

Mild winter, wet spring provide ideal conditions for disease-carrying ticks: experts

By Sean Sauro LNP



An adult female lone star tick is distinguished by a white dot or "lone star" on its back. The nymph and adult females most frequently bite humans.

The first local tick bite of 2020 was reported in January, months earlier than normal — a signal to Rita Rhoads that the disease-carrying arachnids will be out in abundance this year.

“There was no good reason they should be getting a tick bite that soon,” said Rhoads, a Georgetown nurse practitioner.

And Lancaster County scientists were able to back her claim, explaining recent ideal weather conditions are likely to contribute to a larger-than-normal population of ticks, which can transmit illnesses like Lyme disease.

Professor John Wallace, a Millersville University entomologist, said last winter was mild in terms of both temperatures and snowfall, which likely allowed a larger number of the blood-sucking parasites to survive.

“We depend on cold winters to knock these pest populations back,” Wallace said.

And according to David Bowne, an Elizabethtown College biologist, this year’s rainy spring also hasn’t helped to control those populations. Young ticks, called nymphs, are at risk of drying out and dying this time of year, but recent wet weather has prevented that, he said.

Ticks carry disease, including Lyme, which can cause fever, chills, headache, fatigue, and muscle and joint ache. The illness worsens, if left untreated, to cause symptoms like irregular heartbeats and brain swelling, according to officials at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Bowne pointed out that CDC data placed Lancaster County “right in the hot zone for Lyme disease risk.”

The experts explained that ticks typically climb high grass and other plants before stretching out their arms and latching onto hosts — animals and humans. The pests then sink their mouth parts into the hosts and begin their blood feasts. It’s during feeding that Lyme and other illnesses are transmitted, they said.

Rhoads is asking prospective hikers and trail goers to go online to seek out information about insect repellents, proper outdoor attire and other ways to avoid tick bites. Remaining on designated trails and avoiding traipsing through the woods should help, she said.

“Don’t just think about the woods,” she said, explaining ticks live in urban and suburban areas, too. “Think about your yard.”