



Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management

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DEM, RIDOH REMIND PUBLIC OF RABIES PREVENTION TIPS AS SPRING APPROACHES AND WILDLIFE BECOMES MORE ACTIVE

PROVIDENCE, RI – The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM) and the Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH) are reminding the public that as winter moves into spring and the warmer weather brings more people outdoors, they can expect to see more wildlife activity and should avoid interacting with wildlife to help protect both themselves and Rhode Island's wildlife. Throughout the spring, wildlife tends to move around more frequently with the onset of breeding behavior patterns. During this increased period of wildlife activity, Rhode Islanders should remain vigilant and avoid approaching wildlife because all mammals statewide are susceptible to the rabies virus.



The raccoon-adapted strain of the rabies virus is widely found in the wild animal population throughout Rhode Island. Credit: Dean Birch.

First confirmed in Rhode Island in 1994, the [rabies virus](#) is now endemic and can be expected to occur in wild mammal populations throughout the state. Vector species for rabies in Rhode Island include [bats](#), [raccoons](#), [woodchucks](#), [skunks](#), and [foxes](#), but can be carried by any other mammal. Occasionally bats can find their way into human living spaces and [testing of the bat](#) or preventative vaccination is recommended when a bat has been found within these areas when humans or pets may have been sleeping, or if the bat was present around individuals who are not able to communicate that they may have had contact with the animal. [Infected animals](#) can exhibit a wide range of symptoms, from aggressiveness to aimless wandering, lethargy, weakness of the hind legs, and loss of awareness. Some animals show no symptoms and the only way to confirm rabies is through laboratory testing. Rabies is a viral disease acquired from the bite or scratch of a rabid animal. Without a post-exposure vaccine series, virtually all cases are fatal. This post-exposure vaccination should be administered as soon as possible to anyone with a known or likely exposure to rabies, including those who received prior pre-exposure prophylaxis. Rabies treatment must be started as

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soon as possible after exposure. Anyone who has had a potential rabies exposure is urged to call RIDOH's Center for Acute Infectious Disease Epidemiology at 401-222-2577 (Monday-Friday, 8:30 AM-4:30 PM) or 401-276-8046 after hours for treatment guidance.

"DEM stresses that wildlife is beautiful but should always be enjoyed from afar," said RI State Veterinarian Dr. Scott Marshall. "Never approach wild animals and certainly never touch them. Handling mammals is always a potential rabies exposure. Once people handle or have contact with these animals, public health officials are compelled to test the animal for rabies, which requires that the animal be humanely dispatched because testing requires brain tissue."

Although wildlife will be making more appearances in backyards, local parks, and sometimes unexpected areas in the springtime, simply observing a mammal in the daytime is not a cause for a concern or indicative of illness or abandonment. Each spring, Environmental Police Officers from [DEM's Division of Law Enforcement](#) receive many calls from concerned members of the public about "[abandoned](#)" baby wildlife. This is [almost never the case](#). Unless a baby animal is visibly injured or in immediate danger, it should not be approached, touched, picked up, or removed from the wild. If you observe an injured wild animal, please report it to the [Wildlife Clinic of Rhode Island](#) at 401-294-6363 for assistance or to DEM's 24/7 dispatch at 401-222-3070. In the uncommon instance where a wild animal is observed [exhibiting symptoms of illness](#) such as acting strangely, the public should report it to their local animal control officer or DEM and keep their distance. Although rabies can only be confirmed by laboratory testing, the costs associated with staff time to retrieve, ship, test, and dispose of each suspected wildlife rabies specimen are expensive.

All dogs, cats, and ferrets are [required by state law](#) to have current vaccination against rabies and Rhode Island residents should vaccinate their pets for rabies if they are not already. Vaccination of pets prevents them from contracting rabies and prevents people from becoming exposed to rabies through their pets. All pets should be kept indoors unless supervised. Any contact between a domestic animal and wild mammal should be reported to your veterinarian and local animal control officer. The Rhode Island Veterinary Medical Association (RIVMA) and organizations throughout the state offer [rabies vaccination clinics](#) for reduced cost vaccines. Although most livestock are not required to be vaccinated for rabies, DEM and RIDOH strongly recommend that livestock owners consult with their veterinarian to vaccinate their animals.

RIDOH and DEM make the following recommendations to prevent rabies:

- Make sure all dogs, cats, and ferrets are up to date on rabies vaccination.
- Avoid all contact with and do not feed stray or free-roaming domestic animals.
- Avoid all contact with and do not feed wild animals. Feeding wildlife is illegal in Rhode Island not only because it increases the risk of disease, but it can also lead to conflicts between humans and wildlife, and lead to unsustainable populations of wildlife.
- Do not feed your pets outdoors, as this will attract other animals. This is especially dangerous when feeding large numbers of free-roaming cats.
- Protect your pets by always maintaining control. Walk dogs on a leash or let them play in a fenced yard, and do not let pets wander unsupervised.
- Report all animal bites to your city/town's animal control officer.
- Securely cover all garbage cans so wild animals cannot scavenge for food.
- [Bat-proof your house](#).

For more information on how to prevent rabies, please visit [RIDOH's website](#). For more information on rabies and ways to protect yourself and your pets, please see this [RIDOH fact sheet](#). For more information on DEM programs and initiatives, visit www.dem.ri.gov. Follow [DEM on Facebook](#), Twitter (@RhodeIslandDEM), or Instagram (@rhodeisland.dem) for timely updates.

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