Dead squirrel found in Menlo Park infected with West Nile virus

By Bonnie Eslinger
Daily News Staff Writer
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The West Nile virus was detected in the body of a gray squirrel found in Menlo Park earlier this month, a vector control official announced Monday.

A hawk also tested positive for the virus in June, said Angie Nakano, a vector ecologist with San Mateo County Mosquito and Vector Control.

Transmitted through the bite of an infected mosquito, the West Nile virus tends to flare up between the spring and fall, Nakano said, adding that "the virus and mosquitoes multiply faster when it's warmer."

The county's two recent animal infections are cause for concern, but not panic, Nakano said. To help determine whether there is an elevated risk for the disease, she said vector control staff set additional mosquito traps in the neighborhood where the positive hawk was found, but found no mosquitoes infected with the virus. Similarly, extra traps were set up near where the squirrel was found; results should be available in about a week.

The agency has not disclosed the neighborhoods where the infected animals were found.

Although humans can be infected by the potentially deadly disease, there have been no reported human cases in San Mateo County since the first case in 2005, Nakano said.

Of the 3,146 people infected since 2004 by the West Nile virus in California, 110 have died from the disease, according to the California Department of Public Health’s website. There have been six reports of human infections in 2012, but no fatalities to date.

Statewide this year, West Nile virus has been found in 593 mosquito pools, 432 dead birds and 19 chickens.

The squirrel found in Menlo Park was the first one in California determined to have contracted West Nile virus, according to state data posted on July 20.

The Western gray squirrel, which already was dead when found, had a low level of the virus, an indication that it was not infected recently, according to San Mateo County's vector agency. Because tree squirrels don’t travel far, the infection was probably acquired in or near Menlo Park, though the agency has not determined for certain that the virus killed it.

Precautions should be taken to avoid mosquito bites, including eliminating sources of standing water, wearing repellent in areas with a lot of mosquitoes, and staying covered or inside during dawn and dusk, according to the agency. Residents frequently bitten by mosquitoes around their home or elsewhere should contact the district at 650-344-8592.

Email Bonnie Eslinger at beslinger@dailynewsgroup.com; follow her at twitter.com/bonnieeslinger.