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An eastern grey squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*), seen staggering around a backyard deck in May, is most certainly suffering from raccoon roundworm.

News / Insight

Beware a staggering squirrel in your backyard

That staggering squirrel could have raccoon roundworm, a nasty disease that has been known to affect people as well.

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MARGARET BREAM / TORONTO STAR

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Raccoons (*Procyon lotor*), are the primary host of a nematode worm that can infect small mammals such as squirrels. Humans are occasionally infected with the worm, with devastating results.

By: Margaret Bream Toronto star, Published on Sat Jun 16 2012

Gazing out my kitchen window on a recent warm spring morning, I happened to notice a grey squirrel behaving in a most unsquirrel-like way. He was lying prone, completely flattened out on the railing around my deck. He appeared to be soaking up the rays.

“Look at that,” I said to my daughter, Em, as she came into our kitchen.

“He’s sausaging,” she said, describing the squirrel’s curious sunbathing posture.

It looked kind of cute, and we both laughed.

Then the squirrel tried to get up. He was unable to sit upright on the railing and clumsily struggled to get down to the deck. Once there, he rolled and pitched drunkenly across the cedar planks, then made a leap for our cedar hedge. He missed his landing, falling a metre through the foliage. After picking himself up, he staggered away.

There was something seriously wrong with this animal. Something neurological, I suggested to Em, before running to the Internet — and a few wildlife experts — for information.

It’s likely our sad grey squirrel was afflicted with raccoon roundworm, a nasty disease caused by the parasite *Baylisascaris procyonis*. Raccoons, the main host of this nematode worm, are not killed by the adult worms, which live in the coons’ small intestines. But a variety of other small mammals, including squirrels, groundhogs and rabbits, can be fatally infected.

Dr. Douglas Campbell, a veterinary pathologist at the Canadian Co-operative Wildlife Health Centre at the University of Guelph, agreed with my assessment, saying “*Baylisascaris procyonis* is by far the most common cause of neurological disease that we see in grey squirrels.”

He said a lack of coordination and loss of balance are often described in animals affected by this parasite because the worm’s larvae “have a predilection for entering the brain in the region of the cerebellum, which is responsible for balance.”

A squirrel gets infected with roundworm when it digs through the scat of an infected raccoon, looking for seeds to eat, and unwittingly ingests roundworm eggs that have been excreted in the feces.

Millions of eggs, which are not immediately infective, may be present in a single raccoon defecation, the Guelph wildlife centre says. After the eggs have incubated for about 21 days, they become larva and are now infective. At this point, they are very resistant to destruction, able to survive extreme heat, freezing, desiccation and even treatment with bleach.

Raccoon roundworm might not be an issue if it were only squirrels and other small mammals that are occasionally infected. However, there have been confirmed cases of this infection, occasionally fatal, in humans. Most such roundworm infections have occurred in small children and others who are more likely to put dirt or animal feces in their mouth, the Guelph wildlife centre notes.

While the parasite is prevalent in most areas of southern Ontario, there’s no need to panic.

“It’s important to recognize that we believe the risk of infection is small and there are things we can do to make the risk even lower,” says Dr. Shira Shafir, assistant professor in the department of epidemiology at the UCLA School of Public Health, in a podcast produced for the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Ga.

Shafir says home sandboxes where children play should be kept covered when not in use, and raccoons should never be kept as pets. “Prevention efforts can also be enhanced through hand washing and good hygiene.”

If you find raccoon excrement — or a communal “latrine,” where a group of coons regularly defecate — around your property, consider calling in a professional wildlife service for decontamination. If you opt to do the cleanup yourself, the Guelph wildlife centre advises that you do so cautiously. Wear a protective mask, gloves and clothing that can be discarded after use.

Burn the feces or put it in garbage that will be buried in a landfill. “Under no circumstances should (feces) be composted or deposited in an area in which there is likely to be human or animal contact,” the centre says.

Decontaminate surfaces with extreme heat — steam cleaning or dry heat (blow torch); if that’s not feasible, destruction and replacement of contaminated surfaces may be necessary, the centre advises.

And if you see any squirrels staggering around in circles, look around. There’s likely a raccoon latrine not far away.

Star editor **Margaret Bream** can be reached at mbream@thestar.ca.

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