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Commissioner

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Department of
Fish and Game

Division of Wildlife Conservation

STATE OF ALASKA

PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

Bat Found Positive for Rabies

June 30, 2022 (Juneau) – A bat found in Douglas, out in the daytime and acting abnormally, has tested positive for rabies. There is no report of any at-risk exposure to rabies to people.

Wildlife veterinarian Dr. Kimberlee Beckmen, with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, tested the bat Wednesday. Dr. Beckmen, leader of the ADF&G Wildlife Health and Disease Surveillance Program, conducts disease testing including rabies on six to 10 bats each year. In more than 45 years of rabies testing in Alaska close to 200 bats have been examined; this is just the sixth bat to test positive for rabies. All six rabid bats were found in Southeast Alaska, either found dead or euthanized for exhibiting abnormal behavior.

“This is the first time a bat on Douglas Island or in the Juneau area has tested positive but that doesn’t mean we expect more cases,” Dr. Beckmen said. “This detection in a different location just highlights that the risk of bat rabies is always present in southeast Alaska, and it’s crucial that people keep their pet’s rabies vaccinations current.”

Dr. Beckmen tests the bats for a variety of diseases, including white-nose syndrome, a fungal disease that has killed millions of bats in the Eastern U.S., and the disease has not been detected in bats in Alaska. Dr. Beckmen sent a brain sample from the bat to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for confirmation and to determine the rabies virus variant.

State wildlife biologist Roy Churchwell, based in Douglas, said the bat was found during the daytime Sunday crawling on the grass outside an apartment building in Douglas.

“Sometimes a healthy bat may become disoriented and will be seen in the daytime, but will fly off and find cover,” he said. Juneau Police Department Animal Control and Protection was notified, as was Churchwell. The person pushed the bat in an open box without touching it and left it outside overnight; it did not leave and Churchwell collected it Monday morning. It was euthanized and sent to Dr. Beckmen in Fairbanks.

Karen Blejwas, a wildlife biologist and bat researcher in Juneau, identified the bat as a silver-haired bat.

“Silver-haired bats are not as common in the Juneau area as little brown bats, but they are present,” she said. About six different bat species can be found in Southeast, including long-eared bats and California myotis. The little brown bat is the most common and widespread bat in Alaska and the only species found north of Southeast Alaska.

The last bat to test positive for rabies in Alaska was found dead in 2015 at Point Couverden, about 25 miles west of Juneau. The other four cases were on Prince of Wales Island (2006 and

2014), near Ketchikan (1993) and near Wrangell (2014). Many cases of rabies occur each year among arctic and red foxes in northern and western coastal of Alaska. Dogs and other mammals are sometimes infected and the unvaccinated dogs attacked by foxes become the greatest risk for rabies exposure to Alaskans. Anyone who is bitten by a wild animal should wash the wound and call a health care provider. More details can be found here:

http://www.epi.alaska.gov/bulletins/docs/b2016_09.pdf

Dr. Beckmen said if a bat is acting sick or abnormal or is out in daytime, don't handle it with bare hands, and contact the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Anyone who may have been bitten or scratched by a bat, including someone who may have been asleep in a room with a bat and potentially had contact, should contact a health care provider immediately to be evaluated. If you find a bat in your home and no one has been in contact with it you can visit the ADF&G website and learn how to safely release it and report your observation. A list of contacts for area offices and more information on bats can be found by visiting adfg.alaska.gov and searching on "Living with Bats."

More information at: <https://dhss.alaska.gov/health/dph/Epi/id/Pages/rabies/default.aspx>

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