

Updated 09/01/2020

Updated COVID-19 Exposure and Wildlife Handling Guidance



While Iowans continue to be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, we must remain vigilant to the potential risks posed by this disease to our native species. We are updating our wildlife handling guidance based on the current state of knowledge, informed by risk analyses, case reports, and experimental challenge studies. We encourage all staff and partners, including Wildlife Researchers, Wildlife Rehabilitators, and Nuisance Wildlife Control Operators, to adhere to these additional measures to mitigate the short and long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

What We Know: SARS-CoV-2 and Wildlife

COVID-19 is caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. This is a beta-coronavirus believed to have originated in Old World bats from southwest China, which likely jumped into an intermediate host species prior to infecting people. Early experimental infection studies indicated that felids and mustelids were susceptible to infection. This was further evidenced by several natural transmission events from infected people to animals in captive settings, including pet dogs. Most animals have shown mild clinical signs of disease including respiratory signs like sneezing, coughing, and nasal discharge or gastrointestinal signs like loose stool. However, farmed mink from outbreaks in Europe and more recently Utah have also presented with severe pneumonia and death. Given this background, we should consider our native felid (bobcat), mustelid (weasels, mink, badgers, otters), and canid (fox, coyote) species susceptible to infection with SARS-CoV-2.

Researchers are currently evaluating the capacity for our native bat species to become reservoirs for this virus in North America. Until that risk is better known, every effort should be made to prevent exposure to bats via use of **personal protective equipment and the additional measures** listed below for handling susceptible species:

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE):

- Face Mask (recommended options):
 - Fit-tested N-95 mask without a vent (the vent does NOT prevent exposure to the animal)
 - Double surgical mask
 - Surgical mask with a face shield
 - **Minimum:** cloth mask with disposable filter
- Disposable exam gloves or reusable gloves (e.g., rubber dish-washing gloves) over handling gloves that can be decontaminated to prevent the spread of pathogens;
- Other standards of practice in your profession (e.g., coveralls or site-specific clothing, dedicated footwear).

Additional Measures:

- Where practical, refrain from any direct handling of wildlife;
- Limit interactions with wildlife to as few handlers as possible;
- Practice good hand hygiene, using soap and warm water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer ($\geq 60\%$) frequently;
- Keep domestic animals away from wildlife and house in separate rooms whenever possible;
- Implement additional biosecurity measures including enhanced cleaning, disinfection, and quarantine;
- Individuals working with the public are encouraged to include messaging to ensure fewer people come in contact with bats:
 - If you find a bat that is not visibly injured, leave it alone (do not collect). If you can get it off the ground and away from predators, do so without having direct contact with the bat;
 - If you find a bat in need of care, work with a local wildlife rehabilitator, animal control officer, or DNR staff that may pick up injured wildlife.



Bats and Wildlife Research Guidelines

- The DNR recommends that researchers postpone activities requiring direct contact with live bats or consider alternative methods of data collection. Activities that do not involve physical contact or close proximity with bats, such as acoustic monitoring or emergence counts, may proceed as planned with appropriate distancing;
- When such activities are absolutely necessary, they should only be conducted with protective equipment to prevent possible viral transmission as described above.

Bats and Wildlife Rehabilitation Guidelines

- Continue to notify the DNR by email: SCPermits@dnr.iowa.gov or phone: 515-725-8273, of new intakes. Please include count by species.
 - As of September 1, 2020, overwintered bats may be released back into the wild. Please see document **“Moratorium on Bat Release Lifted in Iowa”** for more information.
- Minimize direct handling and if required, use **appropriate PPE and the additional measures** outlined above;
- Limit interactions with bats to as few handlers as possible;
- Limit the number of people providing care, and when possible, have the same rehabber work with the same bats to limit potential exposures;
- Double bag any carcasses and save in a freezer or contact the DNR if you have space constraints;
- Should you, anyone who has come in contact with the bats, or others in your facility/household be diagnosed or suspected of COVID-19 infection, you must notify the DNR by email: SCPermits@dnr.iowa.gov or phone: 515-725-8273 so that we may track bats with potential exposure to the virus. Should you no longer be able to care for wildlife, contact the DNR for further instructions, as this is a fluid situation. This information will only be used by our COVID-19 response team in the event further testing or evaluation is needed.
- Additional guidelines may arise as the research surrounding the SAR-CoV-2 virus evolves. Visit our website for updates: <https://www.iowadnr.gov/conservation/scientific-collectors-permits> as they become available.

Bats and Nuisance Wildlife Control Operator Guidelines

- Minimize direct handling and if required, use **appropriate PPE and the additional measures** outlined above;
- Limit interactions with bats to as few handlers as possible;
- If working with the capture, exclusion, and or relocation of bats, use the **additional measures** listed above;
- Notify DNR State Wildlife Veterinarian Dr. Rachel Ruden at 515-294-8205 or by email Rachel.Ruden@dnr.iowa.gov of any bat that appears sick or shows abnormal behavior;
- Additional guidelines may arise as the research surrounding the SAR-CoV-2 virus evolves. Visit our website for updates: <https://www.iowadnr.gov/Hunting/Landowner-Assistance> as they become available.

We will continue to update guidance on COVID-19 risk mitigation in wildlife in line with current research findings. If you have questions about the SARS-CoV-2 virus as relevant to wildlife health, please contact DNR State Wildlife Veterinarian Dr. Rachel Ruden. You can reach her by phone at 515-294-8205 or by email at Rachel.Ruden@dnr.iowa.gov.



Rachel M Ruden, VMD PhD, State Wildlife Veterinarian