

SAVING ANIMALS

# Wildlife center hunkers down for Helene

Calls for help will start as soon as the storm passes

By BOB MUDGE Senior Writer 7 hrs ago 0



Baby mammals at the [Paul A. & Veronica H. Gross Wildlife Center of Southwest Florida](#) will ride out Hurricane Helene in this nursery.

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VENICE — The protocol to prepare for a tropical storm is very familiar by now.

Make sure all the medical instruments are disinfected.

Stock up on water, food and other supplies.

Have heat packs and incubators ready.

Check that generators are fueled up.

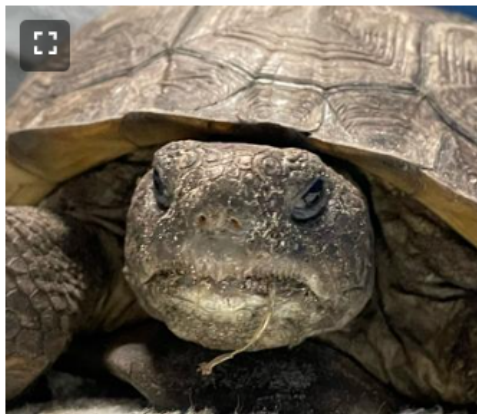
Bring in the patients who are in outside enclosures and put them in crates for safety.

That last step is one of the few differences in the preparations at the [Paul A. & Veronica H. Gross Wildlife Center of Southwest Florida](#) compared to a "people hospital."

The center usually keeps a variety of its patients — raccoons, possums, herons, cranes and such — outside because it's better for them to be in more-natural habitat, Executive Director Pam DeFouw said.

But there are two risks in leaving them there in severe weather: They could get injured, or their enclosure could be damaged, which might allow them to escape, she said.

The center's buildings are "pretty sound," she said, and two or three people always ride out the storm with the animals, in case they need help, because a lot of them are in critical condition. Also, she said, baby animals need to be fed every four hours.



A gopher tortoise at the [Paul A. & Veronica H. Gross Wildlife Center of Southwest Florida](#) is secure indoors from Hurricane Helene Wednesday.

PROVIDED PHOTO

The animals that live outside are put back out as soon as possible, but that depends on whether there's been flooding, she said.

The preparations aren't only to protect current patients, DeFouw said. The center also needs to be immediately ready to handle calls about wildlife injured or displaced by the storm.

For example, squirrels get blown out of trees and rabbits' nests get flooded, and they're often cold when they get to the center. Hence, the need to have incubators ready.

As Helene neared, the center's staff and volunteers had done "an amazing job" preparing for whatever it would bring, DeFouw said.

"Our preparations ... are pretty solid," she said. "Knock on wood, we've never lost a patient."