

Rescued from SQUALOR

A house full of dogs saved by The HSUS and partnering organizations provides a glimpse into the delusional world of animal hoarders

by CARRIE ALLAN

The blue lights of a sheriff's black cruiser blaze through the early spring drizzle, flashing a signal of caution to any cars approaching the modest, ranch-style house on this rural road in Preston, Miss.

Such passersby are infrequent; the road is isolated, the piney woods around it stretching into the distance. But if you were to be driving by this morning, you would see a small woman—middle-aged, blond, perhaps once pretty—standing in the driveway between two officers from the sheriff's department. She is crying, pleading with them. Her face is crumpled and exhausted. The officers have their hands on her arms, restraining her.

Like a river moving around a boulder in its path, a half dozen grim-faced emergency responders in dark blue rain jackets and rubber boots divide and trudge past the officers, heading toward the woman's house.

If you saw this from the road, from a distance, what would you feel? Confusion? Pity for the woman, who is crying as though her heart might break?

Look again: Several loose dogs circle around the front yard, wandering onto the road. More dogs move slowly about in pens in the side yard, some peering out from ramshackle hutches of plywood. The only sounds are the rain, the low voices of the officers, and barking—some close by, other howls fainter, farther away, from the woods behind the house.

Many of the dogs don't look quite ... right. From a distance, it's hard to say why.

Come closer. Get out of your car. Wear shoes you don't care about; every few steps, there are piles of dog feces. There is also trash everywhere, and shoddy fencing made of plywood and rusted metal wiring, and a busted-up sofa in the driveway that has been mauled and shredded by the dogs. Chunks of its yellow, weather-stained foam litter the yard.

The sheriff has opened the plywood gate to allow the responders deeper into the property. As they pass the officers and the woman they're restraining, she says to them in a low, choked voice, "Please, go away."

But the responders here today—from The HSUS, United Animal Nations, and the Mississippi Animal Rescue League—have a job to do, and that job requires balancing their pity for this woman with pity for the animals she's been keeping. Up close, their need is clear: There are more dogs in a front pen, thin, mangy dogs slinking around nervously, many with eye infections, some with open wounds, many with limbs that look bloody and scabbed—a sign that their skin has become so itchy from mange that they're chewing on themselves to try to make it stop.





Some dogs in the Mississippi home had been breeding, exacerbating an already overcrowded situation with the addition of new puppies.

Their discomfort is hard to witness, but there are signs of even more dismal fates. In the backyard, where more dogs are penned, a strange fragment catches the eye; its flash of white stands out against the brown of everything else. It's partially embedded in a pile of feces, but on second glance it's not hard to identify: It's part of a dog's jawbone, the teeth gleaming up from the mud.

From one of the pens, another small pack of nervous dogs watches the goings-on. The water in their kiddie pools, seemingly intended to serve as drinking stations, is dark green and slimy. But the most unsettling thing in this pen is a dead dog, its body wet with rain. It's obviously been dead for some time. Something—the other dogs? the rats running freely around the property?—has eaten most of its back legs and face away. Its fleshless muzzle is agape, the sockets of the eyes empty.

Some of the responders are putting on respirators now, preparing to enter the house.

GOOD INTENTIONS GONE WRONG?

Sheriff James Moore has been monitoring the situation here for several years. But until this March morning when he served the warrant, even he hadn't been inside the house.

A new sheriff for Kemper County, Moore met the homeowner for the first time while campaigning in 2008. "She expressed a lot of concern about what kind of sheriff I would be in terms of protecting the dogs," he says. For several years, she has been running a rescue group out of this property. Her group even had nonprofit tax status

and a profile on Petfinder.com, a major animal adoption site.

But after Moore began receiving complaints about the conditions of the property and the animals, he made it a point to speak with the homeowner more frequently and realized how misleading their first interaction had been. "The best thing that could have happened to those dogs was being taken away from her," he says.

The woman would also pay visits to the sheriff—ironically, to complain about her neighbors—that served as a pungent, visceral clue to Moore and his officers that something was seriously wrong. "Her smell would be in the office for days, and anything she brought or mailed to our office smelled like the house, too," he says.

Moore is the first person into the house this morning, securing the site and ensuring it's reasonably safe for animal handlers to enter. But even years of seeing—and smelling—what it was like on the outside did not adequately prepare him. "When I opened the door and saw what I saw, I could not believe it," he says.

The outside of the house is bad enough, with the poop and the trash and the mud, but at least the yard gets the benefit of sunlight and occasional rain to wash away some of the nastiness.

