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Bat colony found at beach pier

FORT MYERS BEACH: Biologists have found the first ever bat colony at the Fort Myers Beach Pier and there are new concerns the bats have rabies. The colony was discovered as the search continues for three teenagers spotted kissing a rabid bat.

We went to the beach with Lee County Biologist Roger Clark to Fort Myers Beach. As soon as night fell, we saw them venturing into the night in search of food.

"We definitely know they're here and it wasn't just a few chance bats that happened to be here and fell into the water. There's definitely a colony roosting under the pier," said Clark. "Bats like to be near water and near where there are insects."

For a few days, beachgoers have spotted bats floating in the water during the day. Jennifer James-Mesloh, of the Lee County Health Department, says that should be an immediate red flag to stay away.

"If you see a bat during the daytime, chances are that bat is not a healthy bat - leave it alone," she explained.

Last Monday, five boys were seen playing with, and even kissing, a bat. That animal had a confirmed case of rabies.

So far, only two of the boys have been found. But officials with the Lee County Health Department say they all need to be vaccinated soon because time is running out.

The Health Department is now asking all the beach hotels to contact their guests from last week to see if anyone knows the boys.

It's a scenario experts say we could start to see more of now that bats are calling the beach home.

But Clark was quick to add that if people don't touch them; bats could be a good thing - as long as they stay healthy too.

"Bats are an important part of the ecosystem. They play a very important role in consuming lots of insects and the presence of bats indicates a healthy environment," said Clark.

If you have any information on how to contact the other children seen handling a bat, please call the Lee County Health Department at (239) 332-9501.

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