

Rabies or Just Restless?

The Schuylkill Center Wildlife Clinic

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Experiencing one of the small pleasures of July, August and September...playing ball in the yard in the coolness of a leisurely early evening - when suddenly a raccoon appears. "Rabies!" is the first thought that pops into your head. Reasonable, yes; possible, yes; probable, no. Unusual behavior, such as a nocturnal animal out while it is still daylight, can be a sign of rabies but one symptom does not a disease make. There can be several reasons why a raccoon or skunk might be out before dark, especially during these mid to late summer months.

Does the animal look young or small?

It might be a juvenile learning to forage on his own. Becoming self-sufficient is not an easy task when, up to this point in your young life, Mom provided all the food. A growing animal gets hungry often and eats a disproportionate amount of food for their size - comparable to a human teenager boy. An inefficient, growing forager needs more time to fill an empty stomach and often starts earlier in the evening than would an experienced adult.



Is the animal an adult?

It might be a female with growing young in a nest. Mom needs to provide food for four or five or six little ones back home. She gets an early evening start to find the extra food she needs to meet her own nutritional requirements - lactation can take its toll on Mom.

Other reasons?

Barking dogs, construction noises, marauding crows, an overheated den can all coax an animal to begin the evening foraging a bit early. Nocturnal means the period of greatest activity not exclusive activity.

If the animal in your yard appears normal in every other way and seems to be going about its business with purpose and determination, it is most likely a healthy individual. On the other hand, if the animal seems dazed, confused, glassy-eyed, stumbling, overly aggressive or overly friendly, there is a problem. Rabies is not the only possibility, but should be a primary consideration. Put children and pets in the house and call your animal control officer who can usually be reached through the local police, or the Pennsylvania Game Commission. If it is possible to confine or monitor the animal without putting yourself in danger of being bitten or coming into direct contact with it, do so. This will make the job of capturing the animal easier. If this is not possible, for example, if the animal runs off, call the authorities anyway to report your suspicion, so if anyone else reports an apparently ill animal in the same area, it might be easier to find and capture it for testing. Unfortunately, testing brain tissue is still the only definitive way to diagnose rabies.

So, be alert and be aware but don't let the fear of rabies keep you from enjoying the summer evening.