April 9, 2020

Re: COVID-19 Exposure and Wildlife Handling Guidance

To Whom It May Concern:

For the safety of our staff, our partners, and specifically Nuisance Wildlife Control Operators, Wildlife Rehabilitators, and Wildlife Researchers, we are advising all persons to take extra measures to mitigate the short and long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The SARS-CoV-2 virus is believed to have originated in Old World bats from southwest China, and experimental infection studies indicate that felids and mustelids are susceptible to infection. It is currently unknown if the SARS-CoV-2 virus can be transmitted from humans to North American wildlife. Until we have a better understanding of the risk to bat, felid (bobcat), and mustelid (weasels, mink, otters, etc.) species posed by SARS-CoV-2, we recommend that people consider using the following additional measures when handling wildlife:

- Where practical, refrain from any direct handling of wildlife;
- Limit interactions with wildlife to as few handlers as possible;
- A face mask to be worn to block or minimize the exchange of respiratory droplets. This may include use of a surgical mask, dust mask, or cloth mask;
- Disposable exam gloves or other reusable gloves (e.g., rubber dish-washing gloves) that can be decontaminated to prevent spread of pathogens between animals, from animals to humans, or vice versa;
- Washable or disposable coveralls, or a change of clothing and footwear, to prevent movement of pathogens between sites;
- Separate housing for all domestic animals from wildlife; solid walls between caging is preferred;
- Implement additional disinfection, quarantine, and cleaning procedures.

What We Know: Bats and COVID-19

Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that can be found in animal species. The Beta group, found in mammals (which includes Old World bats) comprises viruses that cause Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), and Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19). Research suggests that bats harbor coronaviruses but the viruses typically do not cause disease or death in bat hosts. It is uncertain whether North American bats can contract the SARS-CoV-2 virus, and their potential to become viral reservoirs is still being studied.

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 (don’t collect it). 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 the local professionals, animal control officers, or DNR staff that may pick up injured wildlife.

Bats and Wildlife Research Guidelines

- The DNR recommends that people consider temporarily postponing research activities requiring direct contact with live wild bats. This recommendation does not include research activities that do not involve physical
contact or close proximity with bats, such as acoustic monitoring or emergence counts when an appropriate distance and protection can be maintained;

- 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**

- Notify the DNR by email: SCPermits@dnr.iowa.gov or phone: 515-725-8273, if you have any bats currently in your possession. Please include count by species.
- Reduce the number of bat intakes as much as possible. Intake of bats is still allowed at this time.
- Where practical, refrain from any direct handling of bats; if handling is required, use 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;
- Refrain from releasing any bats from rehabilitation until further notice; if working with bats use the additional measures listed above;
- 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 needs to take place.
- 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**

- Where practical, refrain from any direct handling of bats; if handling is required, use 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 the DNR State Wildlife Veterinarian Dr. Rachel Ruden, VMD at 515-294-8205 or by email Rachel.Ruden@dnr.iowa.gov and State Hygienic Lab 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 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, VMD. You can reach her by phone at 515-294-8205 or by email at Rachel.Ruden@dnr.iowa.gov.

Sincerely,

Dale L. Garner, Division Administrator
Conservation and Recreation Division