

Audubon Zoo animals safe through Ida with help from SoPA student

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Patrick Messmer is Director of Security and Emergency Services for the Audubon Nature Institute and a student in SoPA's Emergency & Security Studies program. (Photo provided)

As Director of Security and Emergency Services for the [Audubon Nature Institute](#), Tulane School of Professional Advancement student Patrick Messmer helps secure and protect the Audubon Zoo's animals when tropical weather approaches.

“We did not lose any animals or exhibits, so we’re all really happy about that.”

— Patrick Messmer, SoPA Emergency & Security Studies student

During Hurricane Ida, Messmer and 34 others braved the storm on the grounds of the Audubon Zoo in Uptown New Orleans.

Known among Audubon employees as the “Storm Riders,” the group is tasked with securing the animals in concrete enclosures to ride out the storm. After the storm passes, the Storm Riders make sure each exhibit is free of harmful debris before releasing the animals.

“Evacuating the animals is not part of our hurricane plan because not only would that take a lot of logistics to happen, but it also places stress on the animals,” said Messmer, a student in SoPA’s [Emergency & Security Studies program](#). “We have tiers of electricity so the animals can keep air conditioning during and after the storm. They are well protected.”

Messmer’s team is a 24/7 unit responsible for the security and Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) Services provided for guests. Although Messmer said he did enter the empty Gorilla exhibit to help remove debris, several of the Storm Riders were zookeepers who are trained to work directly with the animals.

“I was responsible for the health and safety of the team,” said Messmer. “My priority was to secure sleeping locations, meals, and to conduct damage assessments.”

After the storm, Messmer said the first step was for incident commanders to make sure that all animals were still contained.

“We did not lose any animals or exhibits, so we’re all really happy about that,” said Messmer. “Watching this team work together was inspiring, to say the least. At some point, everyone stepped up to do jobs that they may not have been accustomed to doing.”

Like the zoo, Audubon’s other campuses like the Aquarium of the Americas had their own Storm Riders.

“The aquarium’s Storm Riders were there to make sure pumps continued running, to check water quality, and to make sure coolers kept cool,” said Messmer.