

Protect against rabies when deer hunting

UNIVERSITY PARK — Most deer hunters in Pennsylvania take many safety precautions with equipment and clothing before the hunt, but some may disregard a major precaution after the hunt — a check for deer rabies.

"The odds of a hunter shooting a rabid deer are extremely slim," Penn State veterinarian Thomas R. Drake says. "Over the last 10 years, only five rabid deer have been found in the state. Current rabies cases have been limited to

the southern central counties — Bedford, Fulton and Franklin. Outside those areas, the cases are even rarer."

"Rabies is a deadly disease, unless the animal has received prior immunization, or in the case of people who've received post-exposure treatment," Penn State Extension wildlife specialist Jack Payne says. "But rabies has always been in wildlife. There's no reason to panic. People need to be educated, not made afraid of

wildlife."

Both Drake and Payne say their offices were swamped with calls after a rabid deer was found off a Fulton County road. But some minor precautions, both say, could avert such paranoia.

First, a hunter should wear rubber gloves when cleaning or skinning a deer.

"Rubber gloves will protect a hunter, as long as no other part of the body makes contact," Drake says. "The virus can be tran-

mitted in any microscopic cut, and a hunter's hands always have a few cuts."

Second, a hunter should protect against internal rabies transmission by cooking venison thoroughly.

"That's not 100-percent effective, but rabies can be avoided if the deer is well-cooked," Drake says. "Not many people know that rabies can be contracted internally."

"Cooking destroys the rabies

'virus in meat,' Payne says. "Freezing, however, preserves it. The virus lasts ten days in animals in its infectious stage, but artichokes frozen after dying from rabies still had traces of the virus after the spring thaw."

Besides wearing gloves, Payne suggests hunters keep their hands away from a deer's mouth.

Drake and Payne say deer rabies is difficult to detect. Rabies in fur-bearing animals is easier to spot, Drake explains, because those animals display erratic behavior, and can be caught for professional observations.

"On the other hand, it's hard to tell if a deer is rabid," he says. "If a deer runs, it's probably not rabid, but there's no way to tell."

"The problem with deer is, if you don't suspect something, and have no way of checking it, the disease can progress."

"Unlike other fur-bearing animals, a deer doesn't lose its fear of man when rabid," Payne says. "A rabid deer will still run from man."

And even if every hunter took basic precautions, there would still be a problem. Since rabies is a virus that travels through the nervous system, the brain is the only part of the animal that can be accurately checked for rabies. But local laboratories could not possibly check the head of every deer shot in an average gun season, Payne says.

"A lab will only check for rabies if an animal displayed unusual behavior before biting someone," he says. "Labs won't be able to handle the demand (if every hunter wanted to check his deer for rabies.) They'll have to turn people away."

"I've heard of hunters spending \$300 for pre-exposure vaccinations. I don't advocate that," he says. "Vaccinations are OK for trappers because they handle furbearers, which are the major concerns of rabies."

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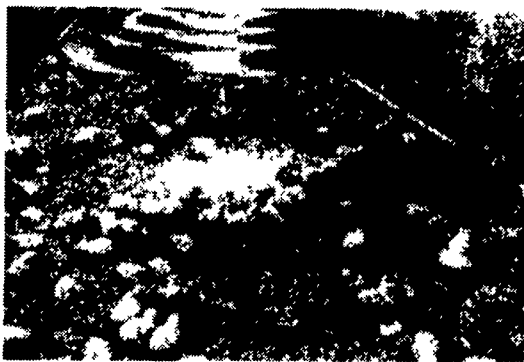
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