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## Search on for boys who played with rabid bat on Fort Myers Beach

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Three boys who tossed around a rabid bat on Fort Myers Beach earlier this week were being sought Friday for medical treatment.

Two other boys were found Friday afternoon — less than two hours after the Lee County Health Department issued an urgent bulletin.

The five boys — believed to be between 10 and 12 — were seen handling the bat on the Fort Myers Beach Pier Monday. Two were identified after one of the boys' fathers saw a news bulletin.

A teenage girl saw them with the bat — a Brazilian Free Tail — retrieved it and took it to a wildlife sanctuary on Tuesday.

The two boys and the girl will begin rabies vaccinations on Monday. They'll get a series of six shots over 28 days.

They are not being identified because of their ages and medical treatment, said Jennifer James-Mesloh, spokeswoman for the Lee County Health Department.

"What we don't know is if the other boys were friends or kids they just met that day," she said.

"We're concerned that since it took place on Fort Myers Beach that they may not be locals. It's important we start the vaccinations within 10 days of exposure. It's a very time sensitive issue."

The boys were seen by the girl holding and kissing the bat, according to the Lee County Health Department.

"On Tuesday morning, a teenage girl and her friend brought in the bat," said Jennifer Roberts, a spokeswoman for C.R.O.W. (Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife) on Sanibel.

The bat was examined and euthanized by P.J. Deitschel, C.R.O.W.'s lead veterinarian and clinic director. Because bats are known to carry rabies, it was sent to the state laboratory in Tampa. Rabies was confirmed.

Said James-Mesloh said: "Bats have very small teeth and they could have been bitten by it and not even noticed it."

Bats also carry rabies in their saliva and if the youngsters handled the bat and then touched their eyes, nose or mouth, they could also be infected, she said.

Dr. Judith A. Hartner, director of Lee County Health Department, also stressed it is critical that the boys be found.

“Rabies is a fatal disease,” Hartner said. “There is no known cure for rabies, only vaccination.”

James-Mesloh said the health department is working with the Lee County Sheriff’s Office, Fort Myers Beach Fire Department, Fort Myers Beach Chamber and the Visitors & Convention Bureau to locate the three boys.

James-Mesloh said no one should ever handle a bat without protective gloves — if at all. She added that if anyone sees a bat during daylight hours, there’s a high-probability of it being ill.

If you have any information on how to contact the youths seen handling a bat, please contact the Lee County Health Department at (239) 332-9501. The phone number will be operational 24 hours a day.

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