

# Reigning Cats & Dogs

*Before playing  
the rescuers'  
version of  
Grizzly Adams,  
know your  
animal kingdom*

BY SLIM RAY

**S**OONER OR LATER, MOST FIRE SERVICE personnel will rescue animals. Just ask members of the Ocean City (N.J.) Fire Department.

Last Halloween Eve, a three-alarm blaze broke out at a popular aquarium, home to more than 200 snakes, alligators, lizards, turtles and sharks. When firefighters from seven companies reached the scene, they found smoke and flames billowing from the 1 1/2-story structure. "You couldn't see across the street, there was such smoke and flames," bystander Norm Stapleton told the Associated Press.

Everyone thought the menagerie had perished. Reporter John Curran wrote: "Then an 18-foot python was found slithering through the ashes, along with two large alligators and some small turtles. About 40 animals had survived ... Firefighters sifting through the charred wreckage of the three-alarm blaze had to figure out who was alive, who was dead, and who might be lurking in the next puddle. 'It would be hard to explain how one of your men got bit by a cayman while he was fighting a fire,' Capt. Bill McDonnell said as he helped direct cautious firefighters into the building."

Fortunately, no firefighters were hurt at the New Jersey blaze, not even Firefighter Ed Kooker, who rescued four caymans — Central and South American crocodilians similar to alligators, but superficially resembling crocodiles. He then went back in to rescue a 5-foot alligator.

Obviously, all fire personnel need to know how to protect themselves under feral conditions.

Firefighters must learn how to rescue animals, and the aquarium fire is a prime example. Ask Kooker. As he emerged from the building with that alligator—one of 12 rescued—other firefighters rushed to his aid with duct tape, wrapping it



PHOTOS CRAIG JACKSON

**A frightened cat may not know you're trying to save it. Protect yourself from bites and scratches by immobilizing the animal with a blanket or towel.**

around the animal's snout to prevent it from biting.

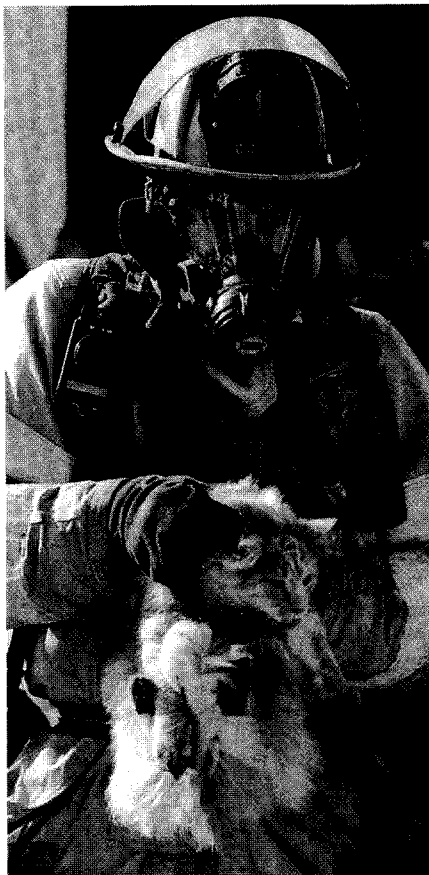
Another example: A month before the Ocean City fire, Hurricane Floyd hit the East Coast. Two firefighters and a National Guardsman were bitten by cats in North Carolina while trying to help Humane Society rescuers save domestic and barnyard animals. "The majority of the cats were like a ball of fur and razors," Animal Control Officer Jennifer Roberts told AP.

## RESCUE RULES TO LIVE BY

First, remember that animals don't react to a crisis as do humans. Sounds obvious, but you'd never know it from the movies coming out of Hollywood. Popular films like *Babe* reinforce the idea that animals think and react like people. They don't—except that they panic, too.

Keep in mind that, large or small, any animal can hurt or kill you. Some pass along diseases. Few understand simple human commands, and animals that do may not respond to strangers. The reaction of any threatened animal can be swift and violent, even lethal.

Knowing a bit about animal behavior



**You can safely handle a cat or small dog by gently grabbing the scruff of its neck.**

## CATS & DOGS: Warning Signs

Short of returning to school for your veterinarian's degree, follow these rescue tips for dealing with the most common domestics:

### Dogs:

- Head up, teeth bared, ears down, hair up on the back and neck: "I'm ready to attack."
- Head down, tail between its legs signals: "I submit — you're the boss." Remember, even a cowering dog may bite out of fear.
- Front legs stretched out, back curved down, tail wagging: "Play time?"
- Head up, tail wagging, barking: "I don't know who you are. I'm calling the boss, and you ought to know I just may bite you."

### Cats:

- Purring, fur smooth: "I'm probably feeling no fear."
- Running away, tail high: "You scare me."
- Arched back, tail tall, fur raised: "You frighten me, and I want you to think I'm large enough to scare you."
- Flattened ears, low growl: "I may attack you, especially if you have me cornered."

helps. You don't need to be the *Grizzly Adams* of your department, but keep in mind that he used soft words and a slow advance to convince most creatures he meant them no harm. Take a cue.

Most animals will retreat from danger if they can; but when confronted at close range, they may launch a pre-emptive attack. When approaching an animal:

1) Watch postures, gestures and actions—yours and the animal's.

2) Move slowly. If an animal uses a threat display (i.e., a cat arching its back or a dog with raised hair on its neck and down its spine), consider yourself warned. With small animals, it may help to squat or approach it sideways.

3) Avoid direct eye contact. Most animals see this as an invitation to confrontation. Look away from the animal or toward the ground, but keep it obliquely in your line of sight in case of attack.