Indoors, though, the droppings have stayed where they fell—the primary reason for the rescuers' respirators. The devices don't protect their eyes, though, which water upon exposure to the gases emanating from years of built-up feces. Their feet squish into what should be solid flooring but is instead covered in several inches of trash: nutritional supplements and soda cans and bags of dog food and potato chips and white bread—all of it mixed with poop.

Everything is covered in a layer of brownish grease, and there are dogs everywhere: little dogs in crates, a mama dog nursing puppies, other puppies blinking listlessly under reddish warming lights, hairless adult dogs roaming freely around the house, stopping now and then to scratch themselves furiously or lick open wounds. At least eight dogs of varying breeds are in the master bedroom, scrabbling underneath the bed and peeking out at the rescue teams. A mostly hairless dog hides in the bathtub, another one cowers behind the toilet near an overturned canister of Comet, and several puppies curl up beneath the sink. Above them on the countertop, folded into a stack of dirty laundry, is a tiny, filthy, dead puppy.

ALL TOO COMMON

While this case seems extreme, it's not atypical. And it's the second time in less than a week that HSUS responders have been called to assist in a hoarding case. By the time they reach Mississippi, they've already been on the road for days, driving here directly from Tennessee, where they helped remove 120 cats from a home in similar conditions.

According to the authors of the new book *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, authorities identify between 700 and 2,000 new cases of animal hoarding nationwide each year. "Because only the most severe cases get reported," write Smith College psychology professor Randy Frost and Boston University School of Social Work dean and professor Gail Steketee, "this is undoubtedly an underestimate."

Frost and Steketee describe the phenomenon as a severe version of a more general object-hoarding mentality. From their research, they've found most animal hoarders "are female, well over forty years old, and single, widowed, or divorced. Cats and dogs are the most frequent animals hoarded, and the numbers vary widely but average around forty, with a few cases of well over one hundred. In about 80 percent of cases, dead, dying, or diseased animals can be found on the premises."

Many people who hoard inanimate objects collect things that others wouldn't see as particularly valuable: newspapers piled into



Mange had caused many dogs to lose their fur and scratch themselves raw in their attempts to stop the itching.

stacks that fill rooms, CDs, books, canned goods, clothing, stuffed toys, small plastic containers—all of it justified by some need the hoarder cannot always articulate, but which has come to define his existence. Adam Parascandola, director of animal cruelty issues for The HSUS's Animal Cruelty and Fighting Campaign, recalls a case from a previous job when he seized neglected cats from a home so overwhelmed with junk that the property was condemned and the owner forced to move. When Parascandola returned to check the humane traps he had set to catch the cats hiding around the house, the owner was there, packing garbage into bags—not to throw away, but to carry to her new residence. "It was literally, like, trash," he says. "We tried to tell her, 'That's trash; you don't need to take that to your new place,' but she just didn't understand."

Animal hoarders, on the other hand, don't just collect trash. They collect lives—often animals who need help, who've been abandoned or given up at shelters and need a caregiver. But hoarders have a blindness that keeps them from recognizing when their own need to collect crosses a line, when their resources can't provide for the number of pets they've taken in. In cases like the one in Preston, many hoarders also fail to spay or neuter the animals they have—leading to more breeding and ever-escalating pressure on scant space, time, and money.

The psychology of hoarding has often been linked to obsessive-compulsive disorder, but more recent research indicates it's not clear where hoarding falls in a spectrum of possible pathologies.

"The trend over the past two decades has been to more readily label hoarding as a disease," writes Northeastern University sociology professor Arnold Arluke in *Inside Animal Hoarding: The Case of Barbara Erickson and Her 552 Dogs*. But, he adds, "attempts to do so have been disappointing because many hoarders do not fit so neatly into various diagnostic labels." Hoarders' failure to recognize the filth of their surroundings or the suffering of their animals supports the theory that they are delusional. Their inability to stop harmful behavior mirrors the psychology of addiction. The traumatic or neglectful childhoods experienced by many hoarders push them to trust animals more than people—a way of thinking common to attachment disorders.



HSUS responders who helped in Mississippi had come directly from Tennessee, where they had assisted the Grainger County Humane Society in removing 120 cats from a dilapidated home.

What do you do when the **HOARDER** is your own mother?

In this report, submitted by a writer who requested anonymity, the child of an animal hoarder describes her mother's disorder and her own struggles to help.

I wasn't sure what to expect when I approached my mother's house. During the years I'd been away, my brother had told me that she'd acquired a number of birds—too many, in his opinion.

