

*Floridian raccoons are the culprits*

# New rabies strain heading this way

A new strain of rabies spread mostly by raccoons is making its way toward southern Ontario, although it's going to be a few years before it gets here.

How few years until the disease afflicts Ontario wildlife "could vary" according to a report released last week by Halton Region's health commissioner Robert Nosal.

Nosal said the new rabies strain has come north with raccoons from Florida steadily since the 1950s, and has reached western New York state, approximately 80 kilometres from the Canadian border. It's expected in Ontario "by 1994 or 1995."

Ontario traditionally has the highest animal rabies incidence in North America, Nosal pointed out in his report, with an average 2,000 cases per year. The disease is spread primarily by raccoons and skunks in the province, and skunks will be susceptible to the new raccoon strain, Nosal noted.

While Ontario animal rabies cases were down in 1991 to their lowest level in 20 years, outbreaks

in western New York, primarily in raccoons, were 10 times the normal rate, Nosal said in his report.

One of the dangers posed by the raccoon outbreak is that the animal has so successfully adapted to living among humans. Nosal said that in a recent survey, the Ministry of Natural Resources estimated there are 16 raccoons per square kilometre in an urban area of Scarborough, an east-end Toronto community.

In Halton, 20 animals were confirmed rabid in 1991 and 33 in 1990, Nosal said, primarily in the more densely populated southern municipalities of Oakville and Burlington.

A Ministry of Natural Resources program which immunizes foxes to rabies through oral vaccines placed in bait hasn't worked with raccoons or skunks, Nosal said.

A task force has been struck to come up with vaccine-bait raccoons will accept, as well as to study other methods of controlling the problem.

If raccoon rabies takes hold in Halton, various regional initiatives will be expanded, Nosal said.

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- symptoms can be mild or severe, come and go unpredictably.

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