

NEWS



Police information officers Sgt. Tara Gerhard and Lt. Daniel Spital provided an incident update to the press on Sunday afternoon after the coyote suspected of rabies infection was located and killed

Coyote Bites Cause Cautionary Park Closure

As expected, coyote tested positive for rabies, although it is unusual in coyotes. Report abnormally aggressive mammal behavior, call 911 from a safe place.

BY SUSAN LAUME
THE CONNECTION

On Saturday, June 4th, Fairfax County Park Authority (FCPA) made the unusual decision to close Lake Accotink Park following a coyote attack reported there. The closure decision, deemed necessary for the safety of community members, was based on the recommendation of Animal Protection Police Officers (APPOs), in consultation with FCPA naturalists. The park was opened again on Sunday at 3 p.m. after the animal was killed. It later tested positive for rabies,

Three adults sustained non-life threatening injuries, and two dogs also were bitten in the initial encounter with the coyote at about 8 a.m. on Saturday morning in the park. Social media postings and signage alerted the public to the park closure, “until further notice.”

Animal Protection Police Officers (APPOs) actively searched the area of Lake Accotink Park for the animal on Saturday by foot and using helicopter surveillance until dusk. Officers also responded to several Sunday morning calls after a coyote was seen in the area of Carrleigh Parkway, biting car tires and exhibiting other unusual behavior. A group of officers continued the search in the area of the park near Carrleigh Parkway

where the coyote was seen headed on Sunday morning. Police spokesperson, Lt. Daniel Spital, said that later in the morning one of the officers conducting the search was attacked from behind by the animal, which bit his leg. The officer turned and discharged his gun several times to stop the attack. The officer was taken to the hospital for treatment and is expected to recover. The coyote was found dead nearby.

Guarding Against Rabies

The coyote, a young male, which naturalists say is unlikely to have mated this season, was tested for the rabies virus by the county health department, and the test was positive, confirming the strong suspicion of rabies disease based on the coyote’s behavior. All those bitten in this incident, human and canine, are expected to fully recover since treatment was timely. Untreated rabies is fatal. While this animal was located and dispatched, the rabies virus may still be present in the environment or other infected animals; the virus has a broad spectrum of hosts, including humans and other mammals.

Rabies infection of an animal can be confirmed only after death, through microscopic examination of the animal’s brain. Experts say it’s best to avoid contact with wild animals for you and your pet. They



PHOTO BY SUSAN LAUME/THE CONNECTION

Female coyote found dead on Pohick Road in February 2022, one of many killed by vehicle collision each year in urban areas

recommend you discourage contact between pets and wildlife; feed your pet indoors so food left outside does not attract wildlife or strays; and report strays which might be unvaccinated.

American Humane, the country’s first national humane society established in 1877, indicates: “There is no cure for rabies, and it is almost always fatal. The typical incubation period for the Rabies lyssavirus virus which causes the disease is three to eight weeks. An infected animal can only transmit rabies after the onset of clinical signs. Once signs occur, an infected animal usually dies within five days. Human rabies cases in the U.S. currently average two per year. Cases of rabies in domestic pets average 400 to 500 per year.”

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) advises that you always keep your pet’s rabies vaccine up to date. Puppies and kittens should receive their first rabies vaccination at 12 weeks of age. Pets must be vaccinated again in one year, and then a three-year rabies vaccine is generally administered during the rest of your pet’s life. It’s also the law in Fairfax County, “Unless exempt pursuant to Virginia law, the owner or custodian of each dog and domesticated cat 4 months of age and older shall have it currently vaccinated against rabies.” (Fairfax County Code of Ordinances, 41.1-2-1).

Coyotes, like all mammals, may contract rabies. According to the American Veterinary Medical Association: “In the United States, most cases of rabies occur in wild animals — mainly skunks, raccoons, bats, coyotes, and foxes. Most of the relatively few

human cases in this country have resulted from exposures to bats. In recent years, cats have become the most common domestic animal infected with rabies. This is because many cat owners do not vaccinate their cats, and cats permitted to roam outdoors can be exposed to rabid wildlife.”

AVMA explains, “Animals with rabies may show a variety of signs, including fearfulness, aggression, excessive drooling, difficulty swallowing, staggering, paralysis and seizures. Aggressive behavior is common, but rabid animals may also be uncharacteristically affectionate.”

Coyotes

The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) notes that coyotes “are generally nocturnal and seldom seen. You may catch a glimpse of a coyote, however, as they move from one part of their territory to another in search of prey. Observing a coyote in this manner, even during the daytime, does not mean that the coyote is sick or aggressive. If the coyote is scared away by your presence, they are exhibiting natural behavior and this should not be cause for concern.”

Coyotes (*Canis latrans*) are native members of the Canine species. Coyotes typically weigh 25 to 35 pounds, and can attain speeds of up to 43 miles per hour while in pursuit of prey. They have pointed ears, slender muzzles, drooping bushy tails usually black tipped, with grayish-brown hair with red tinges over the body. They most resemble German Shepherd dogs. Studies

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FILE PHOTO/US FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE OPEN SOURCE

A healthy coyote among cattails.