Mom was always bad at cleaning, and she doesn't like to throw things away. She'd always had pets: a few dogs, a cat, and several parrots. People in the neighborhood called her "the bird lady" and brought her their pet birds to babysit. Sometimes they left them there permanently.

That was years ago, when things were relatively normal.

Upon my return, I heard parrots squawking from a block away.

As I opened the door, an intolerable din and stench washed over me. Bird cages, some empty and some filled with screeching birds, had replaced furniture. Cages lined the walls, covered the countertops, and were stacked on the floors. Bird seed covered the floor, and from the rodent droppings everywhere, it seemed that every rat and mouse around had come running for the smorgasbord.

Bird poop piled up in cones under the perches. Fly strips hung from the ceiling like party streamers, coated with flies, while more swarmed around. Spider webs draped the corners of the fly-speck covered walls, and beetles crawled through the carpet.

In hindsight, there were plenty of red flags, long before it came to this. In my childhood, there were always hamsters, tortoises, cats, and dogs. Although most of the pets lived outside, the home's interior was in such disarray that guests were forbidden. My mom had other peculiarities: kitchen cabinets stuffed with empty margarine tubs, closets full of used wrapping paper and ribbon, broken appliances that never found their way to the dump.

None of these eccentricities were alarming at the time, but together with my mom's depression, her unhappy marriage, her fondness for acquiring pets, and her controlling parenting, it was a setup for a nightmare.

My mom fits the profile of many hoarders: an elderly woman, divorced and with grown children, filling her emotional void with objects—and with animals. I suspect that animals became part of the situation because,

unlike children, animals don't grow up and move away. And large parrots live 50 years or more—ensuring they will never leave.

Like most animal hoarders, my mom refuses to acknowledge that anything is wrong. It's the visits from "that damn animal control" or "those

nosy health department people"—not her behavior—that are the problem. In her mind, she is caring for her animals just fine.

Any suggestion that she rehome any of the birds provokes an angry outburst: "Those are my children! You don't get rid of your children!" Further attempts at discussion send her into isolation for months.

It was hard even for me to acknowledge

that my mother is an animal hoarder. It's easy to view a hoarder as someone who has simply become overwhelmed. After all, most of her birds came from people who no longer wanted their noisy, messy pet parrots and dropped them off with "the bird lady."

For several years, I made regular cleaning pilgrimages to my mom's house, thinking that she'd see the benefits of a clean living space. But every counter I cleared would be soon covered again in boxes, trash, or 20-pound bags of birdseed. Every time, my heart sank at the disaster renewed.

Once, I arrived to find a new stack of cages, each one holding a single hamster. The next time, the hamster containers were gone, and dozens of fish tanks had taken their place. Next, the fish tanks were still there, but the fish weren't. No one had fed the fish, and they had died.

Sometimes rats crawled out of the walls and died. Even when the bodies became bloated and maggot-laden, my mom simply stepped over them.

I know my mother will never be cured of animal hoarding. Her blindness to the suffering of her dozens of neglected birds, her inability to see the health hazards around her, and her refusal to discuss the situation destroy any shred of hope for change.

Today, my mom's house is in foreclosure. In a few weeks she will be forced to leave it—and the animals—behind. As she flatly refuses to prepare to leave, I'll have to warn Adult Protective Services and local animal control.

Because I know that the recidivism rate for animal hoarders is near 100 percent, I don't have illusions that when my mother is forced out she will stop her behavior. Had I taken action early enough, I might have been able to curb it. My hope now is that others in similar situations might be able to do what I could not before it's too late.

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And while the typical image of an obsessive-compulsive hand-washer may seem hard to align with the squalor of hoarders' homes, many of those homes contain, among the chaos, signs of desperate attempts to maintain order. HSUS field responder Rowdy Shaw recalls one hoarder's home where “downstairs, there were thousands and thousands of Mountain Dew cans, but then upstairs, she had

on the wall this nice, long wooden rack of all her cassette tapes, each still wrapped in the original plastic and all alphabetized,” he says. “It's very strange that you can live in urine and feces up to the wall outlets, and you can't even breathe in the house, but you find these signs” of attempted organization.

Some hoarders are regular multiple-pet owners who become

HSUS field responder Rowdy Shaw and a staff member from the Mississippi Animal Rescue League carry armloads of puppies away from the filthy home where they were found.



overwhelmed due to unexpected changes—loss of a job, for example—while others are exploiters, whose psychological model runs closer to those we call sociopaths. But it’s a third category—mission-driven animal hoarders—that makes up the majority of cases, write Frost and Stekete. Their behavior represents “an attempt to love that winds up destroying its target.”

