

Rabies outbreak jumps species in Taiwan

July 31 2013

Pet owners in Taiwan were rushing to inoculate their animals on Wednesday after the first case of rabies in a shrew was confirmed, fuelling fears that an outbreak of the disease is spreading between species.

Health authorities on the island have been battling to contain a [rabies](#) outbreak among so-called ferret-[badgers](#), with at least 18 cases among the weasel-like animals confirmed so far.

On Wednesday officials confirmed the disease had spread to a [shrew](#), fuelling fears that it could mutate further to affect domestic pets—greatly increasing the risk to humans.

In an area of Kaohsiung, the biggest city in the island's south, more than 500 people took their pets to be vaccinated—though only 380 doses were available, according to the Taipei-based China Times.

The newspaper also reported that a group of villagers found two masked palm civets—small, nocturnal carnivores related to the [mongoose](#)—and beat them to death on Tuesday.

In northern Keelung city, police said they had received nearly 100 phone calls from residents following the discovery of a dead ferret-badger.

Yen Shen-horng, a biology professor at Sun Yat-sen University in Kaohsiung, said there was "no need to panic"—but added it was the first known instance of a shrew contracting rabies and indicated that the virus

may have mutated.

The infected shrew was caught in a home in Taitung county on July 25.

Chang Shu-hsien, the chief for the Bureau of Animal and Plant Health Inspection and Quarantine, told reporters that the shrew could have been bitten by an infected ferret-badger.

Taiwan is now listed as a rabies-affected area by the Paris-headquartered World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) after the island confirmed its first outbreak since 1959 on July 17.

The Taipei city government has set up a contingent unit tasked with monitoring rabies outbreaks, with plans to purchase more than 50,000 doses of vaccines before the end of August.

Only 10 countries and regions in the world are listed as rabies-free. Some 55,000 people die of the disease worldwide every year.

Symptoms in humans include seizures, partial paralysis, fever and brain inflammation, or encephalitis.

There is no known treatment to cure rabies once the infection has taken hold.

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