

Incident Overview

Rabies-Positive Bat at the Zoo

Situational Analysis

A bat found in the giraffe barn tested positive for rabies on May 17. The rabies-positive little brown bat (*Myotis lucifugus*) was found in the giraffe barn, a place not accessible to guests.

On May 18, Santa Barbara County Public Health officials visited the Zoo to discuss and develop a public safety plan. After their investigation, health officials determined no staff members were exposed, and agreed that closing the giraffe feeding deck would ensure no members of the public could be potentially exposed to risk.

FAQs

I heard a rabies-positive bat was found at the Zoo. Am I (or my family) in danger by visiting? Zoo staff has enforced all safety protocols; Santa Barbara County Public Health has declared the public is not at risk by visiting the Zoo.

Why is the giraffe deck closed?

- A bat found in the giraffe barn tested positive for rabies on May 17, 2019. The giraffe deck will be closed for 30 days in order to prevent any contact between the public and giraffes, which is standard protocol when an animal has had potential exposure to an animal known to carry the rabies virus.
- The likelihood of the giraffes having been bitten is very low, but public health protocols require no contact with the public to ensure there is no risk.
- Only approved animal care & health staff will come in contact with the giraffes during the quarantine period, as they are vaccinated and have been specifically trained on what is needed to work around the giraffes in this situation.
- Giraffes will be on exhibit during the quarantine period.

I heard a rabies-positive bat was found on site. Are the other Zoo animals in danger? All of the Zoo's mammals are routinely vaccinated against rabies, and the Zoo has many protocols in place to reduce the risk of our animals being exposed to those animals known to carry rabies (rabies vector).

What exactly is rabies and how can a person get it? Rabies is a viral disease that naturally circulates in bats. It causes inflammation of the brain in humans and other mammals and is typically spread by a bite from a rabid animal, or if a bat's saliva comes in contact with a cut or abrasion, or with mucous membranes, such as the eyes, nose or mouth. There are only 1 to 3 human rabies cases in per year in the U.S. reported each year (www.cdc.gov).

What if you find other animals with rabies on Zoo grounds? We have specific protocols about how to deal with bats, skunks, foxes, or raccoons on Zoo grounds in a way that ensures there is no risk to Zoo staff, the Zoo's animals, or the general public.

What if I am exposed to rabies? Immediately wash any wounds with soap and water and seek medical care promptly. Even if you are vaccinated against rabies but are exposed to an infected animal, you will still need post-exposure treatment, but treatment is simplified by pre-exposure vaccination. With prompt medical treatment, rabies is preventable.

What is the Zoo's protocol for dealing with bats found on Zoo grounds? Only staff who have been rabies vaccinated should handle a bat (skunks, raccoons, and foxes too). Appropriate protection (gloves, towels, etc.) is worn if handling a potential rabies vector and the bat should be handled as minimally as possible. If you find a bat that looks sick or is dead on Zoo grounds, call Animal Care & Health staff or Safety & Security staff to come and deal with the bat, as there are vaccinated staff in these teams that will respond to the call. The bat will be placed in a closed cardboard box or plastic container with a lid and bring it to the hospital. Vet staff will take care of it from there.

How do you know if a bat is infected? Generally, you can't tell. There are stages of the disease that may not be obvious. Signs that a bat is infected with rabies include being active during the day, showing abnormal behavior, or being very aggressive and trying to bite. This is why it is very important to treat every bat as if it could be positive for rabies.

Will other bats be positive for rabies? Yes. It is not a disease that is transmitted via aerosol or via the oro-fecal route, so it doesn't spread rapidly through a population. However, given the number of bats found in a roosting colony, it is highly likely that more bats will be positive.

Bats at the Zoo

- The Santa Barbara Zoo does not hold any bats in its animal collection.
- Little brown bats are a species native to Santa Barbara
- Zoo staff works closely with local health officials to monitor potential *zoonoses* (diseases which can transfer from animals to humans) in the area. Part of this protocol means any native animal found dead on Zoo property is examined or assessed for risk.

Bat Facts

- Bats are super pest controllers and can eat 1,000 mosquitos per hour!
- Bats pollinate more than 700 plants, some of which are used for food and medicine, including bananas, avocados, dates, figs, peaches, and agave.
- Bat guano (poop) is great fertilizer, and helps plants in gardens grow.
- Some bats are helpful in the medical field, like the vampire bat. Scientists have extracted a compound from its saliva that is used quite successfully as an anticoagulant drug in stroke patients.

Bat Common Sense

- The Public Health Department advises the public to be aware of wild animals. Do not approach, handle, or feed wild and unfamiliar animals, even if they appear tame. If you see a dead bat, don't touch it: call Animal Control at (805) 681-5285.
- In addition, ensure pets are up-to-date on rabies vaccinations. If an animal bite or other significant exposure to potentially rabid animals occurs, be sure to contact a medical professional immediately.
- Because rabies also circulates in other local wildlife populations such as skunks, raccoons and foxes, the potential to come across a rabies-positive wild animal exists not only at the Zoo but everywhere (at home, while hiking, etc.).