Osceola County Health Department issued a rabies alert Monday for parts of Kissimmee after a wild raccoon tested positive to rabies. All residents should take this seriously as the disease can easily be spread through contact with wild animals or unvaccinated pets that have been bitten by wild animals.

Rabies is a contagious disease that causes encephalitis or swelling of the brain and is fatal without treatment. Infection occurs primarily from animal bites which transfer the virus from the infected animal’s mouth into the wound.

There are several ways to avoid exposure to rabies. Responsible pet owners are encouraged to keep pets indoors so they don’t have contact with wild animals that may carry rabies. All pet owners should have their dogs and cats vaccinated for rabies as a preventative measure. It can be done during a trip to your local veterinarians office. Some groups sponsor vaccination campaigns and offer low cost clinics at remote sites. Check with local pet shops for more information. Osceola County Animal Control officers know the importance of vaccinations so animals adopted from Osceola County’s animal shelter are vaccinated before they are given to a new home.

Raccoons are known to be common carriers of rabies. They are wild animals and are at home in the woods and natural areas. However, raccoons are quite at home in our neighborhoods and have adapted to community living quite well.

Raccoons are omnivores in the wild eating fish, insects, plants and wild berries and fruits. They are adapted to feeding on fruit we grow in our landscapes such as papayas and oranges, but really enjoy eating from outside pet food dishes. Therefore, it is critical to feed pets indoors. If must have your animals outside, only feed what they will eat at one meal-time. Don't leave food out all the time. This sets up a pattern for our wild friends to add your house to their routine scavenging pattern.

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission officers urge residents not to feed wildlife and that includes raccoons. In fact, there is now a state law that prohibits feeding wildlife. Raccoons are considered cute by many but feeding them encourages unnatural human encounters and significantly increases the risk of people and pets getting rabies. It changes their diet and may even lead to health problems such as obesity and other risks for the animals.

Their black masked faces and striped fur coat give them the bandit look. The mischief they cause goes right along with the disguise. Raccoons can be quite a nuisance if we provide them an opportunity to feed in our garbage. They have very manipulative hands and can open garbage cans and sometimes enter homes through pet doors as they are exploring. I had one on my porch last week that stole my new chayote vine right out of the pot. It was going after the fruit that I was planning to plant in my yard for a fall harvest of squash. I should have paid more attention to my house dog who was barking her head off while the raccoon ran away with its loot.

Raccoons can make a quite a mess as they look for tasty leftovers in garbage cans. Often stray dogs are blamed for the chaos. To avoid garbage can raids, use metal or tough plastic containers with tight fitting lids and cable the lid down. Anchor the can to the ground or build a wire rack to prevent the raccoons from turning cans over and spilling the contents.

The dark crawl space under homes makes a great raccoon den. Keep them out by fencing off all entrances. You can check to see if a raccoon is using an area by sprinkling baking flour in the area. If they are active, primarily after dark, you will see hand prints in the flour the next morning.

To keep raccoons out of gardens, you may need to invest in an electric fence with a wire 6 inches above the ground surrounding the area.

If you notice raccoons that are active during the day or stumbling as they walk, contact Osceola County Animal
Control at 407-343-7105. Anyone who has been bitten by a stray dog or wild animal must report it to Osceola County Health Department at 407-343-2080.

If you have problems with raccoons in your area, they may need to be trapped. Contact the UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension office for more information on methods or to locate a licensed trapper. Call Eleanor Foerste at 321-697-3000.

Eleanor Foerste
Natural Resources Agent
Osceola County Extension/University of Florida
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane
Kissimmee, FL 34744
(321) 697-3000
Fax (321) 697-3010
efoe@osceola.org
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu
Date: June 11, 2006