

How to Avoid a Tangle with Rabid Wildlife on Your Golf Course

Rabies is of growing concern. In the past two years hundreds of animals have tested positive for the deadly disease, and numerous residents have fallen prey to rabid animal attacks. On golf courses, where wildlife abounds, rabid animals can pose a threat to unsuspecting golfers and crew members.

One of the first steps in protecting staff and membership from this potentially life-threatening virus is education. Here are the basics.

What is rabies? Rabies is a virus that causes inflammation of the brain and is almost always fatal once symptoms develop. Present primarily in saliva, the virus is transmitted through a bite or scratch from an infected animal. People cannot get rabies by petting an animal or even by getting rabies-contaminated saliva on their skin unless it comes in contact with a recent wound or break in the skin or a mucous membrane.

The number-one carrier of rabies in our area is the raccoon, followed by skunks, woodchucks, foxes, and bats. Although any animal is susceptible to rabies, it is unusual to find it in small rodents. If they are bitten by another animal, they usually don't survive to pass the virus along.

Tip-offs to trouble. Watch for nocturnal animals roaming the course during the day. Keep in mind, though, that they sometimes appear in the daytime to hunt food for their young.

If, however, an animal seems uncharacteristically tame or friendly, shows signs of paralysis—particularly of the hindquar-

ters and throat, walks in circles, falls over, has convulsions, or attacks without provocation, chances are you've come face-to-face with a rabid animal.

Discouraging wildlife from taking up residence in public areas. Prevention is the best medicine. In this case, that means discouraging wildlife from nesting in public places.

- ✓ Be sure maintenance buildings are secure from wildlife looking for refuge. You wouldn't want to suffer a surprise attack when entering one.

- ✓ Suggest that any openings in the clubhouse attic, basement, or porches be sealed and that chimneys be capped with screens. Chimneys are among raccoons' favorite den sites.

- ✓ Keep dumpster areas clear of garbage, and be sure lids and doors are always kept closed.

How to treat animal bites.

Anyone bitten or scratched by an animal on the course should:

- ✓ Learn as much as they can about the animal. If it's a dog or cat with an owner, get the name and address.

Even if the animal's been vaccinated, it will have to be observed for 10 days to see if rabies symptoms develop. On rare occasions, the vaccine does not protect the animal.

If the animal is wild or stray, be sure to note any features that will allow later identification.

Better—though difficult—capture or kill the animal without damaging its head where the virus is highly concentrated. Should you choose the latter, refrigerate the animal as soon as possible, then call animal control or police.

- ✓ Wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water.

- ✓ Seek medical attention immediately. A physician or emergency room will know whether rabies postexposure treatment is necessary.

Fortunately, rabies vaccinations are not as painful as they used to be since they're no longer given in the stomach. The new vaccine, used extensively over the past 10 years, is safer and more effective than the original.

- ✓ Report the incident to the local health department.

If you find a dead animal on your course, use extreme care when handling the carcasses. Although the virus dies after the animal does, the time varies greatly with humidity and air temperature. To be safe:

- ✓ Never handle carcasses with bare hands. Use shovels or disposable gloves.

- ✓ Place the carcass in double garbage bags, and incinerate or bury it in a hole at least three feet deep to prevent other animals from digging it up.

- ✓ Clean tools or other contaminated surfaces with a solution of one part household bleach and 20 parts water.

For additional information, contact your State Department of Environmental Conservation.

To report possible exposure to rabies or suspected rabid animal sightings, call your health department.

Advice about animal bites and rabies diagnosis is available from your State Department of Health.

This article adopted from one in Tee to Green, newsletter of MetGCSA.