

8-17-12 Crossing Paths with Wildlife

Looking back on it, I suspect that my father had a need to get his dose of nature and that need led to many walks in the woods and fishing and camping adventures. And, thus, my childhood was filled with a love of the outdoors and wildlife. We actively sought out any sign of critters and creatures. My father would lift me up to peek into tree holes, after he had checked, in hopes of finding the elusive Ivory Bill Woodpecker. It was very exciting for a child to believe in the possibility of proving that an animal was not yet extinct.

I never did see the Ivory Bill but there were times when we celebrated the sight of the Belted Kingfisher. Even more thrilling were the couple times that we spotted a copperhead snake. My father would exclaim, "Look at that! I haven't seen a copperhead since my childhood!" These moments made me aware of these amazing creatures being barometers of the health of our environment. They also reinforced the importance of leaving nature alone; observe and enjoy but don't interfere. That is truly an important lesson.

I think of that lesson at least twice a year, in early spring and in the month of August, for during the first warm day, many a hibernating bat is fooled into thinking spring has arrived and ventures out of its roost. In August young bats are leaving the roost and they make mistakes; they might confuse your doorway for a cave or your attic pull down stairs for the way out of your attic. August in New England is also known for its heat and that attic gets roasting hot; sometimes driving bats toward a cooler spot (like your bedroom). And that's where the problem arises, for, ordinarily, we don't interact with bats. But, when they enter our homes, that can be problematic; for bats can carry rabies and rabies is a fatal disease.

Most bats are not rabid. They are wonderful and amazing flower-pollinating, insect devouring machines! If we can leave them alone and they leave us alone, we are doing well.

And here's the big "however": If, for any reason, you are not absolutely certain that there was no contact between bat and human or bat and your pet, there is a problem that needs to be addressed.

The bats we have in New England are small and have very tiny teeth. In fact, their teeth are so tiny; it can be difficult to see the teeth marks of a bite or the scratch marks of their tiny claws. That fact leaves us with this dilemma: there are certain circumstances where we cannot be sure that there was no contact. Those situations have one thing in common: the inability to communicate whether or not there was exposure to or from the bat. Think about it and you will begin to envision various scenarios.

Some of the settings where a bat might have had contact with a person who could not tell that story include an infant or young child, an intoxicated person, a mentally challenged person and any sleeping person who awakens to the sight of a bat in his or her bedroom. And let us not

forget our pets! They can communicate but they can't talk. If you walk into a room where a cat or dog was hanging out and you see a bat, you have no way of knowing if the bat had contact with the pet. If the pet was exposed to a rabid bat, that animal needs to be quarantined. All of these situations require a call to your doctor (or vet) and a public health call.

That call to your local board of health should connect you to our Massachusetts Department of Public Health and together we will review the necessary steps, such as submitting a bat for testing for rabies. Did you know that you can call an epidemiologist 24/7 for urgent matters? Call (617) 983-6800 and you can reach an operator who will take the message and an epidemiologist will call you back. I've used this service and was extremely grateful for it!

While only three to six percent of all bats submitted for testing are found to be positive for rabies, about ninety percent of all human cases of rabies in the United States are from bats. And that is why we come back to the topic of interacting with nature. It was easy for me to stay away from the copperhead snake seen sunning itself at the pond's edge while fishing with my father. It is not so easy to avoid interacting with a bat in your house. If we are 100% certain there was no contact with a pet or person, then the bat can be released, for rabies is not like a contagious disease spread through the air. If we are not 100% certain whether or not there was contact or exposure through a scratch, bite or saliva, then we need to get that home invader tested.

Get out and enjoy the wonders of nature, smell the dirt (along with the roses) and watch the animals, even copperheads and bats, but leave them alone for goodness sake!

For more information at the DPH website, see
<http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/provider/guidelines-resources/clinical-treatment/diseases-conditions/communicable-diseases/public-health-cdc-rabies-info-providers.html>

Also see
<http://www.webster-ma.gov/documents/boh/batsandrabies.pdf>

For information from CDC's site, look at
<http://www.cdc.gov/rabies/bats/education/index.html>

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