

[From Fall 1994]

Rabies Outbreak on Refuge

In July 1994, a raccoon was diagnosed with rabies on Chincoteague Refuge. This is the first known occurrence of this deadly disease on Assateague Island or the refuge. The infected raccoon was an adult male that was very disoriented and partially paralyzed from the disease. Refuge staff is responding to this new situation by posting warnings in areas of high public use and providing brochures about the disease. Refuge law enforcement staff are enforcing the "no feeding wildlife" regulation to prevent visitor-wildlife contact.

Rabies is a deadly virus that attacks the nervous system. It infects the brain and then migrates to the salivary glands in the mouth of the infected animals. It is transmitted when an infected animal bites another animal or infected saliva or brain tissue comes in contact with open wounds of an uninfected animal. Mammals are the only species that can contract the disease, and that includes humans! Some animals are more susceptible to the disease than others and can be infected through airborne pathways. Foxes and raccoons are examples of highly susceptible animals.

Once an animal is infected, its behavior changes as the virus takes effect. The virus causes animals to exhibit certain characteristic behaviors. Generally, they display one of two forms of rabies: "furious" or "dumb." Most people are more familiar with the furious form because of the dramatic behavior exhibited by the infected animals. This form is characterized by periods of extreme rage. The animal will attack anything, including vehicles, and then just as suddenly become very calm and disoriented. The dumb form is characterized by disoriented behavior and/or paralysis. The end result of both forms is death.

What this means for the refuge and its visitors is more education about rabies. Rabies can be prevented in humans and pets by vaccination. Only people who are at high risk of exposure need to have rabies pre-exposure vaccinations. The most common transmission pathway to humans is through pets. All household pets should be vaccinated to prevent the spread of the disease to humans. Pets exposed to the virus transmit the disease to their owners by biting or exposing them to infected saliva on their bodies from other diseased animals. Pets that are suspected of having been exposed should be reported to the local health department for observation.

To prevent exposure on the refuge, NEVER feed or approach any wildlife. Report all animals that are behaving strangely, especially foxes and raccoons, to Refuge or Park Service staff. Try to avoid areas of low visibility and stay on the marked trails. Obey the "no pets" regulation on the refuge. Report any visitor contact with refuge wildlife to Refuge or Park Service employees. If you are bitten, thoroughly wash the wound with large amounts of soap and water. Remain calm and report to the nearest hospital. If you follow these bits of advice, your chances of being exposed are minimal and you can still enjoy the areas of the refuge open to the public.

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