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Feral kittens can bring trouble

1 Comments

Burlington County rabies cases

Following are rabies cases for 2014 (as of June 30), and from January 1989 through June 2014, as reported by the New Jersey Department of Health:

- Raccoon: 18; 480
- Skunk: 2; 81
- Fox: 0; 19
- Cat: 1; 37
- Groundhog: 0; 37
- Horse: 0; 1
- Other wild (beaver, bear, coyote, opossum): 0; 1
- Bats: 4; not provided
- Total: 21; 631

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By Rose Krebs Staff writer

It's often hard to resist approaching a cute kitten that appears in need of food or comfort in your neighborhood or that is cowering in the rain.

But as last week's warning from the Burlington County Health Department that a kitten with rabies was found in Medford demonstrates, the public needs to be wary of any animal living in the wild, as cute as it may be. And the family pet needs to be protected as well, even though it can be difficult to keep Fido from chasing after a feline.

Last week, the Health Department issued a warning that a kitten with rabies had been found in the vicinity of Eaves Mill Road and that 13 people, three cats and one dog were exposed to the rabid feline. The kitten has been euthanized. The people were advised to seek medical attention and that the exposed cats and dog must be monitored for six months and follow health precautions.

Control of feral cat colonies has been difficult statewide, as the public often cares for the cats without taking steps to control the population by spaying and neutering. In response, many towns have started participating in what are known as trap, neuter and return programs, or TNR.

The Burlington County Feral Cat Initiative, an all-volunteer program, aims to help municipalities establish TNR programs to control feral cat colonies and ensure that felines are spayed or neutered and vaccinated.

Gordon Stull, a veterinarian who works with the initiative, said the program services about 200 colonies. Stull estimated that there are as many as 80,000 feral cats in Burlington County. Municipalities participating include Beverly, Lumberton, Mount Holly, Shamong, Southampton, Springfield, Tabernacle and Woodland.

across the county. However, thousands more exist, he said. Stull estimated that there are as many as 80,000 feral cats in Burlington County. Municipalities participating include Beverly, Lumberton, Mount Holly, Shamong, Southampton, Springfield, Tabernacle and Woodland.

Burlington City approved a feral cat ordinance last year after a spirited debate about the issue. One of the city's residents, Harry Heck, who had been recognized as citizen of the year, got into legal trouble after he placed trays of cat food on officials' properties. He had grown tired of the lack of action to address the problem.

"We are making progress, but we have a long way to go," Stull said. "We certainly don't claim to be making a big impact yet."

The program requires that towns pass ordinances that set rules on feral cat colonies and offer some protection to those that are entered in the program and their caregivers.

Some have been critical of the program and the fact that caregivers are not known. Other officials have argued that the program could leave towns liable for colonies, especially in an incident in which a cat scratches someone or a pet and transfers a disease.

Debate about TNR among veterinary, animal advocacy and humane organizations has been intense over the years.

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The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals recognizes TNR as a less costly, efficient and humane way of stabilizing feral cat populations, according to its website.

Other organizations, however, have questioned TNR's effectiveness and argued that it is not humane in that it leaves what has become a domesticated species in a wild, unforgiving environment.

Stull said the program aims to have feral cats in colonies overseen by caregivers vaccinated and helps towns find funding sources to do it.

"The rabies vaccination is very important. That is the only way to control rabies" in feral colonies,

he said.

"We are not creating new colonies; those colonies are already there," Stull said. "The majority of people who are caregivers (in the general population) do not know how to care for a colony."

Although some caregivers usually "have big hearts," they can sometimes add to the problem, he said. Caregivers in the program are told to make sure the cats are spayed, neutered and vaccinated, and to not have any contact with them.

Stull understands the tendency for the public to want to comfort the animals.

"A lot of times, people see a cute kitten and think, 'Let's bring it home,'" he said. "We certainly would tell people in the general public not to touch animals in the wild. Although they may look cute, they can be dangerous."

Stull was quick to point out that there aren't many occurrences like the recent exposure in Medford. He could recall only a few instances of rabies in cats during his long career.

"They were all feral kittens," Stull said, adding that small felines are prone to being bit by predators. He added that the incubation period for rabies can vary, and thus an animal can go months without showing signs of infection. Also, the vaccine can take some time to take effect.

The New Jersey Department of Health does not endorse or oppose TNR. On its website, it provides resources for dealing with feral and "free roaming" cats, which are basically outdoor cats that have lived or live in a home.

Some suggestions it offers are education of the public on responsible pet ownership and how to deal with behavioral problems in pets; establishment of municipal controls, including prohibiting feeding of cats outside managed colonies; and cat licensing and rabies vaccination.

According to department figures, one other rabid cat was found this year in the county. Statewide, nine rabid cats had been found as of June 30.

Daniel Emmer, a department spokesman, said the last human case of rabies "acquired" in the state was in 1997. In 2011, a man from Haiti became ill while visiting a relative in the state. Emmer said it was revealed that he acquired rabies in Haiti when bitten by a dog. The previous case of a human infected in the state was 1971, he said.

Raccoons and bats are the animals most frequently found to be infected statewide. As of June 30, 85 infected raccoons and 18 bats were found with rabies.

Although rabies is rare, it has a high rate of mortality once a person exhibits symptoms. Early symptoms are similar to those of many other illnesses, including fever, headache and general weakness or discomfort. Later symptoms may include insomnia, anxiety, confusion, slight or partial paralysis, excitation, hallucinations, agitation, increase in saliva, difficulty swallowing and fear of water.

Rose Krebs: 609-871-8064;

email: rkrebs@calkins.com;

Twitter: @rosekrebs



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