



EL Yunque National Forest

West Indian Mongoose and Rabies Fact Sheet



HISTORY

The West Indian Mongoose, *Herpestes auropunctatus* is native to India. It's a member of the Herpestidae family of small cat-like carnivores. Mongooses are widely distributed throughout Asia, Africa, southern Europe, and the Caribbean. There are more than thirty species, ranging from one to four feet in length. Mongooses mostly feed on insects, crabs, earthworms, lizard, snakes, chickens and rodents.

Introduced into the West Indies to kill rats and snakes, they have destroyed harmless birds and mammals and have contributed to the extinction or endangerment of many desirable wildlife species. For this reason, it is illegal to import most species of mongoose into the United States.

RANGE

Mongooses are adapted to all the ecological zones of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, including Vieques, Culebra, and most of the offshore cays. In the El Yunque National Forest mongooses occurs at all elevations and forest types including: Tabonuco, Sierra Palm, Palo Colorado, and Dwarf/elfin.

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Mongooses have long faces and bodies, small rounded ears, short legs and tapering tails. Most are brindled or grizzled in shade, a few have strongly marked coats. They have non-retractile claws that are used primarily for digging. Mongooses, similar to goats, have narrow, oval pupils. They have soft short fur, usually pale to dark brown with golden flecks, but may vary seasonally and individually. It has a pale underside and a bushy tail, which is at least two thirds the length of the body.



H.auropunctatus has both a high rate of reproduction (they breed two or three times a year in litters of up to three) and a young age of first reproduction (females can breed at 10 weeks). A female can produce up to 36 individuals in a typical four year life span.

WARNING HAZARD PREVENTION

The West Indian Mongoose is the principal carrier of **Rabies** in Puerto Rico. Human-mongoose interactions have become a critical concern for the Forest Service as both forest visitors and mongoose populations increase exponentially, and recreationist activities encroaches on existing mongoose habitat. The numbers of mongoose related calls and reports have increased in recent years with complaints that includes threatening, attacking and biting visitors.

Prevention includes several actions:

- **Avoid** all mongoose contact.
- **Store your food in sealed containers.**
- **Deposit all trash** inside cans and close them after.
- **Never attempt to feed** these animals.
- **If you see a mongoose in a trap**, do not disturb or release the animal.



- **If you are bitten**, notify Forest Service personnel and seek medical assistance immediately.

POPULATION MANAGEMENT CONTROLS

On a regular basis the US Forest Service wildlife management crew conducts a trapping effort to control the population of these exotic animals. If you come across a trap containing animal(s) do not disturb or release them. Stay away from these animals.

HUMAN-MONGOUSES ENCOUNTERS

The majority of human-mongoose interactions are positive or neutral in outcome. A healthy mongoose is very shy, and you will rarely see one as they will normally avoid contact with humans. Sightings typically only last a few moments.

However, if a mongoose has rabies, its behavior is completely different from that described in the preceding paragraph. The animal becomes very aggressive and dangerous and will attack anything that it encounters!

WHAT IS RABIES?

Rabies is a deadly virus spread to people from the saliva of infected animals. The rabies virus is usually transmitted through a bite.

Rabies is a viral neuroinvasive disease that causes acute encephalitis (inflammation of the brain) in warm-blooded animals. It is zoonotic (i.e., transmitted by animals), most commonly by a bite from an infected animal but occasionally by other forms of contact. Rabies is almost invariably **fatal** if post-exposure prophylaxis is not administered prior to the onset of severe symptoms. It is a significant killer of livestock in some countries.

The rabies virus travels to the brain by following the peripheral nerves. The incubation period of the disease depends on how far the virus must travel to reach the central nervous system, usually taking a few months. Once the infection reaches the central nervous system and symptoms begin to show, the infection is practically untreatable and usually fatal within days.

Animals most likely to transmit rabies in the United States include bats, coyotes, foxes, raccoons and skunks. In Puerto Rico Mongooses are the principal carriers.

Once a person begins showing signs and symptoms of rabies, the disease is nearly always fatal. For that reason, vaccines to stop the rabies virus from infecting the body are given to anyone who may have a risk of contracting rabies.

Rabies is 100% preventable, yet results in an estimated 55,000 deaths each year around the world.

Despite that, an estimated 30,000-40,000 people are exposed to rabies each year in the United States and need to get anti-rabies shots.

TREATMENT FOR PEOPLE BITTEN BY ANIMALS WITH RABIES

If you've been bitten by an animal that is known to have rabies, you must receive a series of shots to prevent the rabies virus from infecting you. If the animal that bit you can't be found, it may be safest to assume that the animal has rabies. But this will depend on several factors, such as the type of animal and the situation in which the bite occurred.

Rabies shots include:

- A fast-acting shot to prevent the virus from infecting you. This injection is given near the area where the animal bit you as soon as possible after the bite.
- A series of rabies vaccines to help your body learn to identify and fight the rabies virus. Rabies vaccines are given as injections in your arm. You receive six injections over 28 days.

STEPS TO FOLLOW AFTER BEING BITTEN



1. **Report the incident** to Forest Service personnel, they will lead you thru these steps and have to take prevention actions to protect other visitors.
2. **Wash your wound** with soap and water for 10 minutes. This may help wash away the virus.
3. **Get medical attention** immediately in the nearest hospital or health service provider.
4. **Be sure that your incident is reported** to the Puerto Rico Health Department by filing the Bite Report form, requested by Administrative Order 259.
5. **Follow all the instructions** provided by the Environmental Health Inspector.
6. **The PR Health Department must provide** the post exposure vaccines. If you are travelling back home, be sure to have copies of all the treatment documents and references so you continue with them.
7. **Remember** you should take the complete treatment.

To report a Mongoose attacks or to get more information about how to get immediate medical attention call:

(Monday thru Friday 8-4:30pm)

911

El Yunque National Forest

787-888-1880

PR Health Department

787-692-2175