Untimely death of Steve Irwin puts focus on Treasure Coast, stingray injuries

By ED KILLER
edward.killer@scripps.com
September 22, 2006

PORT ST. LUCIE — Gary Goodwin loves to fish the shallow waters of the Indian River Lagoon, but after an incident last year he does so from a kayak more often than not.

The reason?

On Nov. 5, 2005, Goodwin felt the sharp stab of a stingray barb jab into the instep of his right foot.

"It's brutal — I've never felt anything like it," said Goodwin, 42, of Stuart. "That barb went about three inches into my foot and broke off. Five days at Martin Memorial and $39,000 later, I've got a memory I'll never forget."

Stingrays, close relatives of sharks, have recently received a lot of attention following the abnormal and untimely death of television personality Steve "Crocodile Hunter" Irwin. An estimated 300 million viewers worldwide watched Wednesday's memorial service for the wildlife educator.

Deaths like Irwin's are extremely rare — a stingray barb plunged into his chest earlier this month in Australia. But encounters with stingrays in Treasure Coast waters are fairly common and on occasion can have painful consequences.

Goodwin was wade fishing near Walton Road and Indian River Drive and thought he was doing all the right things to prevent a sting.

"I had my feet on the floor, shuffling along," he said. "But it wasn't your typical 'step on the stingray' thing. I guess it was lying in the water with its tail pointed in my direction and I guess I kind of kicked the tail end of it."

The dagger-like, barbed stinger went through his wading boot. He then faced nearly a quarter-mile walk back to his truck and almost passed out because of the pain.

Goodwin called a friend to come over and help him clean out the wound. He said his friend cut a 4-inch gash into his foot to try to remove the barb before driving him to the emergency room. Once there, hot towels were his only reprieve from pain as he waited for treatment.

He could feel part of the barb still jammed deep in the wound, but it took an X-ray to confirm it.

"The ER doctor started working on me at about 9 p.m. and worked on trying to get the rest of the barb out until 3 a.m. before giving up," Goodwin said. "He had to work on it the next day to get the rest of the stinger out."

Not all stingray injuries occur to the feet or ankles.

Dr. Ralph Robbins, of Port St. Lucie, recalled a fishing trip over 20 years ago where he, too, was stung.

"It was excruciating, unbearable pain," said Robbins who was nicked through a pair of heavy gloves on his ring finger as he attempted to remove two stingrays from a double-hook surf fishing rig.

"Not a day goes by that I'm not reminded of it."

Dr. Joe Schoppe, of Stuart Podiatry Center, said his practice treats about two stingray injuries a year and said it is critical to get the wound entirely cleaned out to prevent infection.

"You have to let it heal from the inside out," Schoppe said. "If the wound is sutured up too soon, you're asking for trouble.

"It can be a long-standing wound for some people."

The venom in the stinger denatures proteins in the wound site and that begins the infection, Schoppe said. He also said that secondary organisms such as vibrio vulnificus can be associated with the stinger and create a life-threatening situation with respect to blood poisoning and even gangrene.

Capt. Marcia Foosaner, of Palm City, had a run-in in March while wade fishing with a client on the flats near Sailfish Point. It was the first time in 17 years of wade fishing that she was injured by one.

"I always walk carefully, slowly and shuffle and will even poke around on the bottom with my rod tip sometimes," she said.
Foosaner has observed large stingrays creating a shallow hole in the sand when they "fluff." She stepped in what she believes was one of those holes.

"I was talking to my client, telling him where to cast and slipped into the soft spot," Foosaner said. "I lost my balance a little bit. As I tried to lift my foot out of the hole, I steered on him. He wasn't in the hole, but I guess he was lying just outside of it."

Foosaner had a small gash in her neoprene wading boots and the barb struck her foot. She kept fishing and said as long as her foot was in the water, it wasn't too painful. However, she did need two different types of antibiotics to treat an infection that developed.

**STINGRAY FACTS**

There are over 200 species of stingrays worldwide.

The Treasure Coast is home to three species of "benthic" stingrays, or rays that lie on the bottom — they are the southern stingray, Atlantic stingray and bullnose stingray.

Wade fishermen, cast netters, jet skiers, kayakers, dock builders and other outdoors enthusiasts are instructed to shuffle feet in order to "warn" or "bump" a stingray out of the way.

The southern stingray can grow to more than six feet across the wingspan and weigh almost 200 pounds, but in South Florida are most often about one or two feet across.

Stingrays are eaten by many species of sharks.

The 1,290-pound world record hammerhead shark recently caught in Boca Grande Pass ate a 22-pound live stingray used as bait.

Each year about 1,500 stingray injuries occur in the United States.

**STINGRAY SCIENCE**

Dr. Steve Kajiura of the biological sciences department at Florida Atlantic University has begun a promising project with stingrays.

"We started a project to examine what the effects of stingray venom is about two days before Steve Irwin's death," Kajiura said. "There really hasn't been a lot of research done on the venom, which is a protein."

Kajiura said he and his team have worked on stingray sensory systems discovering that their sense of smell is "about average" and perhaps not that important. Eyesight may not be that important either since they can never see what they are eating.

"But we are finding they have a very advanced electro-sensory system and are trying to understand that better," he said.

To learn more visit www.science.fau.edu/sharklab/ on the Web.

**STINGRAY FIRST AID**

The business end of a stingray can be a painful proposition. Here's what to do.

Get injured person out of the water and have them lie down. If vomiting, lie on side.

Stop any bleeding by applying pressure to the area and attempt to remove stinger or barb. If no pain, treat as a laceration.

If pain, immerse injured area in water as hot as victim can tolerate, which will help neutralizes pain of venom. Have person checked by a doctor, as any infection can lead to death from blood poisoning.

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