

Rabies Use Common Sense
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Rabies has terrorized humanity since the dawn of civilization. Fantastic fables, serious stories, silly superstitions, like bats nesting in human hair, fuel misconceptions. Even modern day internet inaccuracies add to this. It is all a very understandable fear and the lack of knowledge is a catalyst for confusion. However, one fact remains solid - rabies is almost always a fatal disease.

Old world drawings of wolf packs pursuing horse drawn sleighs, consuming children that fell off, as it lurched through the dark, snowy woods may well be an unrecognized realization of rabid behavior. We will never know. What we do know is that those tales produced great fear.

Our modern perception of rabies is a mixture of information fueled in part by media reports. Many reports focus on the dramatic or furious stage; the snapping teeth, frothing of the mouth, acting wild and self mutilating of ones own limbs. It makes for a good read. When animals with rabies are in the "dumb stage" they are often seen acting lethargic or simply wondering around and these behaviors entices humans to pet, handle or just try to help the animal. This behavior is not as headlining as "human eaten by rabid animal". When there are no reports of rabid animals we tend to forget that the virus is out there. It is important that us trappers keep the idea of rabies at least in the back of our minds when out there in the field.

Statistically the threat of acquiring rabies in the United States is miniscule when compared to the hundreds of every day life hazards. Hazards such as drunk drivers, house fires, and second hand smoke. The fact is rabies is here and rabies is a clear and present danger.

The more people write about rabid animals the more people think they see animals that are rabid. For example a lactating raccoon drinking from a yard pond on a hot day is more likely thirsty than rabid. However, to the unknowing observer a nocturnal animal out during the day is most likely rabid. A bat swooping low behind you as you mow on a hot and humid summer evening is most likely capturing bugs versus searching to bite a human.

As outdoorsmen and women there are certain facts that you need to know. There are many different strains of rabies, each one is linked to a single mammal species. All are transmittable to humans and are lethal if left untreated.

All furbearers are of potential concern. As trappers we always need to take precautions when handling any animal. This may mean the use of gloves, goggles, skinning aprons, etc. Always err on the side of caution.

In the Eastern United States the raccoon strain of rabies is spreading, it has spread as far west as Ohio. Ohio as well as New York, Vermont and Ontario Canada have been fighting to limit the spread of rabies in raccoons by establishing vaccine corridors, kind of like the function of fire breaks in firefighting wildfires. Sometimes using aerial drops of vaccine hidden in fish meal, or hand placed in some habitats. Although these oral vaccine barriers have slowed rabies, it is unknown when new outbreaks may occur and how fast it will spread. One issue of real concern is the illegal and even legal transport of wildlife including the capture and release in new locations of wildlife by wildlife damage and nuisance wildlife control permit holders. They may unknowingly take infected animals over a present or future barrier zone.

Raccoon rabies was first diagnosed in Florida in 1947 and is now found in all the eastern states up to Maine. The virus made a huge leap northward with the help of man in the late 1970's, over 3,000 raccoons were transported from Florida and released in West Virginia to stock private hunting clubs. Others were released in Kentucky. Then in March 2003 Virginia had their first human fatality from raccoon rabies, a previously healthy

25 year old male became symptomatic before the diagnosis of rabies was made, this was too late for effective treatment.

Let's talk a little about rabies exposure. Rabies exposure is a medical urgency, not lights and sirens medical emergency, but an emergency none the less. What I am saying is, there is no need to speed from your trapping camp, but you do need to seek medical attention right away. Any bite by a wild mammal, or undocumented domestic dog or cat, ferret, horse, cow or any other mammal must be taken seriously because they could have rabies. Failure to have immediate follow up care can lead to death.

There are some actions that you need to take first. First, immediately wash the area with soap and water, be it a bite or the tiniest of scratches or just saliva on your skin. Soap destroys the protective overcoat of rabies virus. Second, seek medical attention as soon as possible. You will most likely receive a series of post rabies vaccines. One last bit of advice, if there is a safe way to confine the animal, do so. Do not destroy the head! A dead animal can be kept on ice double bagged. Always wear gloves and clean any tools with one part bleach to nine parts water. Notify your local health department and the Division of Natural Resources, in your state, if it is a wild animal. Notify your local health department and local police if it is a domestic animal.

Rabies is transmitted only when the virus is introduced into the bite wounds, open cuts in the skin, or into mucus membranes from saliva or other potentially infectious tissue. It is possible but rare to contract rabies if infectious material from a rabid animal, such as saliva, gets directly into your eyes, nose or mouth. A bite or scratch by a large mammal can not be missed but you can have exposure with a bat without knowing, under special circumstances, because of their very small sharp teeth and the saliva factor. When you are unsure of the exposure always err on the side of caution and immediately share the circumstance of the encounter with the health department. One of those circumstances could be a small child asleep in a room. They would be oblivious to the possible rabies exposure. Another would be a drunken person who is passed out. They too might not know they were exposed to a bat with rabies.

The rabies situation is not the premises of a bad television special with a foaming of the mouth crazed beast leaping out from behind the trees and slithering back into the underbrush. Rabies is a fatal disease that can usually be avoided and treated when common sense is used. ### Wild Woody Ulman, P.O. Box 483, Buckeye Lake, Ohio, 43008.