4) Speak softly. If you shout at an animal or it hears you shouting at another person, it may perceive your behavior as aggressive. Keep your voice low and soothing. How you say something may prove more important than what you say. Domesticated animals, particularly dogs and

## CATS & DOGS: Handling Techniques

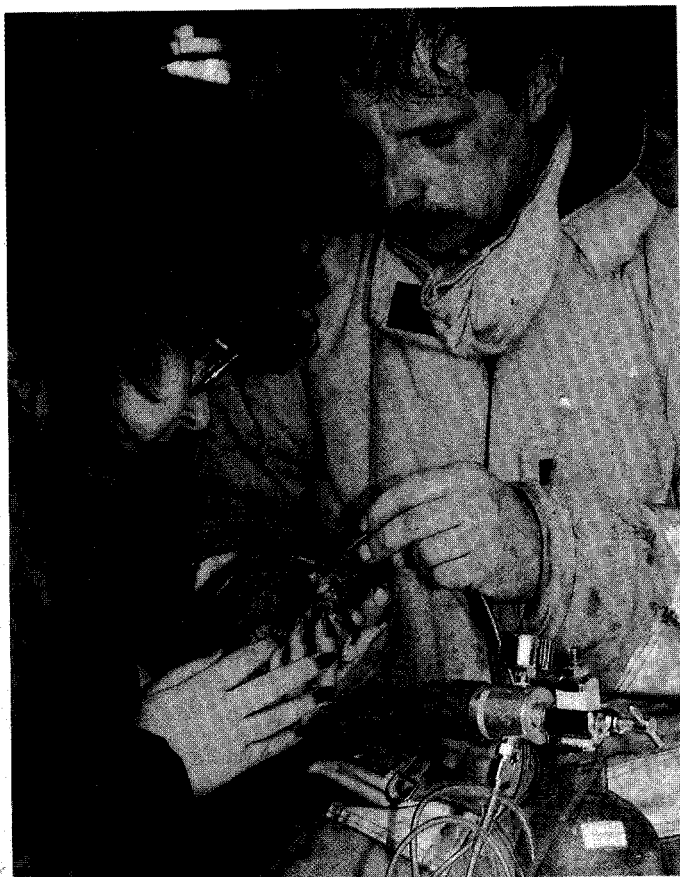
**So, you're determined to save that crying child's dog. Here's how:**

- Try to work from a distance. Use nooses, catchpoles and pole nets to hold a dog so others can move around behind the animal to immobilize its head and place a muzzle on it. You can improvise a catchpole from a pike pole, though it's best to have one ready rather than trying to drill two small holes near the hook end while keeping an eye on the target. Run a cord through the holes so it forms a loop to slip over the dog's head.
- Control the head. A dog attacks with its teeth. Hold a large dog on the sides and back of the head to restrain it.
- Use a muzzle. This disarms the dog's primary weapon: its teeth. You can make an improvised muzzle from surgical tubing or a tourniquet. This won't work on a blunt-nosed dog, such as a bulldog.
- Never muzzle a panting dog. Nor should you muzzle a dog on a hot day. Dogs don't sweat. They vent excess heat by panting. A muzzled dog may die quickly from overheating.

- To lift a dog, use one hand to control the head, then support its weight by lifting from behind its rear legs or, for small dogs, under the abdomen.
- Take a leash with you. Many dogs respond positively to being leashed.
- You can control small dogs by picking them up by the scruff (loose skin) of the neck, which controls their head.
- Transfer the dog into a pen, cage, portable kennel or other enclosure as soon as possible.

**Think you're ready to try a cat? Then:**

- Carry a large towel or blanket to throw over and immobilize it. Remember, though, it can still bite or scratch through the cloth. With gloves on, quickly wrap up the animal.
- Control a cat by picking it up by the scruff of its neck. This controls the head and keeps the cat from biting you, as well as keeping its claws away from your body. Then grab the cat's back legs with your other hand. This immobilizes the cat and makes it impossible for the animal to attack you.
- Use a sack or large bag for temporary holding or transport. Put the cat in the bag tail first and quickly secure the top. Make sure it has adequate ventilation. Do not use a pillowcase because a cat can shred it in short order and escape.
- Use a cage or carrier for long-term holding or transporting a cat.



**Little things mean a lot: Taking time to rescue a homeowner's pet can help lessen the blow of a tragedy.**

horses, often respond to familiar commands like sit, come, stop and—especially in the case of dogs—“Outside?”

## **DOGS**

Dogs are pack animals and most will defend their territory. Firefighters have seen dogs protecting burning homes, refusing to flee or let anyone inside. Never assume a dog is harmless until it is restrained. Pay particular heed to a dog that doesn't bark or show early signs of aggression. Most dogs signal an attack with noise or a bluff charge, but some don't. (See *Cats & Dogs: Warning Signs*, page 88). Before you confront a potentially dangerous dog, plan an escape route and have something to thrust between you and the dog, such as an EMS bag.

## **CATS**

Then there are cats. Usually, when confronted with danger, a cat will run and hide. With no avenue of escape, it will show aggression (See *Cats & Dogs: Warning Signs*, page 88). If it flattens its ears and growls, attack is imminent. Cat scratches and bites are prone to infection. So, lower your profile, avoid eye contact and talk soothingly as you slowly approach. And be thankful for your gloves and turnout gear. ☺

*Slim Ray co-authored **River Rescue** with Les Beschdel and has written numerous articles on flood rescue and river safety. He teaches and consults and is an instructor-trainer for **Rescue 3 International**. Ray is president/CEO of **CFS Press** ([www.cfspress.com](http://www.cfspress.com)) in Asheville, N.C. His most recent book is **Animal Rescue in Flood and Swiftwater Incidents**.*