



West Point's Natural Resources Branch, the Provost Marshal's Office and the Office of Preventative Medicine want to make the public aware of an outbreak of disease among local raccoons in recent months. Since mid-summer, they have responded to more than a dozen reports of sick or dead raccoons around Post. The condition of the animals as well as recent outbreak data suggests that these raccoons were suffering from canine distemper. Photo by U.S. Air Force Airman 1st Class Melissa Waszkiewicz

Sick raccoons serve as a reminder of the importance of wildlife safety

By Christopher Killough
DPW Natural Resources Specialist

West Point's Natural Resources Branch, the Provost Marshal's Office and the Office of Preventative Medicine want to make the public aware of an outbreak of disease among local raccoons in recent months. Since mid-summer, they have responded to more than a dozen reports of sick or dead raccoons around Post.

The condition of the animals as well as recent outbreak data suggests that these raccoons were suffering from canine distemper. Fortunately, in every one of these cases, the sick animals were safely captured and neither people nor pets were exposed to disease risk.

However, sick and injured animals can pose a public health hazard, and so the community should be aware of these types of wildlife safety issues, as well as how to prevent and respond to them.

Two wildlife diseases — rabies and canine distemper — cycle through mammal populations throughout the southern Hudson Valley. Both diseases are serious illnesses not just for local wildlife, but also for pets and — most critically, in the case of rabies — for people.

Rabies is a zoonotic disease (a disease of animal origin) capable of infecting any mammal species, but is most often seen in raccoons, bats, foxes and skunks as well as feral cats and dogs where vaccination is uncommon.

Rabies is detected at West Point an average of once every one to two years following an exposure event. Both people and pets can be infected if exposed. The disease is caused by the virus, Rabies lyssavirus, and affects the brain and nervous systems of infected animals.

Rabies is transmitted through direct contact with the saliva of an infected animal, usually from a bite or scratch. Symptoms of rabies include aggression, lack of fear, difficulty swallowing and excessive drooling, self-mutilation, paralysis, seizures and eventual death. Infected animals may show no symptoms or a multitude of them, depending on which stage of the disease the animal is experiencing at the time it is encountered.

At the point at which symptoms appear the disease is fatal, so prevention as well as immediate response following exposure are critical.

All cats and dogs should be vaccinated, even if normally kept indoors since anything can happen.

Any person or pet that has had physical contact with a wild or feral mammal can potentially be exposed to rabies, and should seek immediate medical treatment.

Canine distemper is also a highly infectious and often fatal disease found in a variety of wild animals including coyotes, foxes, raccoons, skunks and unvaccinated dogs. Humans cannot be infected by distemper.

The disease is caused by the virus, Canine

morbillivirus, and affects the respiratory, gastrointestinal and nervous systems of infected animals.

Distemper is transmitted via contact with saliva, urine, feces and eye and nose secretions from infected animals.

Symptoms of distemper in wild animals include eye and nose discharge, difficulty breathing, coughing and pneumonia, emaciation, a thickening of nose and footpads (distemper is also known as "hard pad disease"), suppressed immune systems, confusion, lethargy and, eventually, death.

Although it is not transmissible to humans, the risk of canine distemper to domestic dogs is especially serious.

Cornell University's School of Veterinary Medicine cites distemper mortality rates of 50% in adult dogs and 80% in puppies. Dogs should be vaccinated consistent with veterinary guidelines.

It is with zoonotic diseases and wildlife safety issues in mind that people are reminded to know and practice these rules of wildlife safety. Practice these rules and help keep West Point wildlife wild and keep people, pets and wildlife safe.

- First, never feed wildlife. Nuisance animal issues often begin over food — either intentional, illegal feeding of wildlife or unintentional feeding from mismanagement of food scraps, pet food, and trash.

- Second, keep your distance. Never

deliberately approach or corner wildlife. Risks include disease or physical harm from biting and scratching. Keep pets fenced, leashed and away from wildlife.

- Third, report suspect animals. Call a wildlife responder immediately if you see sick, injured or oddly-behaving wildlife or if human or animal well-being is a concern.

- Fourth, vaccinate your pets. Installation policy and responsible pet ownership require that dogs and cats receive regular vaccinations.

In the event it is necessary to report an animal emergency issue, call the Military Police Desk at 845-938-3333. Alternately, from 7:45 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday, call the Natural Resources Branch at 845-938-2314 or 845-938-7122.

Do not leave a message. For emergency response, it is important that you speak to a person and can report on the details of the incident. In the event a person or pet has had potential exposure to rabies (e.g. — there was a bat in a house where people were sleeping or your dog fought with a raccoon), seek immediate medical assistance and advice.

For more on rabies, visit the Center for Disease Control website at www.cdc.gov. For more on canine distemper, visit the American Veterinary Medical Association website at www.avma.org.

For more on local West Point wildlife, visit the West Point Natural Resource Branch website at westpoint.isportsman.net.