

Gulf Coast grateful damage wasn't worse

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OCEAN SPRINGS, Miss. -- The air smelled sticky of wet leaves and mud as Nell Reeves placed her potted plants back in their rightful places on the front porch, a small signal that home and life were returning to normal.

"I'm very thankful," Reeves said, reflecting on the minimal damage to her house when Hurricane Georges ripped through this pleasant seashore haven early Monday before petering off across southern Mississippi and Alabama. "I was expecting a lot worse."

As Georges was downgraded further Tuesday from a tropical storm to a depression, with top sustainable wind speeds of just 35 mph, torrential rainstorms accompanied it eastward. Flash flood watches were in effect in southern Mississippi, Georgia and the Florida Panhandle.

But in the Gulf Coast towns where Georges already had left its calling card, people emerged to survey the wreckage and start cleaning up.

All along U.S. Highway 90, which parallels the Gulf of Mexico coastline, things were in places where they weren't supposed to be.

Beach sand was strewn across the road. Trees too big in circumference for adult arms to wrap around lay uprooted. Dark traffic lights with no power to operate were askew or, in some cases, completely missing, with only wires dangling like snakes to mark where they used to be. And alligators floated over the chain link fence at the Gulf Coast Gator Ranch near Pascagoula.

Power outages were widespread. Some residents have been told their power may not be restored for a week or more.

Structural damage to houses and businesses was spotty.

A Shell gas station in Biloxi had its aluminum carport twisted into scrap metal. The roof of a Comfort Suites hotel down the road lay shredded in jagged pieces around the parking lot. A large billboard on a sturdy metal post was flattened parallel to the ground.

But in the whims of nature, other, flimsier structures were unscathed. At a mini-golf course alongside the beach, for example, the leprechauns, Buddhas and cobras that mark various holes looked untouched.

Everywhere, people put the damage in perspective. Where shingles were missing and trees snapped in two, residents reflected on how much worse it might have been.

“This is nothing,” said John Harris, a realtor in the town of Pass Christian, with a dismissive gesture toward an aluminum awning blown from his rear door to his neighbor's front lawn.

At a public beach in Ocean Springs, hundreds of residents gathered to watch an attempt to save a **pygmy sperm whale** bleeding from sea shell lacerations after Hurricane Georges pushed it ashore from its migratory path 200 miles out to sea.

About a dozen people, including state wildlife officials, spent four hours in the water soothing the wounded mammal while cradling it in a blanket to keep its air hole above water.

Eventually, they loaded the 600-pound **whale** onto a flatbed truck to transport it to the National Marine Fisheries Service in Pascagoula. Officials there determined it was suffering internal bleeding, and it was euthanized.

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