FILE PHOTO/US FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE OPEN SOURCE

Healthy coyote pictured in an area of heavy vegetation.

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by the Urban Coyote Research Project have proven that coyotes rarely prey upon domestic pets. Their most common food items were found to be small rodents (42%), fruit (23%), deer (22%), and rabbit (18%). In urban areas they prefer wooded locations where they can hide from people, frequently using parks and golf courses. Coyotes usually sleep above ground in the open or in cover; only denning when raising their young. They typically mate in February and birth pups in April. It's a hard life in the wild; most die before they reach three years of age while those in captivity can live up to 21 years or more. By far, the most common cause of death for urban coyotes has been collisions with vehicles, causing about 40 to 70% of their deaths each year.

In this incident the public relied on the police division tasked with animal issues. The primary function of the Fairfax County Police Department Animal Services Division is to help protect county residents while humanely assisting with pets and animals. According to the county website, "Animal Protection Police Officers (APPOs) assist with a wide array of encounters between animals and humans, from reports of stray dogs, to raccoons in living rooms, to potential neglect or cruelty situations. APPOs are trained law enforcement officers responsible for enforcing county ordinances and state laws that pertain to animals and their treatment. Source: www.fairfaxcounty.gov/police/specializedunits/animalprotectionpolice

Also, Virginia's Department of Wildlife Resources operates a Wildlife Conflict Helpline, toll-free at 855-571-9003 (M-F 8am - 4:30pm).

What To Do If Human Is Bitten?

Wash the wound thoroughly and vigorously with soap and lots of water for 15

"If you, or someone you know, or a pet, touched or was bitten or scratched by the rabid coyote between Saturday, June 4 and Sunday, June 5, you are urged to call the Fairfax County Health Department Rabies Program at 703 246-2433, TTY 711.

minutes, then treat with a disinfectant such as ethanol or iodine.

Call your physician immediately

What To Do If Pet Is Bitten?

Consult your veterinarian immediately and report the bite to local animal control authorities.

Even if your dog, cat or ferret has a current vaccination, he/she should be revaccinated immediately, kept under the owner's control, and observed for a period as specified by state law or local ordinance. Animals with expired vaccinations will need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

Dogs, cats and ferrets that have never been vaccinated and are exposed to a rabid animal may need to be euthanized in accordance with regulations or placed in strict isolation for six months.

Coyote Tests Positive for Rabies - What Now?

With Fairfax County Health Department's June 6 confirmation of rabies in a coyote found in the north Springfield/Lake Accotink area following laboratory testing. In

2022 to date, the county has confirmed 16 rabid animals: 14 raccoons, one fox, and one groundhog. The weekend's coyote bite incident was fairly unusual. According to the health department, there were no confirmed coyote bites on humans in Fairfax County within the past year prior to this weekend. Coyote attacks on humans are rare, as are cases of confirmed rabies in coyotes. Only a few cases of coyotes with rabies were documented in Virginia Department of Health records. In the past ten years, there were only five reported cases in Virginia counties: one each in Loudoun, 2018; Franklin, 2016; Williamsburg City, 2014; and Bedford, 2011.

Now that this rabid coyote case has been confirmed, what should be done about area coyotes?

Dr. Katherine Edwards, a certified wildlife biologist and the county's wildlife management specialist, says "Large-scale population reduction of coyotes based on this one animal is not warranted, nor would it be effective for rabies control. Coyotes are only one of several wildlife species susceptible to rabies and confirmed cases of rabies in coyotes are rare in the Commonwealth. Rabies is endemic in our area and there are multiple wildlife reservoir hosts for the disease present in the county, including raccoons, foxes, skunks, and bats. It would be difficult if not

impossible to reduce population densities of susceptible wild animals to a low enough threshold to prevent the spread of rabies among wildlife." Nor would that tactic be socially acceptable given public concern for animal welfare.

This year, Fairfax County has 15 positive cases of rabies in species other than coyotes; out of 96 tested animals: 14 raccoons, and one fox tested positive. In 2021, there were 26 positive cases of rabies out of 281 animals tested: 15 raccoons, one skunk, two foxes, four bats, one groundhog, one beaver, and two cats.

Notably absent from positive rabies case statistics here are domestic dogs, which are more likely to have received the rabies vaccine. While both dogs and cats are required to be vaccinated in the county, cats are more likely to be unvaccinated and allowed to roam outside where they may come into contact with infected wildlife. According to the Health Department, typically two to five free roaming cats test positive per year here.

Edwards said, "Rabies is a fatal disease but is preventable. Vaccination of pets is a key component for rabies prevention and control. It is required by Virginia law that dogs and cats four months of age and older be current on their rabies vaccination. Vaccinating pets against the rabies virus protects them from getting the disease and also provides a barrier of protection for people and their family if a pet is bitten by a rabid animal.

The Fairfax County Animal Shelter offers low-cost vaccination clinics for dogs, cats, and ferrets on various dates throughout the year. Upcoming dates for this year's clinics, which require advance registration one month prior to the date are: Aug. 28, Oct. 2, and Dec. 4, at a cost of \$20, cash or check only. For more details and registration, see www.fairfaxcounty.gov/animalshelter/communityassistance/rabiesclinics