



Tales from a Sisters Naturalist
by Jim Anderson

Wildlife and diseases

“Never let a mouse live in your house; they will steal the breath of your children.” That’s a saying that I heard came from the people of the Hopi Nation, an accurate description of the symptoms of the hantavirus. They apparently recognized the role wild rodents play — a long time ago — in the spreading of diseases among the human population of the earth.

If you decide to rid your home or property of wild rodents, please do not use chemicals. When an animal dies from poison it usually won’t be found and will lie in a dusty corner until someone smells the rotting carcass. In the meantime other diseases are spread.

A live trap is best, then the animal can be taken a couple of miles out into the

forest or sagebrush habitat and released. The good old Victor snap trap rarely fails to capture and kill the rodent. Handle it with throwaway plastic gloves and if you have a septic tank flush it down the drain. The body is actually good food for a septic tank. Wash the area where it was trapped with disinfectant or alcohol. If there’s no septic tank, place body and gloves in a plastic bag and discard for trash pickup.

The recent death caused by hantavirus in Deschutes County is a deadly reminder of what being careless about rodents can cost. Hantavirus is a respiratory ailment, caused by breathing in the virus carried in rodent urine or droppings.

Several years ago there was a similar tragedy involving a child on the Warm Springs Reservation and a different disease — bubonic plague. The family’s pet cat returned home with a Townsend’s ground squirrel it had killed and left it on the front porch. A flea carrying the plague got to the young lady and the doctor treating her apparently didn’t recognize the infection for what it was in time to save the child’s life.

Since that time, plague has occurred in rural and semi-rural areas of the

western United States, primarily in semi-arid upland forests and grasslands where many types of rodent species can be involved. Several species of animals, such as rock squirrels, wood rats, ground squirrels — including our much-loved golden mantled — prairie dogs, chipmunks, mice, voles, and rabbits can be affected by plague, and both wild and domestic carnivores can become infected by eating infected animals.

People who allow their cats to wander around outside are particularly susceptible to plague, as the cats can be infected by eating infected rodents they kill. Sick cats pose a risk of transmitting infectious plague droplets to their owners or to veterinarians. Several cases of human plague have occurred in the United States in recent decades as a result of contact with infected cats.

It’s those charming little voles that I do all I can to avoid, especially if they’re still alive and moving about. I do not enjoy killing anything, even the disease-carrying rodents so common around the sagebrush and juniper land I live on. But I’m always astounded by the number of voles I find in castings (pellets) left behind under a hawk or owl’s nest, and particularly grateful they are



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

Deer Mouse, *Peromyscus maniculatus*, just about every carnivore’s prey, plus a carrier of several diseases that plague man.

so proficient at reducing the vole population.

Then there’s the poor old jackrabbits. Right at the moment they’re undergoing their cyclic population die-off from the ravages of tularemia. For the last five years we have seen a good-sized population of jackrabbits as we explored the Great Sandy Desert and adjoining countryside for golden eagles. It wasn’t uncommon for us to see at least 15 or so jackrabbits in a three-mile run across the sagebrush and bitterbrush countryside. Today we’re lucky if we see one for an entire day.

Tularemia is a wildlife disease you do not want to come into contact with. It is highly contagious and kills most mammals that become

infected with it. I can recall several years back of two rabbit-hunters dying of tularemia when they decided to barbecue a couple of infected rabbits.

In addition to hantavirus and bubonic plague being carried to us by wild rodents there’s hemorrhagic fever, lassa fever, leptospirosis, lymphocytic chorio-meningitis, omsk hemorrhagic fever, rat-bite fever, salmonellosis and probably some stuff from overseas we haven’t a name for yet.

I’d suggest contacting the Deschutes County Health Department if you capture and kill a rodent you don’t recognize, the information may fit into a mystery they’re working on. Call 541-617-4705.

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