

7-3-09 Survival of The Fittest

My father nurtured a love of nature by filling my childhood with walks, camping, fishing, stargazing and more walking in all seasons and in all kinds of weather. While driving he would call out, "Hawk at 2:00!" or "Chipmunk on stonewall at 4:00!" When out walking in the woods, we felt rewarded at the sight of finding rabbit droppings. After dark he would turn the car into a schoolyard just to allow the headlights to pan across the grassy fields and reflect off of rabbit eyes. We had to work at finding the wildlife and it paid off to be patient.

We don't have to be patient or work hard this summer of 2009 in order to find the wildlife around us. Have you ever seen so many rabbits, chipmunks and red squirrels in all your life? The abundance of small mammals is providing a bumper crop of fast food for hawks, foxes and coyotes. Survival of the fittest is in full swing as the rainiest summer of all times turns all vegetation into a green jungle, luring the rabbits out in the middle of the day to feast away.

One such feasting lagamorph was not so lucky last week in Halifax. It was not saved by its binocular vision, as it became a meal for a fox, in the middle of the day, in a densely populated area of town. If I had not been seeing rabbits everywhere casually hopping about in daylight all summer long, I might have thought this was odd. The question remained; was it abnormal for the fox to be out in daylight near buildings or was the presence of the rabbits too much for a fox to resist?

The question of the state of fox's health and normality was already being asked before it killed the rabbit. You see, the fox had already jumped out and attacked a man and then ran after another, nipping the first in the sneaker and the second on his pant leg. Worried that it was a rabid fox, I went to the scene, with two police officers to interview the victims and to search for the fox. When I saw where the fox had jumped out, I felt it was possible for the fox to be hiding in a hedge to hunt rabbits and was taken by surprise when the man walked by. Circumstances such as being startled or provoked or being cornered can explain an animal's defense. Self-defense is understandable and does not require killing of the fox to make mankind safe. Sometimes wildlife and people cross paths and we just need to excuse ourselves and leave the animal alone.

In this case, we weren't sure yet of the explanation for the fox nipping at the heels of a man walking next to it. More observation would be necessary. A half an hour later, the report came in that the fox had just killed a rabbit. I asked if the fox seemed to be eating the rabbit. I was told, yes. I was also told that the fox took the rabbit in its mouth and went into the woods. The police officer and I looked at each other. We had the same thought. This sounds like an animal healthy enough to know hunger and to hunt. We thought rabid animals are either sick to the point of lethargy or crazy with the disease to the point of attacking anything in sight. Did the fox attack the rabbit simply because the rabbit moved or because the fox was hungry? I did not know but I was leaning toward the healthy hunger explanation.

As a precaution, however, the "Communicator", or "Reverse 911" was used to warn people in the area of an aggressive fox that was possibly rabid. The message is sent by email to the sheriff's office, is recorded and sent as a voice message to all listed numbers in the immediate area. It is wonderful resource.

The next sighting of the fox reported that lawn ornaments were just attacked. Now that description was something useful for determining the abnormality of the fox's behavior! The man and woman who had just witnessed this were still shaken up by the sight of this little fox biting and shaking these two inanimate objects. The fox was, once again, nowhere in sight.

Moments later, a call came in from a few houses away. An officer spotted the fox attacking a sneaker. A woman opened her side door, ten feet from where the fox died with her sneaker in its mouth, and asked, "Is everything all right?" She had placed those sneakers on her little front steps only minutes earlier after her gardening. She felt lucky for not having been in contact with the fox herself and she was, indeed.

Because there had been so many instances of contact and crossing paths with the fox in only a couple hours and because the area was densely populated and there were many people out for walks and gardening and sitting in lawn chairs during this short respite from rain, I felt it was important to submit the fox for rabies testing.

Reverse 911 was used again the following morning to inform people of the likelihood of rabies and the importance of reporting any bites or scratches from the fox. The rabies virus is fatal if contracted but can be prevented after exposure with prophylactic injections.

On Monday afternoon I received the call from the Department of Public Health's State Lab in Jamaica Plain. The fox had tested positive for rabies. The rabbit had simply been a moving object unable to escape from a very sick fox, so crazy with rabies that even a lawn ornament was attacked. The only fittest to survive that day were the people lucky enough to escape exposure to rabies laden saliva and who knew enough to report wild animals acting strangely. I am glad they did.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the Town of Halifax, MA. She hopes you vaccinate your pets for rabies and stay safe while enjoying wildlife from a distance. She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us