

## 7-16-10 Mosquito Stories

As deadly as it is, it is still very challenging to teach or to learn about Eastern Equine encephalitis. Dire news is not enough to maintain the fear if the feared object is never seen, except in stories. And the farther away from our personal life the story seems, the more removed is the meaning and the more diminished is the fear. EEE (Eastern Equine encephalitis) is cyclical and, therefore, once per generation, every twenty years or so, there are outbreaks severe enough to cause deaths, states of emergency and aerial spraying. If your life was not touched at that time by proximity to the tragedies, then it won't have the same impact as for those who suffered the death of a loved one or who have to visit someone in a nursing home because the neurological damage was so great, they can never recover a normal life. If you did not personally know these terrible circumstances, then it might be just a story. You try to teach your children about the mosquitoes and you try to take the appropriate precautions but it remains just a story.

West Nile virus, on the other hand, remains more of a constant, so it is easier for us to accept the reality of it. The disease is not as dire or as deadly as EEE, so, perhaps it is easier for us to approach and contemplate. And while thinking about it, be aware that those most at risk of serious complications or death are people over fifty years old and who have health conditions, especially diabetes. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the risk of death from West Nile virus infection for people with diabetes is 5 times greater than that for people without diabetes. Wow! So, while protecting our loved little ones, don't forget the grandparents.

The mosquitoes that tend to carry the West Nile virus have their own habits and life cycle needs and, as we learn from the entomologists, they prefer to lay their eggs in containers or small amounts of stagnant water. They enjoy an intimate setting, as opposed to the EEE carrying skeeters that enjoy buzzing about the big swamps. Not only do the WNV (West Nile virus) carrying mosquitoes like your tarp and flowerpot you intended to drill holes in but never got around to, but they really like it when those little amounts of water become thick with gucky stuff. For them, this is a nutrient rich environment that will provide their babies with a lovely first meal.

Now the weather conditions enter the story and each year there is a different ending. Heavy rains can be a help us by flushing out wet areas, disturbing the larvae, and, thus, disturbing the life cycle. Frequent rain, like we had this spring, enlarged the existing wet areas and even created new ones. Then came the heat. Mosquitoes like that. Then came the drought. As water evaporated, the organic materials became more concentrated making the wet areas rich in nutrients. The species carrying the WNV, rejoiced in their blessings.

That brings us to July, 2010, with Halifax, Massachusetts having the honor of the first finding of the WNV in a sample of mosquitoes. We would not have that information at all if we

were not fortunate enough to live in an area with a mosquito control program. Their bug experts collect mosquitoes from traps, separate them by species and then test those groups, or “pools”, as in statistics, for EEE and WNV. We can request spraying of our yard. We can get permission from our neighbors to request spraying of a whole street or neighborhood. We can also be on their “no-spray” list and that will be honored, also. We are fortunate, indeed.

Now we realize that the EEE story differs from the WNV story and each year the story will have its variations on the theme but know this: the West Nile virus is probably here to stay unless and until every single person recognizes the importance of not allowing standing water. We have little to no control over the big swamps but we can clean our gutters and rinse our bird baths. Rinse them at least twice a week and if they had mosquito larvae, they won’t have the opportunity to turn into adults. The larvae need at least four days to become the flying adults we love to hate. As soon as they hatch, they seek that blood meal. Well, the females do. The males don’t need the blood and can enjoy the flowers and other manly activities.

Getting back to the mosquito story, we have species’ habits and disease differences and weather factors so far. Now add more details to the species and the story can continue. The finding in Halifax, MA was in a bird-biting mosquito. So, for now, that is good news for us mammals and not so good for the birds. Thus, the numerous calls to my office to report dead birds make sense. I thanked them one and all for the call, for the reporting of unusual events is a critically important role for all citizens. I had to explain, though, that the State no longer tests birds for the presence of WNV, as it would be a waste of resources. Why would it be a waste? That’s right; because we know it is here. Sure, one year is better or worse than another but it is here. It remains.

So, know the story and tell the story to others. And live the story, too, by removing standing water, by using bug repellants, by avoiding dusk to dawn activities and by appreciating that we have a mosquito control program. You can call the Plymouth County Mosquito Control Program at Phone: (781) 585-5450 from 8:00am - 3:00pm and can send a fax to them at (781) 582-1276 and you find them on the web at <http://www.plymouthmosquito.com/>. If you want to know where they are spraying, call 617-582-6219.

For a real nice one page illustration and fact sheet to accompany your story, look at what the Alameda County Mosquito Abatement District has to offer at <http://www.mosquitoes.org/downloads/MosqFacts.pdf>

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