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Our canine friends also need to watch out for ticks

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RUTH RICKER

Comet was treated at the MSPCA's Angell Animal Medical Center in Boston this fall for Rocky Mountain spotted fever, after his owner, Ruth Ricker of Brighton, saw the dog become suddenly ill. Veterinarians say the dog was bit by a lone star tick.

By Matt Rocheleau

GLOBE STAFF MARCH 31, 2016

Veterinarians from a Boston animal care center say they've seen a dramatic increase in the number of dogs brought in for treatment for tick-borne illnesses.

The Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' Angell Animal Medical Center in Jamaica Plain treated 196 dogs for suspected or confirmed tick-borne illness this past fall and winter, a 125 percent increase from the 87 dogs treated during the same period the year before, officials said.

"These ticks are on the move, and we need to be proactive about protecting our pets," said a statement from Virginia Sinnott, a veterinarian who works in the center's emergency and critical care unit.

Experts said the unseasonably warm, snow-free weather this past winter may have been partly to blame for the rise in cases.

The conditions likely meant more people — and their pets — spent time outdoors, and the milder temperatures and lack of snow cover meant ticks were likely more active.

How to protect your yard against ticks

Graphic: How to remove a tick

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disease epidemic**

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disease in Massachusetts**

"I'm not surprised they saw more ticks," said Thomas N. Mather, director of the University of Rhode

Island's Center for Vector-Borne Disease and its TickEncounter Resource Center. "This winter, we'd have a couple of cold days and then a couple of warm days, so the ticks would be less active on the cold days, but more active on the warm days ... and more people were out and potentially exposed."

The year before, he said, "you had record snowfall and ticks were trapped under the snow blanket," and many people stayed hunkered down inside their homes.

Mather said that finding ticks or contracting a tick-borne illness in the fall and winter surprise people the most, "because they think, 'It's cold. we've had a frost. ... The ticks must be dead.'"

But ticks are fairly resilient. Cold and snow doesn't kill them, but it can slow them down. As long as there's enough moisture and they have hosts to feed on, they'll thrive, he said.

Experts said that as the weather warms this spring and summer, both ticks and people will be more active outdoors, increasing the risk for exposure. It's too early to tell whether the tick population will be larger or smaller than usual in the coming months, but experts advised caution regardless.

"What's important from a public health standpoint is that, every year, risk from a tick-borne disease is high in Massachusetts," said Dr. Catherine M. Brown, Massachusetts public health veterinarian "It's an issue we have to deal with in Massachusetts every year."

Officials at the animal care clinic also raised concern over cases they've seen in which dogs were infected by a type of tick that's fairly new to the area — the lone star tick.

Lone star ticks had typically been most common in the southeastern part of the country, but in recent years, they have migrated farther north — and even been found in Massachusetts.

Mather said he did not think lone star ticks have established a substantial presence here yet.

But "they're on their way," he said. "It may just be a matter of time."

Brown agreed.

"It's definitely something that's been on our radar, and we expect continued and growing evidence of the lone star tick in Massachusetts," she said.

He said that type of tick can be concerning because they are “very aggressive” and fast.

“If there’s ever a tick race on ESPN, always put your money on lone star ticks,” Mather said.

Lone star ticks do not transmit Lyme disease, but can cause monocytic ehrlichiosis, Rocky Mountain spotted fever, and southern tick-associated rash illness, also known as STARI.

The most common sources of tick-borne illnesses in Massachusetts are two other species of the arachnid: dog ticks, which can carry some illnesses but are not known to carry Lyme disease; and deer ticks, also called black-legged ticks, which are known to carry Lyme disease.

Lyme disease is the most prevalent tick-borne illness in the state. But ticks here have been known to spread two other illnesses in sizable numbers: anaplasmosis and babesiosis, as well as another very rare, but severe, tick-borne illness, Powassan virus.

Ticks can be common not only in wooded areas, but also in rural and suburban locales including parks and yards.

Health experts say people should avoid areas where ticks are found, wear repellents, and check themselves and pets for ticks after being outdoors.

The MSPCA said keeping ticks off dogs and other pets can help protect families.

“It’s essential to keep ticks out of our homes as their bite can infect us just as they can our dogs,” said Sinnott. “By protecting pets we’re protecting ourselves as well.”

Veterinarians recommended the following steps for pet owners:

- Use an over-the-counter tick preventative all year long for dogs—and keep cats exclusively indoors.
- Walk dogs on hard surfaces or well-worn paths.
- Protect your yard, including by keeping the edges of your property free of debris such as piles of leaves and brush, which offer safe shelter for ticks.
- Learn how to remove embedded ticks.
- Have your pet tested annually for tick-borne diseases.

- Know the primary signs of most tick-borne illnesses in pets: Flu-like symptoms, lameness, decreased appetite and generally seeming unwell. If any of these symptoms are present, call your veterinarian immediately.

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@mrochele](https://twitter.com/mrochele)

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