

Coyote attack brings rabies close to home

Written by Darci Tomky

Even with reports of terrestrial rabies affecting skunks and other carnivores in northeast Colorado, it's hard to picture rabies impacting the Holyoke community, but a recent incident brings the matter a little closer to home.

While doing chores on his rural Holyoke farm early Wednesday morning, Aug. 5, a man witnessed a coyote attack. He reported a young coyote came out of the adjacent corn field next to his corrals to attack his large 100-pound dog.

Veterinarian Dr. Jeff Tharp noted this is very abnormal behavior for a small coyote to make an unprovoked attack on a large dog—making the incident a very significant sign of rabies. He said it simply isn't good survival instincts for that animal to challenge a 100-pound dog.

The dog's owner reacted quickly, shooting the coyote and putting the wounded dog into a kennel. Without realizing the complications of the situation, the man picked up the coyote without gloves on and threw it into a hole on his property.

Some time later, his concern about the coyote having rabies grew, and he called Tharp. Because there have been rabies cases in the area, the man was urged to bring the coyote in for testing by the Colorado Department of Health.

Upon returning to the hole where he threw the coyote, the man found the animal was gone. This further complicates the matter as the Colorado Department of Health no longer had access to the head and brain of the coyote which are required for rabies testing.

Tharp noted there was no proof the dog had up-to-date rabies vaccination. Because of risk and speculation, they must "assume it was rabid," he said. In cases like this, he explained the dog must either be put down or quarantined for six months in an approved facility.

While the owner decided to put the dog down, there was still much risk involved because of the man's handling the coyote with bare hands. He had possible contact with blood and/or fluids from the coyote, and therefore had possible high exposure to rabies. The Colorado Department of Health urged him to obtain post-exposure prophylaxis—a very expensive rabies prevention process, running at around \$5,000, which should be started within 48 hours of exposure.

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According to Tharp, once a person develops neurological signs of rabies, he is “99.9 percent dead.” Tharp emphasized the seriousness of the situation, recalling he knows of only one case where a human has survived rabies only after going through a medically induced coma.

Humans can spread rabies just like animals, so extreme caution must be taken after possible contact with a rabid animal.

Rabies precautions emphasized

Because of the potential danger of rabies in the Holyoke area, Tharp reminds community members there are important lessons to be learned from this incident.

First, rabies is a potential health hazard for both humans and pets.

Be aware of the signs of rabies and avoid contact with potentially rabid animals. Some things to look for include abnormal behavior in wild animals, overly aggressive actions and animals like skunks being out in the day time. Cattle with rabies will be overly excited and will have wobbly back ends.

Tharp stressed to pet owners that rabies vaccinations are very effective in preventing rabies in dogs and cats as well as horses and cattle.

Another important piece in the puzzle is vaccination documentation. In Colorado, the vaccine must be administered by a licensed veterinarian. Pets may receive the initial vaccination at 4 months of age. They will receive a booster vaccination one year later followed by other vaccinations every two years. Tharp explained if a pet misses one of the vaccinations, the vaccine is considered to be expired, and while it would still provide some protection, the animal should receive the up-to-date booster vaccination immediately.

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Additionally, when humans or pets are the subject of an unprovoked attack, it is important to not lose track of that animal if at all possible. When shooting the animal, don't shoot it in the head and take precautions. Wear gloves and avoid coming in contact with fluid, saliva or brain material. Call the health department and a veterinarian for further help with the situation.

“Pet ownership is indeed a privilege, not a right,” said Tharp. “Although there is a cost attached to keeping your pets properly vaccinated, it is probably a small price to pay to protect the health of your pets, the health of pets around it and the health of your family and community members, especially in the face of a disease that is devastating to humans.”