

Mild winter means more mosquitoes, West Nile warning

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Chico >> After three to four months hibernating under porches and in other dry areas, Western malaria mosquitoes are hungry, aggressive and coming out in greater numbers than usual.

While the bites are painful, Western malaria mosquitoes don't pose a health risk; malaria has been eradicated in the United States, and this species doesn't carry the West Nile virus or any other contagious diseases. A warm winter allowed more of the population to survive hibernation than usual, said Butte County Mosquito and Vector Control District Manager Matthew Ball.

What has Ball worried is the Northern house mosquito and the encephalitis mosquito, which are both vectors for West Nile virus that are being seen now.

"We strongly believe this is going to be a bad mosquito season and possibly a bad West Nile season," he said.

The best way to avoid the disease carriers is to take care of standing water, where the mosquito larvae grows into adults. Clean out bird baths, dump outdoor buckets, jugs and bottles that hold water and clean out unused pools.

Wearing bug spray with DEET and loose, light-colored clothing is also recommended.

The vector control district has mosquito fish available, for free, at its offices in Chico at 444 Otterson Drive and in Oroville at 5117 Larkin Road. Tanks of the fish will be available at other locations, mostly feed stores, throughout the county in May.

"An adult mosquito fish can eat 200 to 400 larvae per day," Ball said.

Those fish can be used in ponds, horse troughs and other sustainable standing water sources, he said.

The vector control district also sprays chemicals to kill both adult and larval mosquitoes, but weather conditions have to be right, and Ball doesn't expect to begin fogging until at least late May.

The warm weather and lack of water sources that come with the drought are a major factor in the increase in mosquitoes, Ball said.

For the West Nile virus especially, the lack of water pushes bird populations to fewer water sources which can increase the spread of the virus. The district has seen an increase in the virus over the last four years and Ball expects to see that trend continue.

Another challenge the vector control district is facing is keeping three newly arrived species of disease-carrying mosquitoes out of Butte County.

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The yellow fever mosquito was first found in the state in 2013, and the Australian backyard mosquito was found in California last year, Ball said. A third disease-carrying species, the Asian tiger mosquito was first seen in 2011 in the Central Valley.

These mosquitoes carry Dengue fever, the chikungunya virus and yellow fever.

Right now the three species haven't made it into Butte County, but Ball and the vector control district look for the species in mosquito traps throughout the county to find and kill them before any population can establish itself.

"These aren't easy populations to eradicate," Ball said.