

Regional health unit confirms presence of rabid bat on farm in East Garafraxa

Written By MIKE BAKER

Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health (WDGPH) is asking local residents to be wary when near bats after confirming that a rabid bat had been found on a farm in Dufferin County.

This was the first confirmed case of a rabid bat being found in the region in almost 30 years. Chuck Ferguson, Manager of Communications for WDGPH, said three individuals are currently being treated for possible exposure to rabies following an incident earlier this month. He noted this was the first time since 1990 that a rabid bat had been found in Dufferin County.

Given the sheer number of bats in Ontario ? there are eight different species confirmed as residing in the province ? rabies is considered to be relatively rare for the animal. Last year, 31 bats tested positive for rabies in Ontario. Three rabid bats have been found in Guelph since 2017, and a rabid bat was found by swimmers at Belwood Lake last summer.

Rabies is a serious zoonotic disease that infects the brain and nervous system of mammals. It is transmitted through saliva, usually following a bite from an infected animal. The time period between contracting the disease and the start of symptoms is usually one to three months, but can vary from less than one week to more than one year. If not treated in time, a rabies infection, for both animals and humans, is almost always fatal.

Rabies caused about 17,400 deaths worldwide in 2015, with more than 95 percent of those cases occurring in Africa and Asia. Approximately 40 percent of deaths occur in children under the age of 15. Rabies is present in more than 150 countries worldwide and on all continents, with the exception of Antarctica.

A 21-year-old B.C. man died last month after contracting the disease. It was the first confirmed fatality in Canada since 2012. According to the federal government, there have been just 25 known fatal cases of human rabies in Canada since the 1920s.

The Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry distributes baits with the rabies vaccine that wildlife can eat to stop the spread of rabies in animals, however there is no vaccine or bait for bats. Now, with the first confirmed case of a rabid bat in Dufferin County in almost three decades, WDGPH officials are warning local residents to take extreme caution when encountering a bat.

?Bats are an important part of our ecosystem; it just isn't fun to find one in your home,? said Dr. Nicola Mercer, Medical Officer of Health and CEO for WDGPH. ?If you come across a bat indoors, don't touch it ? call your local animal control agency. If anyone has direct contact with the bat call your family doctor or visit your local hospital emergency department.?

Dr. Mercer is advising residents to stay away from all wildlife, stray cats and dogs. Rabies is commonly spread through wildlife such as racoons, skunks, foxes and bats. If you suspect an animal is acting strangely, contact the health unit or a veterinary clinic.

For more information about rabies, visit wdgpublichealth.ca/rabies.