

## My Reptile Hurricane Story

**Hurricane Charley resulted in a memorable 2004 Daytona reptile expo.**

January 29, 2010

(Click on image for larger view.)

Wild green iguanas in Florida have been passing out and falling from trees because of cold weather. Bill Rauch and I, pointing to damage to the pizza place we ran into during Hurricane Charley in Daytona Beach. Note the street sign on the ground behind us. Did you hear about the green iguanas that have been dropping from the trees in South Florida? Excessively cold weather there is apparently the coldest it's been since 1974. Wild green iguanas exposed to cold temperatures pretty much freeze up and fall out of the trees once the thermometer hits 40 degrees or so. They are not killed, however. The tropical lizards become dormant, and will generally revive once they warm up, presuming they survive the fall, of course.

The cold weather is a bigger problem for the tropical fish farms in Florida, as they have been suffering acute fish losses (read about the fish farm situation here). Sea turtles have been affected, as well. I read about 93 green sea turtles, many of which had to be rescued from where they were floating in a lagoon because their systems were shocked by the cold. They were collected and warmed up at rescue facilities. I just heard on the radio today (Thursday) about two other sea turtles, including an olive ridley, that were rescued in Oregon due to similar shocks to their system from cold water. These two were going to hitch a ride on a military transport that was going to drop them off at the San Diego Zoo for rehab.

I personally love cold, wet weather. For the most part, my area of the country – Southern California -- lives up to its reputation as a place known for its beautiful weather, as well as sometimes earthquakes and wildfires. I like sunshine OK, but I really enjoy inclement weather. As far as I'm concerned, the more rain, the better. This is not just because we're nearly always experiencing a drought here in So Cal, and the rain helps keep my lawn green, especially in these days of water rationing when I'm only permitted to water my lawn at specific times on specific days. In addition to the cooler temperatures that I prefer, and the overall fresh, clean feeling that results, rain creates negative ions, too. These have a calming effect, and can soothe jangled nerves and make one feel at one with the universe. At least they do me.

To illustrate my affinity for nasty weather, I'll tell you about a near-death experience I once had at the Daytona reptile expo. Well, I'm mostly kidding when I say "near death," but you be the judge.

It was August 2004, and Hurricane Charley was heading for Daytona Beach at the same time I was flying there for the National Reptile Breeders Expo. While I wouldn't describe myself as a white-knuckled flyer, I never relish the experience of flying. I am a bit like a tuning fork, reading to start thrumming at any sign of turbulence, strange sound, smell, odd look on a stewardess' face (which I may take to mean imminent disaster), etc. So imagine my concern as, upon approach to Florida, I could look out the window of the plane and see many ominous thunderclouds and lightning bolts – which, admittedly, look pretty cool from the air -- heading in approximately the same direction as my plane. Thoughts about the odds of whether or not planes can survive a hit from lightning immediately began racing through my mind. (Click on image for larger view.)

Stores across the street from the hotel suffered quite a bit of damage.

Reptile artist Marty Capron created this T-shirt to commemorate the 2004 National Reptile Breeders' Expo.

My antsy feelings ended, though, as soon as the plane landed safely. It was wet and windy in Daytona, to be sure, and I headed via taxi directly to the Adam's Mark Hotel. This was where many of the expo vendors and attendees were staying; it's now the Hilton, still located directly across the street from the Ocean Center, where the expo is held. People were concerned about the hurricane, to say the least. The weather was wreaking havoc with some of the vendors' shipments, and they were facing an animal shortage at the expo. A people shortage, too, was looming because roads and bridges were being closed all over the area. A lot of people were worried. It was also kind of exciting, though, especially for me, a bad-weather fan who had never experienced a hurricane up close and personal.

Joining me at the expo that year was, as usual, sales manager Sandy Quinn. Also along was Bill Rauch, Sandy's boss and a fellow bad-weather enthusiast. At one point on Friday, dozens of people, including Bill and me, were gathered beneath one of the covered driveways in front of the hotel. We were watching the hurricane in action: traffic lights were falling down, storefront windows and signs were shattering, and debris was blowing all over the place out in the street.

Then Bill, in all his wisdom, suggested that we make a run for it down the street to a nearby pizza joint. Of course, I, in all my wisdom, was all for this idea, and out into the hurricane we ventured. We stuck mostly to scurrying along the sides of the buildings along the sidewalk on the hotel's side of the street while the wind whipped stuff by in the street to our left, but eventually we had to cross the street. When we did, I noticed with some alarm a huge plexiglass sign face that was at one time attached to a covered walkway above the street we were crossing. Currently, this sign had been reduced to many sharp-edged pieces that were whirling around in the wind, including some that were spinning in what looked like mini tornadoes. Running near all that was a bit scary, but nothing happened and we ran into the dinky pizza place.

The place appeared deserted at first, but then some cautious faces peeked out from behind the pizza ovens. The workers were back there, and they called for us to join them. The fear was that the windows, which comprised the entire front of the store, would blow in soon. So we joined the pizza crew in the rear area, where we watched everything blowing around out front for awhile.

After several minutes Bill and I decided to make a run for it back to the hotel. The pizza people reacted with incredulity at our decision, but they opened the heavy back door and out we went. We ran into a nearby parking structure. The previously mentioned covered walkway joined the structure with a shopping center on the other side of the street, the same side as the hotel. We decided that rather than go back into the street and risk getting hit by stuff flying through the air, we would use the covered walkway. Although the big sign that had been attached to it was now demolished, with pieces still whirling around below, the windows lining the walkway were all still intact. So we ran across, half expecting the windows to shatter around us at any minute. That was scary moment number two. Then we ran along the side of the hotel to the entrance.

The hotel was suffering some damage. The satellite dishes blew off the roof, so there was no TV. Elevators were getting stuck. The wind was so strong, it was blowing water into rooms from around the edges of windows and sliding glass doors. Many people were crowding the lobby and bar area, excitedly chattering while watching the storm outside.

Bill and I, safe back at the hotel, decided to go out again. The hotel is right on the beach, and we wanted to walk along the boardwalk in the "fun zone" area, where there was a pier, arcades, etc. Of course, none of them were open. It was somewhat eerie walking along that boardwalk, in the night with the wind whipping the rain nearly horizontal. We reached the entrance to the pier, and at that moment heard a really weird sound. I can't really describe it...it was like a combination of wind and a loud electric hum. Bill and I got pretty nervous at that point, because we thought maybe a waterspout or tornado was about to form right near us. We turned around and high-tailed it back toward the hotel.

Before we went back in, we went out onto the beach for a bit. We could lean way into the wind at an angle that otherwise would have had us falling onto our faces. Also of interest were the surreal patterns in the sand. It looked like gigantic snakes made of sand were extending all the way from our feet on down the beach, twisting and whipping back and forth in the wind, looking ghostly in the dim light cast from the lights along the boardwalk. It was really cool. Then our Hurricane Run was over, and Bill and I went back into the hotel to dry off. It was mostly a very exciting experience, enhanced by the two pretty scary moments I described.

The next day revealed quite a bit of damage in the vicinity, but the show did go on. I'm sure everyone who was at the Daytona reptile expo in 2004 has their own hurricane stories to tell. It's now known as the Hurricane Expo. It was one for the books, no doubt. It just goes to show you never know what could happen when you go to a reptile expo!

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