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Health Officials Urge Residents to Avoid Contact with Wild and Stray Animals

Contact:

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Indian River County, Fla. – The Florida Department of Health in Indian River County (DOH-Indian River) urges residents to avoid contact with wild and stray animals to protect themselves from the risk of rabies exposure.

In Florida, raccoons, bats and foxes, and unvaccinated cats are the animals most frequently diagnosed with rabies. Other animals that are at high risk for rabies include skunks, otters, coyotes, bobcats, and stray or unvaccinated dogs and ferrets. In 2018, Indian River County has received report of three rabid animals, including two bats and one cat. The highest number of rabid animals seen in the last ten years. Most recently, a rabid cat exposed a person in May 2018, prompting a 60-day rabies alert in Indian River County. In July 2018, a rabid bat was identified as well. While bats commonly transmit rabies virus by biting, the bite wounds may be small and difficult to recognize, so never try to touch or handle a bat. If you find an injured or sick bat, do not touch it.

“Rabies is a potentially fatal disease. It is important not to handle wild animals, to be aware of unusual acting animals, and to keep pets vaccinated against rabies,” said Miranda Hawker, DOH-Indian River Health Officer.

Rabies is transmitted through exposure to the saliva and nervous tissue from a rabid animal through a bite, scratch, or contact with mucous membranes such as the eyes, nose, or mouth. DOH-Indian River works with local animal control agencies in coordinating response to human exposures to potentially rabid animals.

The following are steps you can take to protect yourself and your pets against rabies:

- Persons who have been bitten or scratched by wild or domestic animals, or have had any contact with a bat. should seek medical attention and promptly report exposure to local animal control
- Do not handle, feed or unintentionally attract wild or stray animals, including cats, by leaving pet food outside or garbage cans open.
- Keep rabies vaccinations up to date for all pets.
- Do not allow your pets to run free. Follow leash laws by keeping pets secured on your property.
- If your pet is bitten by a wild, stray or unknown animal, seek veterinary assistance immediately and report the incident to your local animal control agency. (See contact information below).

- Call your local animal control agency directly to remove any wild or stray animals from your neighborhood that are injured or demonstrate unusual behavior.
- Never adopt wild animals or bring them into your home. Call animal control for assistance rather than trying to nurse injured or sick wild or stray animals.
- Teach children never to handle unfamiliar animals, wild or domestic, even if they appear friendly.
- Prevent bats from entering living quarters or occupied spaces in homes, churches, schools and other similar areas, where they might come in contact with people and pets.
- Spay or neuter your pets to help reduce the number of unwanted pets that may not be properly cared for or regularly vaccinated.
- Local animal control agencies in Indian River County coordinate the exposure investigation with the Florida Department of Health in Indian River County.

Animal Control Agency Contact Information:
Indian River County Animal Control: (772) 226-3486
City of Vero Beach Police Department: (772) 978-4600

For further information on rabies, go to the Florida Department of Health website: <http://www.floridahealth.gov/diseases-and-conditions/rabies/index.html> or contact Florida Department of Health in Indian River County at (772) 794-7440.

About the Florida Department of Health

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