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Children play with bat in Fort Myers Beach, risk rabies

Search on for three boys who need quick treatment

By *MARK S. KRZOS*
mkrzos@news-press.com

It's critical that three boys who tossed around a rabid bat on Fort Myers Beach earlier this week be found: They need to start rabies shots within 10 days, health officials say.

Two other boys who played with the bat were found Friday afternoon, less than two hours after the Lee County Health Department issued an urgent bulletin.

Dr. Judith A. Hartner, director of the health department, stressed the urgency.

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

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

A teenage girl saw the boys with the bat — a Brazilian free tail — retrieved it and took it to a wildlife sanctuary Tuesday.

The two boys and the girl will begin rabies vaccinations 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 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 families didn't want to comment when asked by James-Mesloh on Friday afternoon.

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 Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife on Sanibel.

The bat was examined and euthanized by P.J. Deitschel, CROW'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.

"Bats have very small teeth," said James-Mesloh, "and (the boys) 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.

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 find the three boys.

James-Mesloh said no one should handle a bat without protective gloves — if at all. She added that if you see 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 in operation 24 hours a day.
