

10-24-10 Last Word on EEE for 2010? Hopefully

It appears that my hummingbirds have had their last sip of sugar water from my yard in Plympton, MA and begun their long migration journey. These amazing miniscule creatures defy logic with their ability to fly all the way to Central America and back to New England. Their day to day characteristics defy any presumption based on appearances. They are fiercely territorial. Their name may mean “without feet” but their wings, beating 53 times per second, more than compensate for any lack of podiatric ability. Why, they’re almost dangerous. There were a few times this summer when I barely escaped colliding with these airborne mini swords sounding like elfin buzz saws.

When I realize the hummingbirds have left, I am reminded that other, less pretty and less amusing birds are also leaving the area and with their absence, the ability for Eastern Equine Encephalitis (EEE) to amplify between bird and mosquito also diminishes.

Temperatures are another factor playing a role in the maintenance of EEE at this time of year. It is still here. Mosquitoes are still infected but it is difficult to reduce the numbers with spraying because the mosquitoes hunker down in the vegetation when it is cold, making spraying often ineffective at this time of year. For this reason I can understand that our local mosquito control programs typically cease spraying, in response to individual requests, around the first week in September. Once understood that there are reasons, other than budgetary ones alone, this sounds like a reasonable decision. The program is there if we need them, though. If a hotspot for EEE continues, your local board of health can work with the mosquito control program for localized sprayings for those hotspots. How do we know if EEE is still active? That is the question.

We know the status of EEE, as best we can, from the surveillance program, trapping mosquitoes and sending them to our amazing State Lab for testing.

Fortunately, it is our Massachusetts Department of Public that decides when the trapping and testing will end. It is different each year. How refreshing it is to know that some programs are guided by knowledge and circumstances, rather than preconceived dates and time frames.

Some years have little to no EEE activity and during those years, it makes sense to conclude the surveillance early. That does not describe the summer of 2010, with 51 mosquito collections testing positive for EEE in Plymouth County alone, several horse cases and one human. This is the kind of year when we need to keep informed.

We are kept informed by our Arbovirus Program. Are you familiar with it? We are fortunate to have it.

My five year old grandson, Colin, recently realized there are compound words. He was telling his parents, “You know two words put together make a compound word.” I can’t wait to talk to him about combo words combining parts of several to make a new word. The first one I can teach him will be ARBOVIRUS. AR is from arthropod, or blood feeding insects such as ticks and mosquitoes. BO stands for borne, as in the bearing of or carrying of the disease. Virus stands for the virus carried by the insects. So, instead of the way too long word, “arthropodbornevirus”, some creative person came up with the combo word, “arbovirus”.

The arbovirus program keeps us informed each summer season and it is the only way we can make informed decisions for protecting ourselves and making sound budget decisions county and statewide. Without it we are guessing. Without it we are completely in the dark. We need to see that information because EEE is a disease that is typically cyclical, unlike Lyme disease which is constantly increasing. I say EEE is typically cyclical but there are no guarantees on that. The mosquitoes did not sign a contract. There may be factors the scientists don’t understand yet. EEE returned this year, not satisfied with its peak performance cycle in 2004, 2005, and 2006. Without our mosquito control programs participating in the arbovirus program, we would not have had a clue that this summer was a high risk year for EEE until a horse in Middleboro, MA died of it. Who wants to be surprised when we can be informed? I hope our legislators pay attention and choose to continue funding the arbovirus surveillance program. The cost of a surveillance program will save money in years when there is little or no disease by sparing us the aerial spraying, additional traps and the time spent on warning and educating the public. In years of high positive results for disease, lives are saved by having that knowledge.

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