

General Guidance for Communicating about SARS-CoV-2 in Wildlife

USGS National Wildlife Health Center

As SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19 in humans, continues to spread globally, questions have emerged about the potential for humans to transmit the virus to North American wildlife, its potential impacts on native wildlife populations, and the resultant possibility and consequences of establishing a persistent wildlife reservoir. Currently, there is no evidence that wildlife are a source of infection for people in the United States. However, based on the evolving situation, we are concerned with the potential impacts inadvertent negative messaging may have on wildlife conservation efforts, particularly when the pathogen of interest affects humans (see [MacFarlane and Rocha 2020](#)). Therefore, we have compiled some general guidance for partners seeking assistance with balancing messages about risk of pathogen transmission from wildlife with messages about continued wildlife conservation efforts to protect species and ecosystem functions.

General guidance (adapted from [MacFarlane and Rocha 2020](#))

- Don't repeat misinformation or myths. Emphasize facts.
- Don't only emphasize risk. Highlight ways to reduce risk. Put risk in context.
- Don't vilify wild animals. Emphasize benefits of wildlife and diverse ecosystems.
- Balance conservation vs. risk message.
- Give the audience a set of actions they can take to protect themselves and wildlife.
- Tell the audience what you know and don't know and what is being done to find out more.

Additional considerations: The points emphasized during communications should be flexible in order to accurately communicate relative risk for different audiences (e.g., wildlife recreationist vs hunters) as well as to prevent the unintentional vilification of wildlife. For example, emphasizing the ecosystem function value(s) of a species before discussing biosafety precautions to reduce the chances of disease exposure/transmission may be a useful way to promote feelings of goodwill for species commonly perceived as nuisances for humans. The following key talking points are intended to serve as boilerplate examples that can be readily modified. We recognize that natural resources agency needs will differ and that they are the most knowledgeable about the audiences that they routinely communicate with.

Key talking point examples:

- *Communicating the value of wildlife to various audiences*
 - Healthy wildlife is an integral part of healthy ecosystems.
 - Help keep wildlife healthy by keeping your distance while you enjoy the great outdoors.
- *Communicating relative risk to a variety of audiences*
 - You are most likely to get COVID-19 from other people. The risk of getting COVID-19 from animals is low.

- Because wildlife can carry multiple zoonotic diseases, even without looking sick, it is always important to enjoy wildlife from a distance.
- If you are around or in contact with wildlife, consider [using the same tools and techniques](#) you use while in public, including social distancing and the use of masks to protect yourself and the animals from possible spread of the virus.
- *Communicating about appropriate measures for encounters with sick or injured wildlife*
 - You can help injured wildlife by avoiding contact and calling your local wildlife health professionals.
- *Communicating the value of wildlife for ecosystem function to counteract negative associations towards of “nuisance” or “vilified” species. (messages should be tailored for the relevant species or ecosystems in your jurisdiction)*
 - Bats are important for healthy ecosystems and agriculture. Fruit-eating bats disperse seeds and nectar-eating bats pollinate plants. Bats contribute about \$3.7 billion worth of insect control for farmers in the United States each year.
 - Racoons serve an important role within urban and rural landscapes as scavengers who help clean up carrion as well as prey on pests such as grubs, wasp larvae, rodents, and small snakes.
 - Foxes serve an important role within urban and rural landscapes through their ability to control populations of their prey animals like rodents and rabbits.
- *Communicating biosafety precautions for audiences likely to come into close contact with wildlife products (from CDC)*
 - [Get vaccinated against COVID-19.](#)
 - Follow public health guidance on quarantine following possible exposures to COVID-19.
 - Follow appropriate guidance from the state wildlife authority, [CDC](#), and the [U.S. Geological Survey \(USGS\)](#) on the use of PPE (respirator, protective eyewear, disposable gloves or reusable gloves that can be decontaminated and changed between individual animals) when handling or working with susceptible wildlife.
 - Wear dedicated clothing and footwear that can be laundered separately after each field work shift or can be bagged and thrown away immediately after completing the shift. Disposable protective outerwear such as gowns, suits, and boot covers may be appropriate depending on the activity.
 - Clean and disinfect all field gear and equipment that may come in contact with wildlife before starting the work, between animals (if warranted), and after finishing the work.
 - Additional examples of biosafety guidance for hunters, wildlife rehabilitators, and natural resource professionals are at:
 - Reducing the Risk of SARS-CoV-2 Spreading between People and Wildlife (CDC): <https://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/covid-19/wildlife.html>
 - Guidance on SARS-CoV-2 and Free-Ranging White-Tailed Deer: (Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies): https://www.fishwildlife.org/application/files/5516/3277/5426/GuidanceSARS-CoV2_White-tailed_Deer_SEP2021.pdf
 - COVID-19: Staying Safe in Your Community – Guidance for Hunting (Wisconsin Department of Health Services): <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/covid-19/community.htm>

- *Communicating basic measures to reduce encounters with peridomestic species (from [CDC](#))*
 - Keep your family, including pets, a safe distance away from wildlife.
 - Do not feed wildlife or touch wildlife droppings.
 - Cover food waste; keep trash secure.
 - Always wash your hands and supervise children washing their hands after working or playing outside.
 - Leave orphaned animals alone. Often, the parents are close by and will return for their young.
 - Do not approach or touch a sick or dead animal – contact your state wildlife agency.

By combining the various key talking points above an example message for general audiences about SARS-CoV-2 findings in wildlife may look something like the following:

Help keep wildlife healthy by keeping your distance while you enjoy the great outdoors. Remember, you are more likely to get COVID-19 from other people than from animals. However, we still have much to learn about wildlife and SARS-CoV-2 infection, including learning what risk, if any, infected wildlife may pose to people. Nevertheless, there are [numerous ways to reduce potential risk](#). If you are around or in contact with wildlife, please use the same tools you use while in public including social distancing and the use of masks to reduce transmission risk. You can help injured wildlife by avoiding contact and calling your local wildlife health professionals.

References

- MacFarlane D and Rocha R. 2020. Guidelines for communicating about bats to prevent persecution in the time of COVID-19. *Biological Conservation*, v. 248. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2020.108650>
- Centers for Disease Control. 2021. Reducing the Risk of SARS-CoV-2 Spreading between People and Wildlife. Accessed November 10, 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/covid-19/wildlife.html>

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