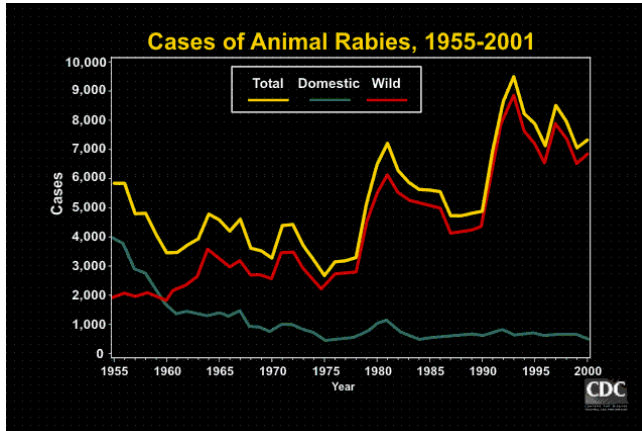


Safety Note #83

FIELDWORK SAFETY: RABIES



Nationwide Wild and Domestic Rabies Cases, 1955-2001
Graph Courtesy of the National Center
for Infectious Diseases

Data available from the Department of Health Services indicate there were 3,312 reported cases of animal rabies between 1993 and 2002 in California. During this same period, seven human rabies cases were reported. Ninety-six percent of the reported rabies cases occurred in bats and skunks. About two percent of the reported rabies cases involved domestic animals, including primarily dogs, cats, and cattle. In addition to bats and skunks, rabies cases were also reported in other wild animals such as foxes, opossums, and raccoons.

Rabies is usually caused by exposure to saliva transferred during the bite of a mammal that is infected with *Lyssavirus* virus. Infection can also take place by the transfer of contaminated saliva through mucous surfaces located at the eyes, nose, or mouth. Areas where concentrated airborne rabies virus may occur, such as caves populated by infected bats, are another exposure route for rabies.

The incubation period for rabies is approximately one to two months. Early rabies symptoms include fever, headache, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, and sore throat. Later rabies symptoms include hyperactivity, confusion, hallucinations, seizures, neck stiffness, or paralysis.

California Code of Regulations Title 17, Section 2602 (a) requires local health officers to be immediately notified by any person having knowledge of the whereabouts of an animal having or suspected of having rabies. Moreover, the local health officer shall be likewise notified of any person or animal bitten by a rabid or suspected rabid animal.

The following fieldwork precautions should be taken for rabies prevention:

- Never approach wild mammals in the field, especially if their behavior is unusual.
- Never touch dead mammals encountered in the field.
- If wild animals must be handled, always wear protective equipment appropriate to the hazard – gloves at a minimum.
- Use a respirator when entering a closed space (i.e., cave, field building) where bats are present.
- If bitten by a wild mammal, wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water and cover with a sterile bandage. Then, promptly seek professional medical help.