These hoarders often feel they have a special connection to animals. The irony often seems like a perverse joke to the emergency responders and shelter staff called in to save animals from people who, even as dead cats and dogs are being carried from their homes, still maintain their belief that they alone know what’s best for them.

SWEET SURRENDER

The animals, apparently, feel differently. Almost as soon as the HSUS emergency response rig opens its doors, revealing rows of scrubbed-down stainless steel caging and heaving an antiseptic breath over the fetid landscape, one of the loose dogs on the property runs onto it, finds a towel of her liking, and curls up on it, ready to leave.

She has to wait a while. By the end of the seizure, the property’s estimated 70 animals will turn out to total 181. Most of the dogs aren’t aggressive, but they’re unsocialized and nervous about being handled. Rounding up the ones in the pens—some of whom, despite their bad condition, can still run fast—takes kindness, skill, and time. Each animal has to be documented for court; this time-consuming process involves photographing the area where the animal was found, and then the animal himself from multiple angles in order to capture his physical condition.

By mid-afternoon, the steady rain has turned the grounds into a muddy poop soup, and the teams of responders are soaked and filthy. They have removed scores of dogs, and many more are still waiting.

To get to the dogs in the main pen in the front yard, the rescuers have to use wire cutters, a scene made more bizarre by the tiny

audience watching them from inside the still-shuttered house: Dozens of rats are peering out the window and seem to be wondering if there might be a space for them on the rescue rig, too.

The animals’ owner is no longer on the property. After refusing to calm down, she has been arrested for disorderly conduct and taken away. It’s a minor infraction, and she’ll be out of jail tomorrow. But later in the day, Parascandola goes to see her. He’s hoping to get the thing that rescuers pray for in these cases: legal custody.

A major hoarding case takes tremendous resources—people to rescue the animals, veterinarians to evaluate and treat them, a place to hold them safely and humanely while the case progresses. Sheriff Moore and Debra Boswell, executive director of the Mississippi Animal Rescue League, have worked for nearly nine months to plan this seizure, agreeing in the end that they’d need outside help.

It’s difficult for any local agency to handle such a case on its own, says Parascandola. Many shelters are already overwhelmed, and the abrupt arrival of scores of animals can force them to euthanize healthy, adoptable pets in order to make space for sickly, skittish hoarding victims—a terrible choice, and one that sometimes prevents shelters from intervening in hoarding situations.

In many hoarding cases, shelters must hold animals for long periods as the owner fights the charges in court. If local laws don’t require the owner or the state to cover costs, shelters may spend tens of thousands of dollars to house and feed the victims—a massive drain on already limited resources. But if owners agree to surrender the animals, they can be treated, evaluated for adoption, and placed into new homes quickly.

In the visiting area of the jail, Parascandola made his case. “She asked first if she surrendered the animals, would that prevent her from being prosecuted? And I said ‘No, absolutely not.’ And then she said, ‘Well, then why should I surrender them?’ And I said, ‘For the dogs. They need to get out and into a better situation.’”

Whether it was due to Parascandola’s plea—or simply because



Safe on The HSUS's emergency response rig, a dog enjoys a comforting chin scratch from United Animal Nations responder Julie Rathbun.

she couldn't afford to pay the bond required to cover the costs of holding the animals—the woman did everyone a favor: She surrendered all but three; later, a court ruled that even they should not be returned to her. That means that the 181 animals taken from the property can be distributed among shelters that have offered to help, and placed into new homes. It means that when scores of nervous, hairless, shivering dogs are driven away from the property in the evening, they have seen the last of this place—a place where they came to be rescued, only to be neglected, starved, and allowed to get sick. It means the end of false hope, and the beginning of the real thing.

THE PROSECUTION PROBLEM

For the animals, it's the start of a new life. But for the people who worked so hard to save them, it's not the end of the case. Despite co-

pious evidence provided by the onsite team and by Sheriff Moore's office, at press time—some three months after the seizure—the local prosecutor had not yet brought cruelty charges, says Parascandola.

This outcome is far too frequent, often stemming from the pity that prosecutors and law enforcement feel for people who are sometimes portrayed—and who may present themselves—as confused but well-meaning motherly types who just loved animals too much.

Under criminal law, a perpetrator's intent is significant. Establishing intent to commit a crime typically involves proving someone knowingly took actions that would result in an illegal outcome.

