

Steep increase in rabid bats, skunks prompts warning from health officials

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(Photo: Submitted)

The number of animals who have tested positive for rabies in Michigan has more than doubled from this time last year.

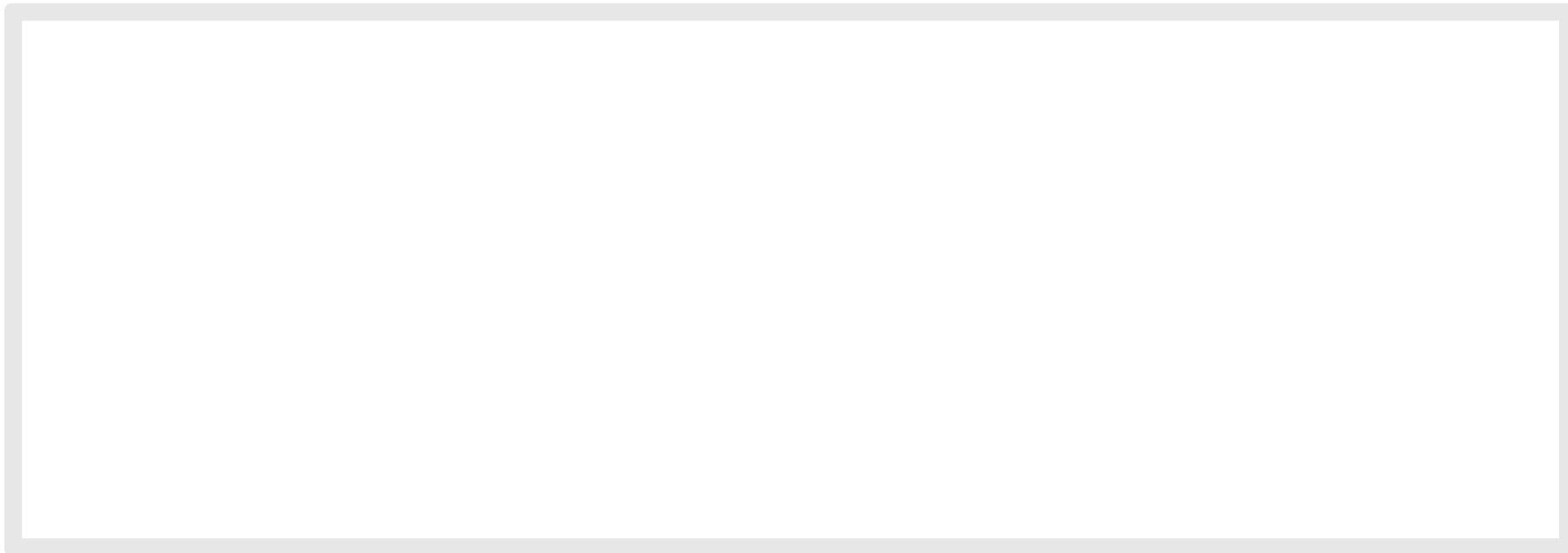
Twenty-two bats, including one found in Livingston County, and two skunks returned positive results for rabies as of July 2, according to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. In the first six months of last year, just nine animals had tested positive. In all of 2017, 38 animals tested positive for rabies.

State and county health officials are urging residents to take precautions against the disease, which is extremely rare in humans, but nearly always fatal if not treated before symptoms appear.

“Bats get really active around August and we’re not there yet,” said Dr. Don Lawrenchuk, medical director for the Livingston County Health Department. “Rabies is the most fatal disease known to mankind... Much better to prevent rabies than deal with consequences later on.”

Rabies is most commonly found in bats. If a bat is found in a home, such as was the case in more than 700 complaints received by the Lake Orion-based bat removal service Critter Catchers last year, residents need to take immediate action.

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“If you wake up in the middle of the night and there is a bat in the house, it could have scratched you and you didn’t realize it,” said Lynn Sutfin, spokesperson for the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. “If possible, you need to determine whether it has rabies. It’s not always an ideal situation.”

The initial reaction to having a bat in the home is to get it out as soon as possible, notes David Kugler, owner of Critter Catchers. He said containing the bat to a room and capturing it so it can be sent for rabies testing may help to avoid costly rabies vaccinations.

Laboratory testing of a bat or other animal possibly infected with rabies commonly takes about 24 to 48 hours for results.

Two Hartland residents who found a bat in their home did have to get vaccinated after the bat came back positive for rabies last month, Lawrenchuk said.

He added they are now protected since the vaccine, if given shortly after exposure, is virtually 100% effective.

“If you wait until the symptoms begin, all bets are off,” Lawrenchuk said. “When bats bite and scratch a person, the marks are so small, you can’t tell with the naked eye... Many times, people panic, open the windows and let the bat out and then call the health department and say, ‘What do we do?’ And we have nothing to test. We have to presume (humans were infected). We’re not going to roll the dice and take the chance. We don’t want this to happen in Livingston County.”

Lawrenchuk’s recommendation is to trap the bat, wearing gloves and other protective clothing, and to put in an impervious container to take to animal control or the health department.

Livingston County has homes that are “more complex in design,” Kugler said, providing opportunities for bats to enter attics in construction gaps.

“You can find bats in old farmhouses or brand new homes that were just built in the last year,” he said. “It seems that they prefer homes with the larger, more complex roof lines. Most people do not realize that they have bats in the attic and are at risk.”

The species of bat he finds in the county is the big brown bat, which he said is thriving. They can enter homes through a gap as narrow as 3/8 inch, underneath ridge vents, around dormers, behind siding and through gable vents.

But that isn’t the only way they can find their way in. Sutfin said people who hang laundry to dry on clotheslines outside and bring it in during the evening may even get an unwanted hitchhiker.

She also cautions against approaching any kind of wildlife. Rather, residents should call their county animal control department, a wildlife rehabilitator, or report it to the DNR at (517) 336-5030.

“Even if they don’t appear sick, if you bring it in your home, it could be a problem,” she said.

Pet owners should also make sure dogs and cats are vaccinated against rabies. If your pet has been bitten or scratched by a wild animal or may have had unsupervised contact with wildlife, contact a veterinarian as soon as possible. Additional actions may be needed, even if the pet is up to date on rabies vaccinations.

For more information, visit Michigan.gov/rabies.

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