

County battles severe outbreak of distemper

By Ryan Anderson
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A dry summer has led to a flood of distemper cases among area wildlife.

Now it appears that two disorientated raccoons along Clear Creek in Pearland may mark the continued presence of the distemper outbreak.

Pearland resident Charles Roberts noticed a raccoon acting strangely in his yard.

Roberts placed the raccoon in a cage and monitored its activities. Three days later, the raccoon was dead.

A second raccoon, with similar symptoms, entered his yard a few days later.

"I was afraid that my neighbors had been putting out poison and that the raccoons had gotten a hold of it," Roberts said.

Fearing that the raccoon had been poisoned, Roberts began calling various organizations to determine the best way to treat the raccoon.

"I wanted to find out how I could get the animal to up-chuck without it biting off my fingers," Roberts said. "If it was poison, I needed to pump the animal's stomach."

According Susan Dancer, a state licensed animal rehabilitator, the distemper outbreak started in February.

"I have not really noticed an increase or decrease in the number of cases during that time," Dancer said. "We should see fewer cases as the mating season draws to a close, though."

According to Dancer, distemper mainly affects the younger raccoons, but all raccoons are susceptible.

Distemper cases seem to be concentrated around bodies of water where raccoons have access to artificial food.

"People need to stop feeding wild raccoons. People along creeks will leave bags of dog food outside for the animals. This increases the population and if one animal gets infected, it will knock out the whole population," Dancer said.

Dancer urges anyone who sees a raccoon acting strangely to call animal control immediately.

Distemper is not limited to wild animals. According to Craig Baker, senior animal control officer for Friendswood Animal Control, dogs are also prone to getting distemper.

"It is very important that people keep their animals' vaccinations up-to-date. Those shots will prevent an animal from getting distemper," Baker said.

The main symptom of distemper is disorientation. Nocturnal animals with the disease, such as raccoons, will also become active during the day, according to Baker.

Additional symptoms of distemper are; transient fever, hardening of the paws, lack of appetite, nasal discharge, coughing, seizures and vomiting.

"A lot of times animals with distemper will seem very tame. That is because their fear reflex in their lower brains has been damaged by the disease," Dancer said. "One time I saw a family that had an adult raccoon on a leash in their front yard."

The outbreak is not limited to just Friendswood and Pear-land, however.

"All of the raccoons and opossums that we have tested for rabies, have turned out to have distemper," said Brenda Mayfield, secretary for the Brazoria County Animal Control. "From what we understand, the cause of the outbreak is the dry conditions that we have had."

Mayfield estimates the number of animals found with the disease to be "in the hundreds."

Prevention through vaccination is the only cure for distemper.

"There is nothing you can do to save the animal once they get it," Mayfield said.

Even though the disease is not always fatal, according to Dancer, "the animals are unable to function in the wild once they get the disease."