

Alaska Science Forum

WOLF RABIES

By NEIL DAVIS

Wolf rabies in North America has been known to occur only infrequently, though in the eastern Mediterranean wolves are important carriers of the disease. There had been only six verified cases of rabies in American wolves prior to 1977, when at least six wolves in one Alaskan pack died of rabies within a period of weeks.

While studying a wolf pack of ten animals on the upper Hulahula River of northeast Alaska, Richard C. Chapman noted strange behavior by one member of the group. Between vicious attacks on other members of the pack, this wolf wandered back and forth and pursued other unusual and aimless activities.

Writing in the July 28, 1978, issue of Science magazine, Chapman told about the wolf later approaching his tent. After being driven off by shouting and banging of pots, the wolf later returned and was beaten off twice more by raps on the head with an old boot. Chapman finally shot the wolf with a pistol.

The dead wolf was found to be rabid; its stomach contained wolf hair, moss, wood chips and sand. Evidently, the wolf transmitted rabies to other members of the pack since two to three weeks later six of the remaining wolves in the pack died.

Transmission of rabies from wolf pack to wolf pack in northern Alaska is thought to be unlikely since the density of wolves is low (one per 180 square kilometers), and each pack tends to keep in its own territory.

However, wolves do chase and attempt to kill arctic foxes. Unlike the wolves, the foxes do at times range over great distances, and they are often afflicted by rabies. Since rabies can be contracted by eating a rabid animal or even inhaling contaminated air, the wolves can easily get rabies from foxes.

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