

Plague in Free-ranging Mammals in Western North Dakota

Authors: Dyer, N. W., and Huffman, L. E.

Source: Journal of Wildlife Diseases, 35(3) : 600-602

Published By: Wildlife Disease Association

URL: <https://doi.org/10.7589/0090-3558-35.3.600>

BioOne Complete (complete.BioOne.org) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.

Plague in Free-ranging Mammals in Western North Dakota

N. W. Dyer,^{1,3} and L. E. Huffman² ¹Department of Veterinary and Microbiological Sciences, Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory, North Dakota State University, Fargo, North Dakota 58105, USA; ²USDA/APHIS Animal Damage Control, Bismarck, North Dakota 58501, USA; and ³Corresponding author (e-mail: ndyer@prairie.nodak.edu).

ABSTRACT: From July through October of 1996, 48 blood samples were collected from coyotes (*Canis latrans*), badgers (*Taxidea taxus*), and raccoons (*Procyon lotor*) in western North Dakota (USA) for the purposes of determining antibody titers to the plague bacterium, *Yersinia pestis*. The passive hemagglutination paper-strip blood-sampling technique was utilized with hemagglutination inhibition controls. Two positive samples were obtained from McKenzie county, one from a coyote with a titer of 1:64 and one from a badger with a titer of 1:256. Considering coyote and badger population dynamics, this study documents plague in western North Dakota.

Key words: Badger, *Canis latrans*, coyote, plague, *Taxidea taxus*, *Yersinia pestis*, survey.

Each decade since the mid-1940's has seen an increase in the number of reported cases of human plague in the United States and in the number of states reporting these cases. From 1944 to 1953, nine human cases of plague were reported from California, New Mexico, and Arizona. In sharp contrast, from 1984 to 1993, 125 cases of human plague were reported and these originated from all states west of the Mississippi except North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1994). While some of this increase may be explained by improved surveillance methods and better diagnostic techniques, there is an apparent mounting risk to humans in the Great Plains and western states. This study documents serologic evidence of *Yersinia pestis* in free-ranging mammals in western North Dakota.

Animals from 11 counties in western North Dakota were sampled (47° to 49°N, 101° to 104°W). This area is characteristic of the rolling grasslands of the northern Great Plains and includes the rugged terrain of Theodore Roosevelt National Park and the Little Missouri National Grass-

land. From July through October of 1996, five United States Department of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Animal Damage Control (USDA/APHIS/ADC, Bismarck, North Dakota, USA) specialists were supplied with Nobuto paper strips (Toyo Roshi Kaisha, Ltd., Tokyo, Japan) by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA), for the purpose of obtaining blood samples to determine *Y. pestis* titers in harvested animals. Once dipped in the animal's blood and air dried, the strip was sealed in a labeled envelope and mailed to the North Dakota State University Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory (NDSU-VDL, Fargo, North Dakota, USA) at the end of each week. There the samples were held in a conventional freezer and mailed in groups of ≥ 10 to CDC. Serology for antibody to *Y. pestis* was determined by the passive hemagglutination paper-strip blood-sampling technique as previously described (Wolff and Hudson, 1974). Briefly, a small section of the blood saturated strip was extracted overnight at 4 C (0.4 ml of borate buffer at pH 8.0). The buffer and strip were then complement inactivated at 56 C for 30 min. The extract was adsorbed to washed sheep red blood cells (1:10, vol/vol) for 20 min at room temperature. Supernatants were tested for antibody to the water-soluble fraction 1A envelope protein of *Y. pestis* following centrifugation. Passive hemagglutination tests and hemagglutination inhibition controls were those recommended in the protocol described by the World Health Organization (WHO, 1970). A minimal provable titer for whole blood was 1:128. This titer was determined using deletions for extraction, passive hemagglutination microtechniques, and passive hem-

agglutination inhibition controls. The generally accepted diagnostic titer is 1:16.

Forty coyotes (*Canis latrans*), five badgers (*Taxidea taxus*), and three raccoons (*Procyon lotor*) were sampled. Of the 40 coyotes, 14 were juvenile and eight were adults. Two animals, ages unknown, were seropositive; a coyote with a titer of 1:64 and a badger with a titer of 1:256. These were collected in McKenzie county, (North Dakota, 103° to 104°W, 47°30' to 48°N). Identification of seropositive animals in one county on the North Dakota/Montana border is a strong indication that *Y. pestis* is present in western North Dakota. The primary reservoir may be black-tailed prairie dogs (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) located on both state and private lands in the area. Both white-tailed prairie dogs (*Cynomys leucurus*) (Ubico et al., 1988), and Gunnison's prairie dogs (*Cynomys gunnisoni*) (Cully et al., 1997) are reported sylvatic reservoirs for *Y. pestis*, experiencing sporadic epizootics in which significant die-offs may nearly decimate large colonies. Predatory species such as coyote and badger, which may hunt or simply visit plague affected colonies very likely become infected by the organism if infested by carrier fleas or when feeding on infected prey. While clinical disease associated with *Y. pestis* is well known in domestic cats (Raffo et al., 1986; Eidson et al., 1991), and reported in dogs (Orloski and Eidson, 1995), serologic studies of wild populations, such as the coyote and badger, indicate that certain species seroconvert in the absence of clinical disease (Clover et al., 1989). Both badgers (Messick et al., 1983) and coyotes (Thomas and Hughes, 1992) have been identified as sentinels for plague in previous studies. The seropositive coyote and badger from McKenzie county were apparently clinically normal at the time of harvesting by USDA/APHIS/ADC specialists.

