

Raccoons, skunks in daytime? Be wary

By G. L. Ruggenstein
staff writer

Last fall it rained raccoons in Troy when the distemper-infected animals fell out of their trees and into people's yards.

It was an odd sight, and its memory revives worries now that spring is bringing out area wildlife, including rambunctious raccoons with all their cute, cuddly babies.

"We want people to be careful of wild raccoons and skunks they see during the daytime hours," said Carl Anderson, manager of Oakland County's Animal Control Division. "These animals are nocturnal and shouldn't be out during the day. If they are, they are probably diseased."

earned after two recent cases of rabies, the first to occur in Oakland County in at least seven years.

He also noted an outbreak of rabies in the Tuscola County area last spring.

The latest Oakland County involved a raccoon in Springfield Township, north of Clarkston. The raccoon was in a family's yard during the day and "tangled with the family dog," Anderson said.

Animal control officers caught the raccoon and shipped it to Lansing, where it tested positive for rabies. The dog had been vaccinated for rabies, however, and was unaffected, Anderson noted.

"It was the first in 10 years," Anderson said of the rabid raccoon.

stray cat turned into the Auburn Heights animal shelter.

"The cat acted perfectly normal when we got it in," Anderson said.

At first they suspected the cat had distemper, which has symptoms similar to rabies, Anderson said.

But during a normal 10-day quarantine, the cat died on the ninth day.

A veterinarian and assistant at the shelter who had been scratched by the cat had to undergo the painful rabies prevention treatment.

At least nine people in Tuscola County's Mayville area had to have the series of five shots last year after being bitten by farm animals, dogs and barn cats.

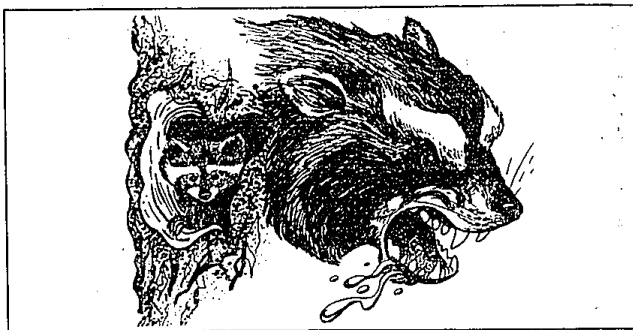
ANDERSON ADDED that there has always been a reservoir of rabies and distemper in the wildlife population. "It's nature's way of controlling the wildlife population," he said.

But the Springfield Township incident puts him on the alert because "my own biggest fear is that rabies will get into the domestic animal" population, Anderson said.

That's what happened in Mayville, where farm pets hadn't been vaccinated.

Similarly, Anderson fears Oakland County pet owners haven't adequately protected their pets against the disease.

"About 40 to 50 percent of dogs and cats are vaccinated against rabies," he said. "The World Health Organization guidelines recommend at least 70 percent of the animals be vaccinated to prevent a rabies epidemic."



Illustration/MARVIN TEEPLES

Raccoons and skunks may carry a bigger bite than a dog since they could be infected with rabies.

The best way to avoid a possible problem is to be prepared by having pets inoculated, Anderson said.

THE RABIES inoculation for puppies is good for one year in dogs under six months of age, said Dr. Fred Gasow of Gasow Veterinary Clinic in Birmingham. Shots for dogs a year or older are good for three years.

Rabies immunizations for cats, however, are only good for one year, Gasow said.

Anderson noted that there are two types of rabies — the furious rabies

familiar to most people, and dumb rabies.

"The animal just gets very lethargic, just lays around and drools," Anderson said of dumb rabies.

With dumb rabies, a wild animal such as a raccoon or fox would appear tame enough to touch, but again Anderson warns, "Don't!"

If the animal is behaving strangely Anderson said to call the local animal control officer, or his office in Oakland County to pick it up.

THERE'S NO cure for rabies, a virus that attacks the central ner-

vous system and destroys the brain, Anderson said. It's always fatal within 10 days for unvaccinated animals. Unless treated immediately in humans, the disease is fatal within 14 days.

A person bitten by a suspected rabid animal should wash the wound immediately with soap and water, then get medical attention.

Anderson also stressed capturing or killing the animal.

"Don't shoot it in the head or smash the skull," he said. The head of the animal is preserved and sent to Lansing for testing.

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