

West Nile virus and a few others



Tips from the Posse
 By Mark Rackay

I clomped around in the Florida Everglades for many reasons, some fun and others not so much. Where the Everglades reach the saltwater in Florida Bay was the holy grail of outdoor sports.

The fishing was the best in North America. Only here can someone try for a flats slam, backcountry slam and an offshore slam within 30 miles of each other. Thousands of species of fish and sea life populated the area.

For the adventurous type, the Everglades provided many other types of wildlife viewing. Species of birds that exist nowhere else in the country thrive here. The panther thrives here, preying on wild hogs and deer. Saltwater crocodiles live in this area, similar to the ones found in equatorial Africa. And then, there are the snakes.

The glades have the biggest rattlesnakes, like the eastern diamondback, found in North America. They can exceed 6 feet in length and be as wide as your thigh. Throw in the deadly coral snake and the very aggressive cottonmouth and you have the trifecta of serpents.

With all of those representatives of the animal kingdom, the most deadly animal around is the lowly mosquito. He has found his home here and thrives. We have a huge population of the skeeters here on the Western Slope, and they can be just as deadly.

Mosquitoes, those miserable insects that suck blood and transmit viruses, are responsible for the most animal related deaths in the world, according to a graphic report from Bill Gates in 2016.

For comparison, humans are responsible for 580,000 human deaths per year, while snakes account for 60,000 deaths annually. Sharks, which we hear so much about, only account for about six lives per year.

The lowly mosquito, the bug that sucks blood and transmits viruses from human to human, accounts for 830,000 deaths per year. Mosquitoes are responsible for the spread of the Zika virus, dengue, and yellow fever. The majority of deaths from a disease spread by the mosquito's largest killer is from a parasitic infection called malaria.

More than half of the mosquito related malaria



I spent many years prowling around the Florida Everglades and learned a great deal about things that bite, especially mosquitoes. Unfortunately, we have a skeeter problem here in western Colorado, and this is what prime skeeter habitat looks like. (Photo by Yinan Chen)

deaths occur in Africa, but that number is dropping in recent years due to improved medications and immunizations against the disease.

Colorado is not immune to mosquitoes or the viral diseases they spread.

There are four viruses in Colorado that are transmitted by mosquitoes. Western equine encephalitis, St. Louis encephalitis, California encephalitis and the West Nile virus are all found here. All of these viruses are transmitted to animals and people by bites from infected mosquitoes, and rarely through blood transfusions or organ transplants.

Colorado saw 68 reported human cases of West Nile in 2017, which is about average.

West Nile virus has made its presence known on the Western Slope the past several years. Five human cases were reported last summer in Delta, and that number rose to 35 with two fatalities by November, and was still climbing. Delta recorded eight cases in 2018, and Montrose had eight confirmed human cases in 2018, and four reported cases in 2019.

According to the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, most people who are infected with mosquito-borne viruses do not become ill and have no symptoms. About one person in 10 develops a mild illness, and one in 150 develops a more severe illness.

For persons who do become ill, the incubation period ranges from five to 14 days. In rare cases, the virus can cause a serious brain infection such as

meningitis or encephalitis. These infections begin suddenly with a high fever and headache and may advance to a stiff neck, disorientation, tremors and coma.

Symptoms usually last seven days before subsiding. Severe infections can result in permanent brain damage or death. Most of the deaths occur in persons over 50. There is no specific treatment for infections with this virus except supportive care.

People cannot transmit the disease to other people. The risk for the disease is greatest from June through early September, when the mosquitoes are the most active. All of us who live, work and recreate in the outdoors here in Colorado are subject to the mosquito-spread diseases.

The simple solution is to not get bitten by the mosquito, but I doubt any of us want to spend our summers indoors. With that in mind, here are a few things you should consider while in the outdoors:

- Limit outside activity during dawn and dusk. This is the time that mosquitoes are the most active.
- Wear protective clothing, such as long sleeve shirts and long pants. Light colors, such as khaki, seem to be less of an attractant to the pests.
- Apply insect repellent to exposed skin when outside. Products that contain DEET are the most effective. Generally, look for a concentration of DEET around 25% or higher.
- Repellent should be reapplied every few hours.
- If staying in one place, and winds are not a factor, a Thermacell works well. I used one of these in severe mosquito conditions while

in Florida. Thermacell creates a barrier around you that keeps the mosquitoes away. They work great for barbeques on the patio when the wind is down.

There is a product made by Sawyer that contains Permethrin that can be used to treat your clothing. Permethrin will last up to six washings and also repels ticks. It is not as effective for high concentrations of mosquitoes as DEET because it does not protect exposed skin. In very heavy mosquito conditions, you could use both methods for maximum protection. Many military clothing is issued pretreated with it.

Drain all standing water no matter how small of an amount. Old tires, beverage cans and buckets

can contain enough water to hatch mosquito eggs.

If you sleep in the open while camping (not in a tent) consider using a mosquito netting. These are small, lightweight, and very effective in keeping the bugs off you while you are sleeping.

A head net will keep the biting insects away from your face. Several manufacturers also make a complete suit for the whole body. The suit consists of a screen type material that keeps the bugs off your skin. This method is beneficial for persons who do not or cannot use repellants on their body.

There are other products out that claim an "all natural" or "organic" repellant to these insects. I have tried some of these on

occasion and would advise you to not waste your money. You don't want to find out that the product is not strong enough when you are camping in a remote area, near sunset, a hundred miles north of nowhere. Stick to DEET because it works.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a director for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org.

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