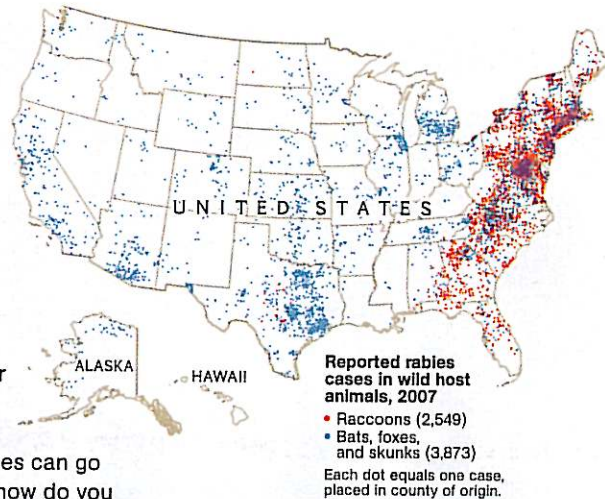


HEALTH

Rabies Bites It kills at least 50,000 people worldwide each year, mostly children. Dogs are the main culprits. But in the United States, where pet vaccination and stray-dog-control programs are strong, rabies has a different face: Raccoons and skunks are by far the top four-legged viral hosts.

Scientists are standing up to these rabid mammals. Since the early 1990s more than a hundred million doses of oral vaccine have been spread in problem areas to create buffer zones. Distribution continues. At the same time, another disease host is showing teeth. Widespread and mobile, bats are directly implicated in 20 of the 25 U.S. human rabies deaths since 1997. (Bat bites can go unnoticed, especially if the victim is asleep.) So how do you vaccinate on the wing? Ideas range from genetically modified insect prey to a parasite for drug delivery, says rabies expert Charles Rupprecht of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Meanwhile, up to 40,000 U.S. bite victims yearly rely on a six-shot regimen in case of infection. Doctors who administer the drugs quickly haven't lost a patient yet. —Jennifer S. Holland



Vaccine bait



This one is healthy, but raccoons are the top U.S. rabies hosts. Bats are number two. Dogs rank low, just above cattle.