

The Evening Tribune

Weather for Hornell
Partly Cloudy
Time: 6:00 pm
Temp: 50
RealFeel Temp: 50
Humidity: 30
Winds: E at 3

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Raccoon attack prompts rabies concern

By *ROB MONTANA* - STAFF WRITER

When Gerald Kernan decided to break for lunch while working on a house on Coombs Hill [Road](#) in Garwoods last Tuesday, he didn't think he'd wind up seeking a rabies vaccine.

It was just after noon when Kernan heard a noise under the porch, stopped to look, then wound up with a raccoon on his leg.

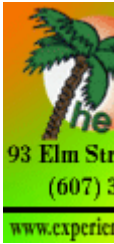

“I heard something chattering and thought it was a red squirrel, because they don't seem to want to leave,” Kernan said. “It just happened so fast, because there was a blur of furball, and the raccoon had wrapped its front legs around my leg and bit into me on the back of my calf.”

After he beat it off with his hat, Kernan followed the raccoon across the road where it escaped, necessitating a rabies series. He had already received a tetanus and [seven](#) rabies shots by Wednesday afternoon, with five more shots to come in the next month.

“My concern is I haven't been hearing anything about rabies, and upon further research - hearing from the health department and [game](#) wardens - this is the fifth case of rabies this winter,” Kernan said. “I thought the public should know.”

There have been two confirmed cases of rabies in Allegany County in 2006, including one raccoon found during February, according to the state health department Web site. In Livingston County, there was one case found in a raccoon during February, also the total for 2006. Meanwhile, Steuben County has no cases this year.

Last year, Allegany County had the most cases of raccoon rabies with six, and also had incidences of rabies found in a cat, a cow and a gray

fox. There were five cases of raccoon rabies in Livingston County in 2005, with a pair of skunks and a hoary bat found as well. In Steuben County in 2005, there were three raccoons, a cat, skunk, deer, dog, big brown bat and three cows found to have rabies.

“Generally speaking, we're in a situation where we have a fairly low level of rabies in raccoons,” said Mike Ermer, state Department of Environmental Conservation Region 9 wildlife biologist. “We have them turning up here and there, but I'd be surprised if there had been more than four or five cases in the county. There certainly haven't been any large numbers.”

There was a large wave of rabies in the mid-'90s, Ermer said, but there has been a drop since then. Part of that, he said, may be a reduction in the number of people turning in animals suspected to have rabies.

If an animal is acting suspiciously the best thing to do is avoid contact, Ermer said. Animals that cause concern should be reported, he added, either by contacting the local law enforcement agency or health department.

“When in doubt call the county health department,” Ermer said. “They can call the DEC too, and we'll give them the answer we think is best.”

While Steuben County has no cases this year, last year saw the first cases of dog and cat rabies in about 10 years, according to Gail Wechsler, Steuben County public health coordinator.

“You kind of feel like you're failing, because neither of these animals had been previously vaccinated,” she said. “Both had a tangle with a raccoon, and both owners didn't do anything about it at the time.”

“Both animals were with large families, and almost everyone had to receive rabies post-exposure shots,” Wechsler added. “All that probably could have been prevented if they had contacted us.”

As a result, she said, the families endured the lengthy series of rabies shots, and the animals “suffered painful deaths.”

Raccoons may be the popular creature to spread rabies in this area, but it also may be spread by bats. People should be concerned if they awake to find a bat in the room, or if a bat is discovered around a child that cannot communicate, Wechsler said.

“If people are asleep in a bedroom and wake up to find a bat in there, they should try and catch the bat, and get a hold of us because we can send it in for testing,” she said. “If they let it go, because bats are so small people may have been exposed and not realize it because they were asleep.”

The easiest way to catch one in a bedroom is to turn on the lights, Wechsler said, which usually cause them to land. Then, she said, put a coffee can or something else over the top of them, then slide a piece of paper or similar material between the can and the flat surface to trap the bat inside. Also, she added, it's important not to crush the skull of a bat if people want it to be tested,

“If they crush the skull a bat is very often untestable,” Wechsler said.

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