

Of Bats and Brooms

I recently had the pleasure of watching the construction of a long awaited deck at the end of my house. On the day after its completion I walked up the two steps and walked around this little platform, imagining future events from dining with friends to watching snow pile up in drifts during a winter storm. As I circled back, completing my tour of this addition to my living space, I spied something on the floor. I bent over and looked at a sprinkling of, of what? Bits of pinecones left by a nibbling squirrel? No, they were droppings of some kind. Animal scat. They were too small for squirrels. They were not the right shape for mouse droppings; too roundish. Then I realized that they were all in one area, only six inches or so inches across and very close to the side of my house. I placed my feet close to the edge and looked straight up along the outside of my house. Directly above the little circle of droppings, one shingle was sticking out more than the others. After a few seconds of squinting, I saw something confirming what I had suspected for a long time. A single cedar shingle, sticking out just a bit, provided enough space for a sleepy bat. I shaded my eyes from the sun with my hand and when my vision adjusted to the darkness under the shingle, there it was: the cute, tiny, fox-like face staring back at me. Or were its eyes closed in sleep? I am not sure. Apparently they wake enough to move their bowels after a whole night of eating their fill of insects because at my feet were the droppings to prove it.

Whether or not you think bats are cute, you might as well know they are everywhere. They live in our midst, in out trees, even in our attics. By midsummer, the attics are getting unbearably hot, though and this year's baby bats are old enough to roam and explore. They are also inexperienced enough to make mistakes, such as flying down chimneys or through cracks in the eaves and sometimes they make their way into closets and bedrooms. This is a problem. The problem is that bats are high on the list of likely to be rabid. So, it is important to avoid contact with them.

Each type of animal that is potentially rabid requires its own version of warnings and precautions. For foxes and raccoons, we look for the "dumb" or "furious" signs of behavior. In each case, the animal is acting abnormally. It is moving slowly and staggering and unafraid of humans or it is attacking rather than running away. How does a bat usually behave, though? What do we know about bats? How often do we see them?

Most of us don't know anything about them. If we were to see one flying around our house, it might be frantic because it wants to get out. Is that normal? Probably. Does it have rabies? We don't know and we can't assume that it does not.

Another challenge with bats is that if we have any reason at all to be uncertain about whether or not there has been contact with the bat, then we want to test it or we should be treated for rabies. This is different from the decision-making flow chart with other animals. We know if a fox jumped on us. We know if a raccoon shook saliva in our face.

Bats' teeth are so tiny that the puncture marks of a bite may not show and a bite may not hurt. This is why each year in mid-summer, boards of health receive from the State Department of Public Health the following guidance. We are uncertain of exposure if:

- A sleeping person awakens to discover a bat in the room.

- An adult discovers a bat in the room of a previously unattended child, mentally disabled person or an intoxicated person.

Under those conditions, either the person should be treated with Post Exposure Prophylaxis or the bat should be trapped and tested to rule out exposure to rabies.

If you are certain there has not been any exposure to the bat, the goal is to let it get out of your house through an open window. If you attempt to capture the bat for testing, extreme caution must be taken. Wait until it lands, protect yourself with leather gloves and jacket and try to keep some distance by attaching a can to the end of broom handle. When the can is over the bat, slide a piece of cardboard under it and tape it closed. You can also, for a fee, hire a person permitted to handle wild animals. Contact DPH at 617 626 1794 for instructions about submitting a bat for testing.

If you decide to capture a bat in your house, learn from the mistakes made by a Halifax man several years ago. First of all, he kept swatting the bat with a broom, making the bat all the more frantic and increasing his chances of exposure. When the man thought he had killed the bat, he put it in a Cheerios box and placed the box in the fridge. Then he called the Board of Health. I told him the bat should be tested. Before I could get there, though, curiosity got the best of him and he peeked into the box. Out flew the bat, much to his surprise and it bit him before flying away. The broom swinging began all over again. This time, he succeeded in killing it. The bat tested positive for rabies and the man had to be treated.

As usual, it is best to observe nature at a distance and to leave it alone. Distance provides us with a safety net from rabid animals. Rabid animals are sick enough that they will die soon on their own. However, if there has been exposure and/or we are uncertain about exposure, then testing of the animal is recommended.

I still think they are cute but I will keep my distance and I'll just use a broom for sweeping those little reminders of them. I'll just smile and sweep them right off my deck, all the while glad for the reminder of their presence.

Cathleen Drinan is the Health Agent for the Town of Halifax. She welcomes your comments and suggestions for this column. She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us