In the case of hoarders, the issue of intent is muddy at best. A reasonable person can foresee the consequences of taking in animal after animal without an accompanying increase in resources. But most hoarders do not make this connection. And yet, as Arluke writes in *Inside Animal Hoarding*, the outcome “can be more disturbing than incidents of deliberate cruelty toward or torture of individual animals. Often, [hoarding] affects many animals kept for months or even years under conditions of horrendous deprivation and suffering.”

It's a paradox at the heart of the hoarding phenomenon: The behavior is driven by sickness, and those who suffer from it deserve some sympathy. But the very fact that it is a psychological disorder makes prosecution all the more critical—because without it, the hoarder will almost certainly begin collecting animals again; some experts have estimated the recidivism rate for hoarding at close to 100 percent.

Talking to a hoarder, says Boswell, is almost like speaking another language. Their denial can be difficult to penetrate. “If you haven't dealt with them and aren't experienced, they can sound like they're making sense,” she says.

Hoarders will often respond to a list of concerns with a list of excuses. In conversations with Parascandola and the sheriff, the Mississippi woman claimed that others had dumped dead dogs on her

A Haven—or a Hoarder? How to tell the good from the bad and the ugly

Does your neighbor seem to have an awful lot of cats? Is there a funny smell coming from the house down the street? Does a rescue group in town seem unwilling to adopt out any of its animals?

Animal hoarding is more common than most people realize, and there may be someone struggling with the disorder in your own neighborhood. Be aware, says Adam Parascandola, director of animal cruelty issues for The HSUS's Animal Cruelty and Fighting Campaign: “It's almost always much worse that it appears on the surface.”

If you suspect you know a hoarder, consider reaching out to her or her family members. If that's not practical, check with

your local animal control office or agencies such as health and human services, elder protection, or code enforcement to see if they have services to offer.

While hoarders are often private pet owners, about a third of the cruelty complaints The HSUS receives are related to groups claiming to be animal welfare organizations, Parascandola says—though many of these calls are false alarms.

If you believe a shelter or rescue group has become overwhelmed, the best way to assess the situation is to visit the facility. But that's not always an option for groups working out of private homes. In such instances, you may want to consider the fol-

lowing questions:

- ▶ Does the organization have regular adoption hours or hold events where you can observe the animals' conditions?
- ▶ Does the group work with other shelters and rescues in the area?
- ▶ Are the group's online listings of adoptable animals regularly updated—indicating that it is actively placing pets?
- ▶ Will the group share the names of the veterinarians it works with?
- ▶ Does the group make its financial statements available on request? Does it have a list of its staff, board members, and/or volunteers?

For more information, visit humanesociety.org/cruelty.



Rescued from the muck in Mississippi (below), this dog traveled north with field responder Karla Goodson (right) and the rest of The HSUS team to receive medical treatment and rehabilitation from the Washington Animal Rescue League in the nation's capital. Large-scale rescues would not be possible without assistance from groups that take in the animals, treat them, and place them with new families.



property, that some of her animals had been kidnapped and then brought back infected with mange. In her mind, none of the conditions seemed to be her responsibility. (According to one of Moore's officers, she even seemed to believe that the scores of rats running around her property were rabbits. "I've never seen rabbits with such long skinny tails," he says.)

Boswell wants to see charges brought. "It's not that we want to see her in jail," she says, "but that's the control." Prosecution is often the only way to ensure, via conditions of sentencing, that a hoarder will not regress. If a person's freedom is made conditional on not owning animals, that stipulation can sometimes effectively penetrate the layers of denial. It is often the only way to get hoarders to stop.

For Sheriff Moore, who'd never dealt with a hoarding case before this one, the experience has been eye-opening. He wants the case prosecuted as much as anyone does. And he's already had a frightening glimpse into how thoroughly hoarders misunderstand how much their behavior hurts the animals they claim to love—and how important it is that they be held accountable, in spite of their illness.

Since the seizure, he says, he's already heard that the animals' owner has moved toward obtaining more pets. "Last thing I was aware of was that she was going to Petco in Meridian and trying to get some animals from them, and they told her they won't deal with her anymore," he says.

But that didn't stop her. Her blindness is so complete that she came to Moore himself—the man who's been hearing complaints for years, who's talked to her neighbors, who was the first to open the door of her house and see the filth and the clutter and the sick, mangy animals everywhere.

"She wanted me to write a letter saying she was not charged with any kind of cruelty charges, and so it's OK for her to receive animals again," he says. "I thought, she has to be kidding." ■

