

RABID ANIMALS

A number of rabid animal encounters during the winter of 2003/2004 has brought increased awareness of the potential that we may be exposed to similar encounters during our hikes. In February 2004, a rabid fox bit a hiker on the Hugh Norris Trail in Saguaro West National Park. In November 2003, a hiker in Saguaro East National Park was bit by a fox. Two foxes found dead in Sabino Canyon in January 2004 tested positive for rabies and there were two rabid bobcat attacks, one in Ventana Canyon, during the same month. These incidents demonstrate that we, as hikers, need to be aware of our surroundings when hiking so that we do not become a victim of a rabid animal.

What is Rabies? - Rabies is a viral disease that affects the central nervous system of mammals and is always fatal once symptoms appear. This includes wild animals as well as pets. In Arizona, there were 75 confirmed cases of rabies in wild animals in 2003. This included 44 cases in bats, 18 in foxes, 8 in skunks, 4 in bobcats, and 1 in a coyote. Seventeen of the rabies cases were found in Pima County. Small rodents such as squirrels, rabbits, chipmunks, etc. rarely have rabies. Reptiles do not carry the rabies virus. The last rabies case involving a domestic animal in Pima County was a puppy in March of 2002. Rabies kills wild animals and family pets alike. The disease can also kill people if they are exposed to rabies and are not treated as soon as possible.

How do animals and people get rabies? - There are several ways the rabies virus is spread. The most common way is by being bitten by an animal infected with the virus. Rabies is spread when broken skin or mucous membranes come into contact with infected matter (saliva or nerve tissue) from a rabid animal.

Once the rabies virus has entered an animal's body, it can follow the nervous system and eventually reach the brain, causing an infection. The virus then travels to the salivary glands and is shed in the saliva of the infected animal. Rabies can then be spread to other animals and people. The time between contact with the rabies virus (an exposure) and visible signs of illness first appear (rabies infection in the brain) varies from a few days to several months. An animal can pass the infection to other animals or humans from 3 to 5 days before the onset of visible signs and throughout the course of the infection.

What does a rabid animal look like? - You cannot tell if an animal has rabies just by looking at it. In the very early stages of the rabies infection in the brain, there may not be any clear signs of illness. As the disease progresses, obvious signs of illness may appear. The behavior of animals with rabies may seem strange. They may appear unusually tame and friendly, with no fear of humans (healthy wild animals usually maintain a distance and run away if approached). They may appear restless and very aggressive, often biting at real and imaginary things. They might bite or scratch at an old wound until it bleeds. They might drool a lot. As the disease progresses, a rabid animal may have difficulty chewing, drinking, walking or even moving. Eventually the animal will die, usually within several days from the appearance of visible signs.

How can you protect against rabies? - While hiking, enjoy wildlife from a distance. Do not feed or handle wild animals. Leave animals that may appear abandoned or orphaned alone. If approached by a wild animal, try to scare it away by throwing things at it. Use your hiking stick if it gets too close.

What should you do if exposed? - If you believe you have been exposed to the rabies virus in any way, wash the affected area thoroughly with soap and water and seek medical attention as soon as possible. Quick treatment is critical to preventing the disease if exposure occurs. A doctor will assess the risk and decide whether preventative treatment for rabies is necessary. Treatment for an exposure to rabies includes wound care and a series of injections.

Prepared by T. Johnson from 9 January and 21 February 2004 articles in the Arizona Daily Star and the New Brunswick Department of Health and Wellness Website.

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