

Critters and Virus
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Rain was coming down from the dark heavens by the buckets as I drove the long sandy lane back to Roger's old farm. Bolts of lightning lit up the entire western sky, crackling from the sky to the ground everywhere. The static caused my hair to rise. The swampy county where I survive is noted as the lightning capitol of the world. People are killed monthly by bolts from nowhere. I thought, "I should have stayed home."

Roger met me on the sagging old porch with his two raccoon hounds frantically wagging their tails to greet me. We had met before on the trail. "Rich," Roger said softly in greeting me, "I thought I'd talk with you out here on the porch rather than in front of the wife and kids." That got my attention real quick.

Roger continued, "During the past week I've spotted several raccoons in and around my barn and out building act strangely." Taking a seat on the squeaky porch swing, Roger lit up his brier pipe, blowing sweet smoke at a cloud of mosquitoes hovering near us. "Several of the critters acted almost drunk, staggering about, falling down, then they'd act normal again." Roger said, while pointing to a wooded area nearby. "There used to be a bunch of raccoons living back in the woods and swamps, but of late they seem to enjoy my buildings more than the trees."

After a hot coffee with the family, I picked up another recipe for a skunk cabbage salad and walked to the barns. My hunter's light picked up several raccoons in the rafters glaring down at us with green and red eyes as if they were showing resentment at us for disturbing them. I immediately noticed froth on the jaws of two animals and, taking Roger's arm, we beat a hasty retreat back to the house with the dogs at our heels.

I told Roger as gently as possible that he had a barn full of rabid raccoons and probably rats too. It would be absolutely necessary that he and his family and dogs stay in the house or go to stay with friends until we had the problems eradicated. I arranged to return in the morning with traps and equipment to contain the sick animals for transport. As a nuisance hunter I find the deep south becoming plagued by pitiful animals with rabies. We have too many wild raccoons, foxes, and cats, with no natural predators or hunters to thin their ranks. They multiply like rabbits. Scientists recently found that raccoons with rabies and PCBs are killing the Florida panthers that feed on them.

Rabies is an incurable, deadly disease caused by a virus. The virus attacks the central nervous system of mammals. With rare exceptions, rabies is almost always fatal. Few humans survive the virus. Any warm-blooded mammal can get rabies. However, some animals are most susceptible to rabies than many animals. Cats and dogs, while less susceptible to rabies than many animals, are more likely to transmit the rabies virus from wild animals to humans. Animals rarely afflicted with rabies include rats, mice, squirrels, possums, hamsters and rabbits. Birds, snakes and fish can not get the disease. Rabies is usually transmitted through a bite or a break in the skin with saliva carrying the virus.

Although it's not possible to determine whether an animal has rabies just by looking at it, some symptoms strongly indicate rabies. The stereotypical "foaming at the mouth" is not necessarily the best indicator that an animal has rabies.

Although people often divide symptoms into two categories, "dumb" (or paralytic) and "furious" rabies, animals can exhibit both forms of rabies as the disease progresses. Animals with "dumb" rabies often appear depressed and uncoordinated. They gradually lapse into complete paralysis. When their throat and jaw muscles become paralyzed (lock jaw), the animal will drool and have difficulty swallowing. Companion animals with "furious" rabies exhibit the classic "mad dog" symptoms. They will act nervous and vicious, often snapping at real or imaginary objects. Cats always exhibit the furious form of rabies.

Several other animals diseases may mimic rabies. For example: distemper, a disease common among coyotes, foxes, dogs and raccoon has many symptoms common to rabies including foaming at the mouth, convulsions and paralysis. Both diseases are spreading rapidly in states that have outlawed the trapping and hunting of these animals. Animal control is a necessity.

People can protect themselves and their pets from rabies by taking a few simple precautions:

- A. Make sure all your companion animals are up to date on their shots and wear their license tags.
- B. Supervise your pet, obey leash laws and control the pet.
- C. If another person's pet bites you or your pet, contact the owner, their vet for data, or your health department.
- D. Teach your kids to stay away from wild animals of pets they do not know.
- E. If raccoons or other wild animals are lurking about your yard acting sick, call the animal agency for help.
- F. Avoid attracting or handling wild animals; feed your pet indoors, do not toss food into your yard.
- G. Keep your yard free of garbage, pet food and bird feed (except in regular bird feeders.) If trash and garbage must be kept outside, place in a sturdy, sealed container.
- H. Keep your home in good repair to prevent animals from entering through cracks and crevices. Use strong metal mesh to cover potential entryways, such as around chimneys, dryer vents and holds in eaves and around foundations.

If you or your pets are exposed, bitten, scratched or licked by a potentially rabid animal, your first line of defense is soap and water. Scrub the area thoroughly then contact your doctor for advice and examination. Try to locate or have the animal agency locate, the biting animal so they can quarantine the animal for study. If your pet has been bitten and was never vaccinated, it will develop rabies and should be euthanized, otherwise it should be isolated for six months for study.

We took eleven rabid raccoon out of Roger's buildings in two days and left traps in place for another week with no takers. Both of Rogers' hounds had been vaccinated recently, but were still quarantined for the legal time for study and came out very healthy.

With no animal control and unlimited breeding, the animal population is rapidly increasing throughout the country with resulting epidemics in rabies, distemper and other spreading diseases. This serious problem is completely ignored by the anti's.