

WARNING ISSUED

Brandon faces rabid skunk outbreak

Two cases confirmed as sick animals chase horses, attack broomsticks

BY DAWN WALTON

Skunks that should be hunkering down to hibernate in southern Manitoba are instead braving low temperatures to hound horses, attack inanimate objects and charge at people.

A rabies outbreak has hit Brandon, prompting police in Manitoba's second largest city to issue a rare warning this week to beware bizarrely behaving skunks.

"On New Year's Eve when we came home, there was a skunk chasing the horses in the pasture," recalled Barb Vinthers, who has an acreage at the city's outskirts and a horse farm as a neighbour.

"We've been here 35 years," she added, "I've never seen a rabid skunk. Don't want to see another one. They're very aggressive."

Since mid-December, two cases of rabid skunks have been confirmed - either by testing or by observing aggressive behaviour - in that area of the city. Traps have also been set, as officials expect more.

Three horses are now under 60-day quarantine in case they have been exposed to the virus from skunks nipping at their hooves. Officials are warning people to keep their pets under control, indoors and vaccinated against the almost-always fatal disease.

On New Year's Day, Brandon animal control officer Kelly

Incidences of rabies in Canada

Jan. 1 to June 30, 2007

Species	NWT and Nunavut	B.C.	Sask.	Man.	Ont.	Que.	Total	%Total
Dogs	3			1	1		5	4.46
Cats		1	1	1			3	2.68
Bovine			1	4	4		9	8.04
Equine				1	1		2	1.79
Skunks			3	15	14		32	28.57
Bats		3			14	5	22	19.64
Foxes	7					1	8	7.14
Raccoons			1			29	30	26.79
Hamsters			1				1	0.89
Total	10	4	7	22	34	35	112	100.00

MAGGIE WONG/THE GLOBE AND MAIL ■ SOURCE: CANADIAN FOOD INSPECTION AGENCY

Pettinger responded to Ms. Vinthers's complaint of a cantankerous skunk and found himself under assault.

"It was biting a lady's broom, attacking it leaning up against the house," he recalled. He followed it for a few houses, attempting to capture it, but the animal turned and ran toward him. "I shot it," he said.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency usually counts hundreds of cases a year of rabies in animals, normally in skunks, bats and raccoons, but the virus has also been found in domestic animals. In recent years, Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba and Saskatchewan accounted for the bulk of animal infections; the virus has rarely surfaced in Atlantic Canada.

"It's something that we kind of live with here in Canada," said Lynn Bates, a veterinary program officer with the CFIA. "But it's not often we would get skunks within the city limits."

The viral infection, which is carried by warm-blooded animals, attacks the central nervous system and the brain.

Infected animals can display symptoms including aggression, depression and paralysis, which can lead to drooling, as well as odd behaviour such as wild animals that shed their fear of humans or pets being scared of their owners.

The virus is transmitted through the saliva of an infected animal, usually by a bite or scratch; it can also be passed

on by a lick to a cut or contact with mucous membranes.

In people, symptoms can develop quickly - usually within 20 days to two months - or take several years to emerge. Infected people experience flu-like symptoms first, but the virus can quickly progress to cause anxiety, confusion, insomnia, hallucinations, a fear of water, difficulty swallowing and convulsions before the victim slips into a coma.

While human cases of rabies are rare in Canada, 24 people have died of the disease since record keeping began in 1925.

Last year, a 73-year-old Alberta man died after being bitten by a rabid bat many months before and failing to seek treatment before symptoms developed. The most recent victims before him included two people also infected by bat bites, a 52-year-old British Columbia man in 2003 and a nine-year-old Quebec boy in 2000.

Ms. Vinthers has been phoning neighbours to alert them that the skunk problem that plagued the area all summer has now turned dangerous with confirmed cases of rabies. She's also trying to stay inside and she watches where she's walking.

"Checking the garage before you get out of the car," she said. "When you drive in, you make sure that you look around to make sure there's no skunks lingering around the corner."