

Warm-blooded beware: Tick season is upon us



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF DARRELL GLOVER



Pam Asheton Listening to the Land

Too long a winter describes almost too well last year's frigid, hard-on-wildlife season that's so reluctantly departing. Forest and meadows still are piled high with ice and snowflakes, way too slowly receding and melting. Dermacentor albipictus - hard bodied ticks, and opportunistic parasites, have flourished.

Bragg Creek veterinarian Judith Samson-French confirmed her Masters research studies in parasitology, explaining, "Ticks move with the receding snow line, so [they're] found at lower altitude now and later in the spring at higher altitudes, as snow recedes."

She recalls parasites "absolutely rampant on moose in certain areas causing so much hair loss, we called them ghost moose as they were mostly bald. On bighorn

sheep, we always found lots of ticks especially along the spine area in the spring time when we were trapping them at Ram Mountain."

Hosts equally can be caribou (particular sufferers, moose too, elk, and our local specialists, white-tail and mule deer. Today's photograph is a well-gorged individual combed from a wild horse colt, where over 200 were removed in one grooming session.

"Parasites benefit from not killing their hosts, since that implies suicide for them. If the host has poor immune system or poor body condition (as can happen after this last harsh winter); parasite loads are harmful to the hosts, and ultimately for the parasites themselves," this talented vet explains in an email.

Dr William Samuel rates seriously up there in tick expertise, passing on knowledge at the University of Alberta (with helpful research on this online link at http://www.ccwhc.ca/wildlife_health_topics/winter_tick/wintertick.php).

His writing is spare and scholarly, a true scientist, noting with detachment a female adult moose may have 30,000 of these insects on board while one female reindeer loaded up with 400,000 (who

counted I wonder, what a truly terrible assignment!). As April finally begins to warm up, I take note of his remark that, "Warm temperatures, low precipitation and absence of snow cover in April favour survival of adult ticks. Thus, these weather conditions may predict epidemic disease in the following winter and spring." Oh joy.

Ticks can transfer on to dogs, also humans, which can result in Lyme's disease, a multi-faceted number that really wants early diagnosis and treatment. The longer term untreated developments can be truly life-changing. If you're hiking along the foothills and backcountry and through brush areas, it's worth checking afterwards in your clothes and any exposed skin for these insect visitors. Removing them needs care; as teenagers we used to love dipping a cotton bud in our father's gin, laying atop the insect, counting to 60 and very carefully lifting the inebriated limp insect away from our dog with tweezers. I didn't, I admit, much like looking at them! and my stomach still heaves doing the same operation even now.

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