The seropositive animals were taken within 1.6 km of each other in the east central portion of McKenzie county about 80 km east of the Montana border. Studies

indicate coyote home ranges vary from 3.2 to 34 km² (Andelt and Gipson, 1979, Gese et al., 1988). Similar studies on badgers estimate home ranges from 1.6 to 20.8 km² (Lindzey, 1971; Messick and Hornocker, 1981). Considering these ranges and the distance of the collection site from the Montana border, the coyote and badger were probably North Dakota residents and exposed to the bacteria within the confines of the state.

Trappers, wildlife biologists, and hunters should be aware of the presence of *Y. pestis* in the West, and handle wildlife accordingly. This is the first documentation of seropositive animals in North Dakota and while the state has had no reported cases of human plague, serologic evidence of the organism within resident wild populations makes such an occurrence possible.

The authors acknowledge the considerable contribution of K. Gage and L. Cater for determination of *Y. pestis* antibody titers from Nobuto strips.

LITERATURE CITED

- ANDELT, W. F., AND P. S. GIPSON. 1979. Home range, activity, and daily movements of coyotes. *The Journal of Wildlife Management* 43: 944-951.
- CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION. 1994. Human plague in the United States 1993-1994. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 43: 243-246.
- CLOVER, J. R., T. D. HOFSTRA, B. G. KULURIS, M. T. SHROEDER, B. C. NELSON, A. M. BARNES, AND R. G. BOTZLER. 1989. Serologic evidence of *Yersinia pestis* infection in small mammals and bears from a temperate rainforest of north coastal California. *Journal of Wildlife Diseases* 25: 52-60.
- CULLY, J. F., A. M. BARNES, T. J. QUAN, AND G. MAUPIN. 1997. Dynamics of plague in a Gunnison's prairie dog colony complex from New Mexico. *Journal of Wildlife Diseases* 33: 706-719.
- EIDSON, M., J. P. THILSTED, AND O. J. ROLLAG. 1991. Clinical, clinicopathologic, and pathologic features of plague in cats: 119 cases (1977-1988). *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 199: 1191-1197.
- GESE, E. M., O. J. RANGSTAD, AND W. R. MYTTON. 1988. Home range and habitat use of coyotes in southeastern Colorado. *The Journal of Wildlife Management* 52: 640-646.

- LINDZEY, F. G. 1971. Ecology of badgers in Curlew Valley, Utah and Idaho with emphasis on movement and activity patterns. M.S. Thesis, Utah State University, Logan, Utah, 50 pp.
- MESSICK, J. P., AND M. G. HORNOCKER. 1981. Ecology of the badger in southwestern Idaho. *Wildlife Monographs* 76: 1-53.
- , G. W. SMITH, AND A. M. BARNES. 1983. Serologic testing of badgers to monitor plague in southwestern Idaho. *Journal of Wildlife Diseases* 19: 1-6.
- ORLOSKI, K. A., AND M. EIDSON. 1995. *Yersinia pestis* infection in three dogs. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 207: 316-318.
- RAFLO, N. L. 1986. Bubonic plague in a cat. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 188: 534-535.
- THOMAS, C. U., AND P. E. HUGHES. 1992. Plague surveillance by serological testing of coyotes (*Canis latrans*) in Los Angeles county, California. *Journal of Wildlife Diseases* 28: 610-613.
- UBICO, S. R., G. O. MAUPIN, K. A. FAGERSTONE, AND R. G. MCLEAN. 1988. A plague epizootic in the white-tailed prairie dogs (*Cynomys leucurus*) of Meeteetse, Wyoming. *Journal of Wildlife Diseases* 24: 399-406.
- WOLFF, K. L., AND B. W. HUDSON. 1974. Paper-strip blood sampling technique for the detection of antibody to the plague organism *Yersinia pestis*. *Applied Microbiology* 28: 323-325.
- WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION (WHO). 1970. Passive hemagglutination test. In WHO Technical Representative Service. No. 447. Geneva, Switzerland, pp. 23-25.

Received for publication 3 March 1998.