

Do You Know.....about rabies?

A recent article in The Washington Post suggested that rabid animals are running rampant among us and there is nothing we can do to protect ourselves. This article was alarmist in the extreme and contained information that was misleading (at best) and totally inaccurate (at worst)!

Rabies is a virus that can, potentially, affect virtually any warm-blooded animal, including people. Once symptoms appear, it is considered 100% fatal. Before you panic, there is a plus side.

Rabies is a very delicate virus which can survive in a very narrow temperature range. Birds, whose body temperature is normally around 104 degrees, have never been shown to contract rabies. Virginia opossums, with a body temperature of about 96 degrees, rarely suffer from the disease. If exposed to normal air temperature, the virus dies within a half hour. It is almost unheard of in rodents (beavers, groundhogs, squirrels, etc) and lagomorphs (rabbits and hares). During the 18 years I have been rehabilitation wildlife, I have personally known of one case in a beaver and a few cases in groundhogs in Frederick County. I have never heard of a case in a squirrel, mouse, rat, chipmunk or any other rodent. This may be due to the fact that, in order to contract rabies, one must be bitten by a rabid animal. Most rodents are relatively small and a bite would generally cause death in a very short period of time.

In order to contract rabies, you pretty much have to be bitten by a rabid animal. If a raccoon comes after you and chews on your leg, you will probably notice! There was one case where spelunkers were thought to have contracted the disease simply by breathing the air in a cave that housed an enormous bat colony. The investigation into this matter suggested that, due to the specific temperature and humidity in the cave and the large accumulation of bat guano, the rabies virus was viable in the air. There is also one case on record where laboratory workers were exposed when a centrifuge opened and spewed brain matter around the room (sorry for the graphic detail!). Post-exposure shots (which include a series of five shots over a period of several weeks) have been 100% effective in preventing the disease to those exposed. Should you be bitten by a wild animal (or a cat or dog whose vaccination status is unknown), it is a simple and relatively painless matter to get the post-exposure shots; your health insurance will even pay for the treatment.

<i>Rabies reports in the United States from 1998 to 2002</i>		
<i>Specie(s)</i>	<i>Ave. # cases</i>	<i>%</i>
raccoon	2962	39.18
skunk	2257	29.85
bat	1175	15.54
fox	443	5.86
domestic cat	276	3.65
cattle	106	1.4
domestic dog	105	1.39
horse/mule	62	0.82
mongoose	58	0.77
groundhog	50	0.66
bobcat	30	0.4
other wild animal	24	0.32
sheep/goat	9	0.12
other domestic	3	0.04
Total	7560	100
Source: <i>dvm, The News Magazine of Veterinary Medicine</i> , April 2005		

In this area, the primary rabies vector species (RVS) are raccoons, foxes, skunks and bats. That does not mean it does not occur in any other animal, simply that it is uncommon. Deer, cows, cats and even beavers have tested positive. An article in the April 2005 issue of DVM Magazine reported that, of 7,560 animals testing positive for rabies throughout the United States (between 1998 and 2002), 39.18% were raccoons, 29.85% were skunks, 15.54% were bats and 5.86% were foxes. All other wild animals made up 0.32% of the total. Even this is somewhat misleading. Ordinarily, the only animals tested are those that have bitten people or have been picked up by an

animal control agency because of abnormal activity.

So, how do you know if a wild animal in your yard might have rabies? If you see a normally nocturnal animal, such as a raccoon, walking through your yard during the day, should you be concerned? It is important to know that there are two forms of rabies, generally referred to as "dumb" and "Furious" rabies. Most people expect the "furious" form: foaming at the mouth, running round biting at the air or trees or car tires, vocalizing at nothing. For those of you old enough to remember, Ol' Yeller had the furious rabies. If you see an animal exhibiting these symptoms, it is pretty easy to know you need to stay away from it and call for help from your local animal control agency. The "dumb" form is more subtle. These animals are presented to rehabilitation centers with comments like, "It is very friendly" or "We've all been petting it. It must have been raised by someone." The rabid beaver we received at SCWC was "very sweet." Although a full adult, it did not seem to mind being petted or handled. Fortunately, we knew this was abnormal behavior and did not allow anyone except rabies-vaccinated staff to handle it. Though appearing friendly, these animals can suddenly turn and snap without warning. In addition to a "friendly" demeanor, we always watch to see if the animal eats. Most raccoons, foxes or skunks find cat food to be a true gourmet meal. If one of these animals is coming to our back door and chowing down on your cat's food, it probably is not rabid. The rabies virus affects the muscular and nervous systems, including the ability to swallow (foaming at the mouth is caused by an inability to swallow saliva). If it is coming to your door for food, it has probably found an easy meal (please do not feed your pets outdoors, or at least bring the food in at night).

During the baby season, late spring through late summer, many normally nocturnal animals will be out hunting during the day to provide food for their babies. To determine if there is need for concern, observe the animal from a safe distance. If a fox or raccoon is simply walking across your yard, relax and enjoy the view/ If it is staggering around, walking randomly like it does not know where it is going, cannot climb over a fence and does not seem to react when approached, BE CONCERNED. DO NOT TOUCH THE ANIMAL! Give SCWC a call for advice on how to proceed. If you can safely confine the animal (by putting a box, recycling bin or laundry basket over it), call your local Humane Society or Animal Control officer and ask them to pick it up. Please do not allow your friends and neighbors to come over and play with or pet the seemingly cute and friendly animal. If we receive an RVS that has been handled by more than a few people, especially children, we have no choice but to euthanize the animal and have it tested for rabies. If the test is positive, you cannot imagine the "can of worms" that has been opened.

Although we at SCWC obviously love animals, the health and well-being of people always takes precedence. We really do not like having to euthanize animals, but if human health and safety is at stake, we do what we must. We are the professionals and must act in a responsible manner. Help us to help the animals! Call us if you have any concerns, especially concerning the rabies vector species, before you attempt a rescue.

*by Chris Montuori, staff*