



Publication: DS 04-016
Last Revised: March 2015

Forestry and Agrifoods Agency
Animal Health Division
P.O. Box 7400
St. John's, NL
A1E 3Y5

t 709.729.6879
f 709.729.0055

animalhealthdivision@gov.nl.ca



Rabies in Labrador



What is Rabies?

Rabies is a deadly viral disease of the brain spread by the bite of an infected mammal. It is commonly seen in Labrador in cycles of unpredictable length (generally 3-5 years), though we can still see individual cases between peak years. The primary carriers of the disease are red and white (Arctic) foxes. Other wild animals, such as bats, may also carry the disease. In 2004, a little brown bat tested positive for rabies in Labrador.

Rabid animals can bite or scratch people, foxes, dogs, cats, wolves, caribou, and other mammals, potentially passing on the virus. Once bitten by an animal with rabies, it usually takes two weeks to six months before the exposed animal shows disease symptoms. In some cases the time between bite and symptoms can be as short as four days or as long as one year. Once the symptoms start to appear, the animal will usually die within 10 days.

What are the Symptoms?

The symptoms of rabies include a change in behaviour, such as from friendly to aggressive or from cautious to fearless. A dog that had a good temper may start acting mean; while a fox that would normally not be seen in a town during the daytime might be seen running around between houses and fighting with dogs.

Animals with rabies may start biting and chewing more. This could include biting at people and animals, or biting and chewing at skidoos, wood, stones, buildings, etc., sometimes to the point that they break their teeth. The animals may also bite themselves, usually at the site of the original wound.

Another possible sign is the presence of porcupine quills in the face. Animals normally wary of porcupines may approach them when rabid.

Rabid animals may also be observed staggering, drooling, have a change in voice or paralysis of part of the body (such as a hind leg).

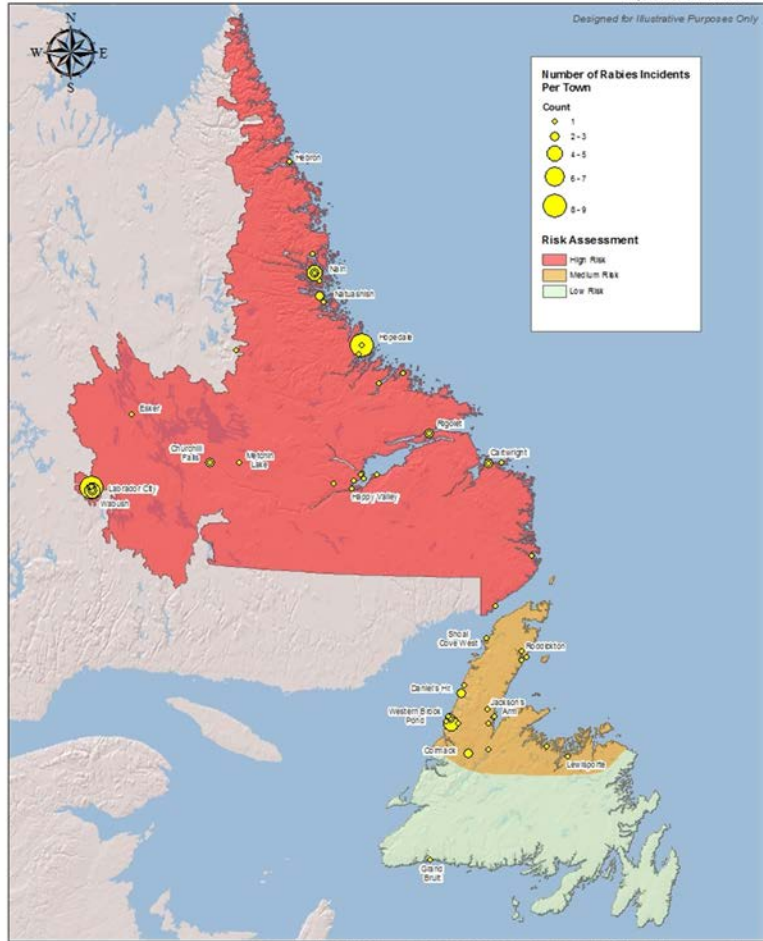


Where is it Found?

Historical records suggest that rabies has been in Labrador as long as people can remember. In any one outbreak it is difficult to predict how far the virus will spread and how many communities will be affected.

Both the Island of Newfoundland and the mainland portion of Labrador have had rabies outbreaks in the past. The figure on the following page is a detailed map containing all the sites of confirmed rabies cases, as well as risk zones for rabies exposure based on historical accounts. We do not see many cases in outbreak years (commonly 10-20), but with the large size of Labrador and the small human population, there is no doubt that hundreds of cases go unseen or unreported during these outbreaks.

