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Time running out for 3 who handled rabid bat on Fort Myers Beach

If infected, they're in danger of dying

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Three boys are still being sought by the Lee County Health Department eight days after they were seen with a rabid bat.

Jennifer James-Mesloh, a spokeswoman for the Lee County Health Department, said Tuesday time is running out for the boys who were seen playing with a Brazilian free tail bat near the Fort Myers Beach Pier.

Two boys who were playing with the bat and a teenage girl, who took the bat to Sanibel's Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife, began rabies vaccinations Monday.

"We're still trying to find the other three boys," James-Mesloh said. "We've partnered with the Lee County Sheriff's Office, the city of Fort Myers Beach, the Fort Myers Beach Chamber and the Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau to try and get the word out. They're all assisting us in trying to get the word out that these boys need to come forward."

Tony Schall, spokesman for the Lee County Sheriff's Office, said deputies are interviewing people on the beach and trying to allay some fears about rabid bats.

"We are out there talking to people to see if they know of anything," he said. "A lot of people also see the media trucks and there's some fears out there."

Schall also said a Fort Myers Beach resident found two bats in the water, collected them and took them to CROW for examination Monday.

It is recommended that rabies vaccinations begin within 10 days from contact with a rabid animal, James-Mesloh said.

While the local media have helped, James-Mesloh said that the national media have been called.

"Within the first hour of our bulletin, we had one parent contact us," she said. "That told us that they were local. But (because) we haven't heard anything from the other families, it's a strong possibility that they're from somewhere else."

James-Mesloh said CNN and The Associated Press have been contacted to help assist in the search for the three remaining boys.

While the two boys who have come forward - and the girl who brought the animal to CROW - did

handle the bat, health officials aren't sure if the other three boys did. Because bats have tiny teeth, the creature could have bitten the boys and they may have not noticed it. Bats can also spread rabies through their saliva. If the youngsters handled the bat and then touched their eyes, nose or mouth, they could also be infected, James-Mesloh said.

"Just because they handled the bat, doesn't mean they're infected," she said. "We want to make it clear - we need to find these boys. Rabies is 100 percent fatal ... and once you start exhibiting the symptoms of rabies, it's untreatable."

Symptoms of rabies begin to show about three weeks after exposure. They include headaches, anxiety, confusion, muscle spasms and fever, James-Mesloh said. "The symptoms mimic so many other things."

Additional Facts

How to help

-What: Information needed on the boys who had contact with the bat.

- Where: Contact the Lee County Health Department at 332-9501.
