

7-22-11 Summer This and Summer That

Some of our better known summer guests aren't very well known at all. The interactions of weather, insects, birds and water bodies result in complex interactions and a myriad of varying results on diseases such as Eastern Equine Encephalitis (EEE) and West Nile virus (WNV) and environmental conditions such as algal blooms. The weather alone has so many factors that might influence these conditions. There's the temperature, the degree of humidity, wind, sunlight or clouds, and the number of rainy days and the amount of and severity of rain events, to name just a few.

Sometimes as early as March, we worry about mosquito borne disease. Last year was one of those perfect storms for EEE, with lots and lots of rain early on and then extreme heat and humidity and lack of rain for the rest of the summer. The early rain followed by heat and drought were almost identical to 2005. That year and last year saw so much EEE, that an emergency aerial spraying was conducted to save lives.

This year brought different weather patterns. The heat and humidity began only recently and, even now, interspersed with periods of arctic air bringing breezy dry conditions. The rain has been irregular but when we get it, it has been heavy. Heavy rain can wash out areas supporting the mosquito eggs and larvae. Maybe the combination of lack of prolonged periods of heat and sporadic heavy rains are responsible for this year's lack of EEE activity. I don't know for sure but I like it!

There have been two positive findings for WNV. Scientists believe that WNV will probably always be here. The mosquitoes carrying this disease prefer containers of water for their eggs, such as tires, dumpsters, gutters and bird baths. Let's be educated and vigilant on this point. Do not allow standing water. Rinse bird baths at least every four days. We can't control the weather but WNV is mainly dependent on human activity creating the containers. Treat areas we can't control such as ditches and catch basins with larvicidal treatments such as Altosid or Dunks, to say good bye to those unwanted guests!

The ticks arrived in droves earlier this season but the heat has sent them into hiding. They are still there resting in the shade and will be back looking for a meal (your blood) after rains and in the fall. Avoid them, check for them and spray for them because they are problematic guests. Note to self: Don't invite them next year! Keep them away with more concentrated garlic juice.

The algae are behaving this summer. It is being studied but it is still a mystery. Last year's heat seemed to cause the algae to grow into the harmful blooms. That was expected. But, then, it stayed so hot for so long, it seemed the algae hunkered down in a column and sunk to the lower, cooler levels of water. How does it know how to do that? I am sure it doesn't really know but what triggers the herd behavior?

While last year saw the algae's amazing rising and falling survival modes, this year did not get that jump-start from early heat waves. This year's early cooler temperatures were not conducive to algal growth and the heavy rains break it up, just as it washes out the mosquito larvae. So far, I have not had to post a single advisory for algae. I am glad this traditional visitor has stayed away, too!

Rabies is another culprit to watch for this time of year and we've had a recent reminder of just how surprising and deadly rabies can be. There's a reason why the DPH poster says, "Pet your own leave others alone." It took only a gesture of kindness, offering water to a lethargic feral kitten, to risk a man's life last week. The kitten bit the man. At first, he thought he would

just wash it and he would be okay. But, then, the family dog found the kitten again. Only, this time, it was dead. Now the family was worried and with good reason. The kitten needed to be tested for rabies, the dog needed to be quarantined and get a rabies booster shot. The man could wait until the test results were back for the kitten.

Unfortunately, the kitten had been dead out in the heat for longer than realized and it was not suitable for testing. Without certain negative results for the disease, there was only one option for the man whose hand was bitten by that kitten. He had to receive the series of shots to prevent rabies. Every year, this message needs to be repeated, for some people don't realize there is no treatment for rabies. It can be prevented but once it has begun, it kills. That's it. No other options.

"Reverse 911" calls from the Sheriff's office were made to the surrounding streets, alerting people of the feral cat with her kittens in the area, just in case. The message advised people to leave them alone and call the police dispatcher. Maybe the cats aren't rabid, as the descriptions of them sounded like healthy animals. But the kitten died and the kitten bit the man. It is so easy for domestic animals left in the wild without veterinary care to develop other illnesses such as feline distemper. People who allow these diseases to spread by not neutering and vaccinating their pets are a mystery to me. Nature gives us enough dangerous mysteries. Let's not invite more.

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