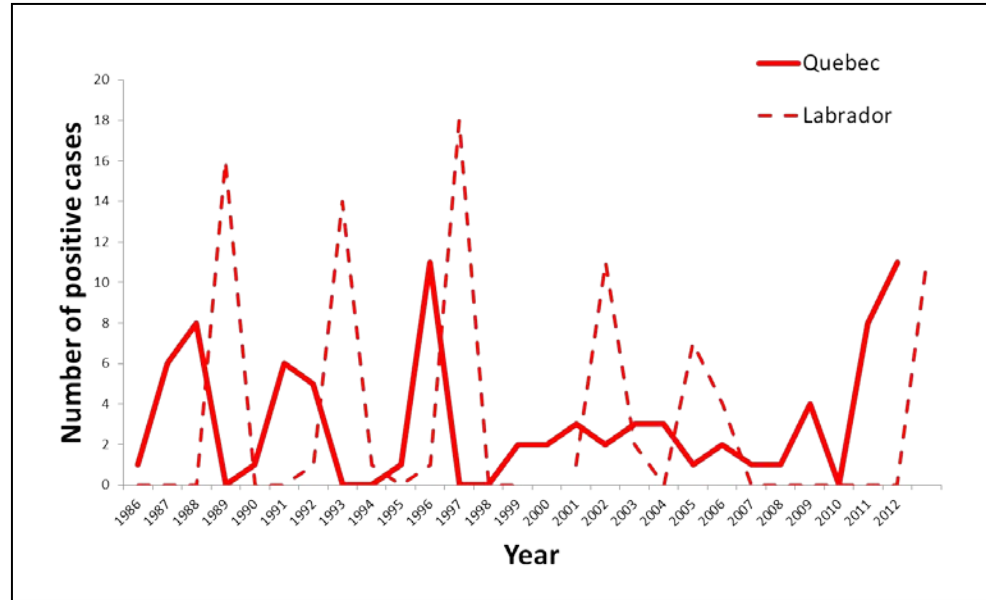
Risk Assessment Areas for Rabies Incidents in Newfoundland and Labrador 1954 - 2013



File location: M:\CR\BKA\Shared\Agrifoods\LR\SIGIS\Animal Health\Rabies\Rabies Risk Assessment_NL.mxd

When fox populations are high, hungry foxes may be seen around communities as they look for food. This type of behaviour is understandable and should not be considered a sign of rabies. However, rabies is also seen more often in years with an elevated fox population, so it may happen that the conditions that bring foxes closer to communities (hunger) also bring rabid animals closer.

Rabies also moves in waves from Nunavut down through northern Quebec and into Labrador. As seen in the following graph, cases in northern Quebec usually precede those in Labrador.



What Can I Do?

Keep your pets under control at all times.

It may be impossible to know if a pet was exposed to a rabid animal if it is left to run loose in the community.

Have your dogs and cats vaccinated against rabies.

The Forestry and Agrifoods Agency provides vaccine to public health officials in coastal communities, and subsidizes vaccination through private veterinarians where they operate. It also supports the Chinook Project, a veterinary outreach program of the Atlantic Veterinary College that provides services for Labrador communities.

Do not feed or otherwise encourage wild animals to be friendly with people.

The natural fear that wild animals have of humans protects them as well as ourselves. Any change in this predictable behaviour can result in human injury or death to a wild animal.

If you or someone else has been bitten by a wild animal or pet:

Wash the area well with soap (and disinfectant if available) and water. Contact the local Public Health Nurse or a doctor to determine what should be done next. If the bite was from a domestic animal, the animal is usually held for observation for 10 days. ***In the case of bats, any encounter with a bat should be reported, including the finding of a bat in the room of a sleeping child or anyone else who may not be able to state for sure that they had contact with the bat.***

Report all sightings of possibly rabid animals to local officials.

This could be to your provincial Conservation Officer, Public Health Nurse, police detachment, veterinarian or municipal council. If an animal must be shot, try to avoid hitting the head as the brain will be needed for laboratory testing.

Rabies is a “named disease,” meaning that, by provincial law, all suspicious cases must be reported to provincial officials (Conservation Officer or Chief Veterinary Officer).

Additional Information

Forestry and Agrifoods Agency website:

www.nr.gov.nl.ca/rabies

This site contains the information in this pamphlet, as well as a list of all historical cases reported in this province and links to other sites that have valuable information on this disease. Posters on rabies education are also available upon request in English, Inuttitut and Innu-aimun.

A children’s book on rabies has been written that is available in English, Innu-aimun, Inuttitut and French. For more information regarding these publications, please contact the Animal Health Division.

