

No one was injured at the research station, and all opted to stay to clean up the mess

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A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist and four volunteers arrived safely in Honolulu early Friday morning after being evacuated from a remote research station within the French Frigate Shoals, the service reported.

A devastating wind storm rolled through the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands on Dec. 9, damaging all facilities on Tern Island, including the group's living quarters, storage facilities and boat sheds. Communication systems and solar panels were compromised.

"They are still reeling in the trauma of it," said Ann Bell, acting superintendent of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, which comprises the chain of Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

No one was injured, and Bell said the evacuees had access to enough food and water while waiting for rescue.

The volunteers and the Fish and Wildlife Service employee elected to remain on the damaged island for nine days after the early-morning storm to clean up some of the debris, Bell said. They were offered a Coast Guard evacuation several times but instead decided to wait for the Fish and Wildlife supply vessel Kahana to retrieve them.

"Not only was it difficult on the island, but then they got on the boat and they (were) transiting against 20- to 30-knot winds and up to

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from Johnston Atoll to evacuate a biologist and several the research station Dec. 9.

amazing wildlife heroes that decided to stay on and continue to secure the facilities and secure debris (to) keep it from flying."

Although Fish and Wildlife Service officials have yet to completely assess the extent of the damage, the island's largest facility appears to have been destroyed beyond repair.

Bell said conditions were similar to a microburst or tornado, including plummeting temperatures right before it hit. The Fish and Wildlife Service is calling the destructive winds a "storm event."

Evacuees reported to officials that the storm struck in the midst of a lightning storm before sunrise. Everything started shaking, and it

sounded like a freight train was nearby, Bell said. Walls collapsed, windows blew out and a boat shed was completely destroyed within minutes.

The south wing of the living quarters, which is where all the volunteers were staying, sustained the most damage.

"When the event occurred they were literally trapped in their rooms with doors and debris trapping them in," Bell said. "So that was a frightening experience."

Bell, who has worked with the Fish and Wildlife Service for the past 17 years, said, "Nothing has come close to the destruction (in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands) that occurred within one minute on Tern Island."

storm-hit isle

The Fish and Wildlife Service vessel Kahana departed volunteers from Tern Island after an intense storm hit

35-foot swells" for two days, Bell said, adding that the ship's passengers looked exhausted when they arrived in Honolulu at about 1 a.m. Friday.

After seeing photographs of the damage, Bell said she is "overwhelmed with their passion and determination to stay on under such horrific circumstances."

The Fish and Wildlife Service field station on Tern Island is 490 miles northwest

of Honolulu and provides year-round access for biologists to do research, student-based education and restoration projects as well as monitor hundreds of albatross, wedge-tailed shearwaters and Bonin petrels.

"Once they realized they were not physically injured, I felt like they began to put wildlife first instead of themselves first," Bell said. "(It was) an experience that really shed light on some