

More rabid bats are found

By Alice Collins
staff writer

Two more rabid bats were found in Oakland County last week — both at residences in Bloomfield Township — bringing the total to four confirmed cases since mid summer.

The chief of the communicable disease program at the State Health Department in Lansing said Tuesday it is unlikely that a rabies epidemic is on the way, however, he didn't rule out that possibility.

"Bats usually transmit rabies to other bats," said Dr. Donald Coon, "and as long as it continues to be bat-to-bat transmissions, we're not too concerned."

The biggest concern, he said, is that the disease might spread to cats. "It would then be a greater hazard to people."

He urged that people have their cats vaccinated against rabies.

"Skunk-to-skunk and bat-to-bat is the most common scenario," he said. "But once in a while if another animal or human beings get in the way of that transmission, then we're in trouble."

Cats, skunks and sometimes dogs and raccoons will "stumble onto one (a dead bat) and eat it," he said.

The first rabid bat discovered this year in Oakland County was found in mid summer in a swimming pool at Oakland University.

The second was found biting itself as it lay dying on the floor of a house near downtown Birmingham on Aug. 24.

Bloomfield Township Deputy Police Chief Dennis McGee confirmed Tues-

day that two bats found last week at homes in the west-central part of the township were rabid.

On the advice of personal physicians and the Oakland County Health Department, many of the persons who came in contact or possible contact with the diseased creatures are already receiving rabies shots.

The third bat which tested positive was found early last week flopping around on an outside patio at a house on Echo Lane.

Last Thursday morning, Lydia Cunningham found the fourth bat. It was sitting on a window sill in her son's bedroom just above her son's bed. Her child was in school at the time.

The Cunningham's house is on Echo Road about a quarter of a mile from the house on Echo Lane.

"THE BAT'S wings were spread but it wasn't acting strange in any way like the others I read about," said Cunningham. "But because I'd read about the other rabid bats in the paper, I closed the bedroom door and called animal control at the Bloomfield Township police."

"We'd had one in the house just five weeks before, but I just let it out because I hadn't heard about the rabies," she said.

Township animal welfare officer Mike Lagrould went to the house and captured the bat, as he had done with the one earlier in the week.

Township police rushed it to the State Health Department laboratory in Lansing Thursday night. By Friday, the Cunningham's were notified that the test was positive.

CUNNINGHAM SAID their two children were started on the rabies shots on Thursday even before it was determined that the bat was rabid. "Our pediatrician advised us not to wait," she said.

"When the lab called me at 4:15 Friday afternoon that it was positive," said Cunningham, "then our panic broke loose."

Cunningham and her husband started receiving the shots that day. The township welfare officer is also receiving injections.

Dr. Coon said a rabid bat was also found in Detroit on Aug. 24.

Rabid bats in Oakland County are unusual, said Coon. Two were identified there in 1980 and none since that time.

Twelve have been found in Michigan this year. Last year at this time the total was three, he said. He said the state lab is testing many bats every day and "we're running about two percent positive."

Last March, a 5-year-old girl died after being bitten by a rabid bat in Hillsdale County. She was the first person in Michigan to die of rabies in 25 years.

RABIES is a virus that attacks the nervous system. It has a two-to-eight week incubation period but can strike as early as 10 days or as late as one year after the victim is infected, according to Dr. Carolyn Bird of the Oakland County Health Department.

"It's spread by the saliva of the animal, so we suggest that you get out of the way of any animals suspected of

having it. And don't handle them because they could have saliva on their fur."

Unless a victim receives vaccine shots before the onset of symptoms, the virus is fatal. There is one known exception.

Early symptoms include apprehension and restlessness. Severe anxiety follows with paralysis of the swallowing muscles. Foaming at the mouth results from an inability to swallow. Delirium, convulsions, coma and death follow.

Skunks, bats and raccoons are considered high-risk animals, said Bird. Raccoons are particularly troublesome because they are often found in the city and are sometimes fed or kept as pets.

Raccoon and bat populations in the Birmingham-Bloomfield area are high. This is an especially active time for bats to be flying around.

EXTREME CAUTION is advised when dealing with an animal which is believed to be rabid. If an animal such as a bat is found in a house or building, it should be confined to one room, with padding placed under the door to keep it inside. It should be removed only by an animal control expert.

In recent years, the incidence of rabies in raccoons has reached epidemic proportions on the southeastern Atlantic seaboard and is currently as far north as southern Pennsylvania, said Dr. Coon. "There is a serious epidemic now in the Washington, D.C.-Maryland-Virginia area," he said.

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