



Wildlife Diseases FACTSHEET

Bat Rabies in Newfoundland and Labrador

What is rabies?

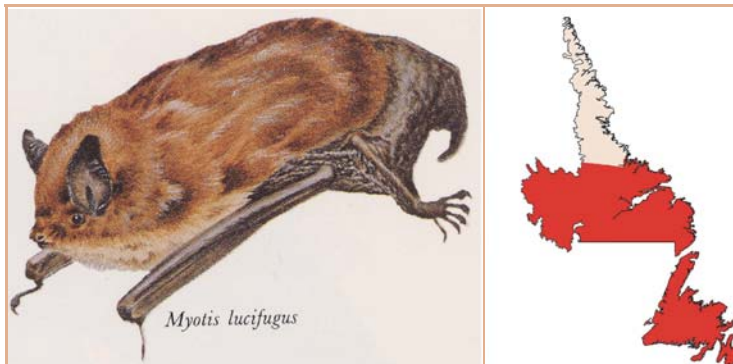
Rabies is a deadly viral disease of the brain, spread by the bite of infected mammals. It is most commonly spread by foxes in this province though other wild animals such as bats may carry the disease. Sick foxes or bats can bite other wild (e.g. foxes, wolves, coyotes, caribou, moose, bear) or domestic animals (e.g. dogs, cats, horses, cattle, sheep) and people and make them sick.

Once bitten by an animal with rabies it can take from two weeks to six months before the animal or person shows signs of the disease. Though uncommon, this period can be as short as 4 days or as long as a year or more. Once the signs appear the animal or person is usually dead within 10-14 days.

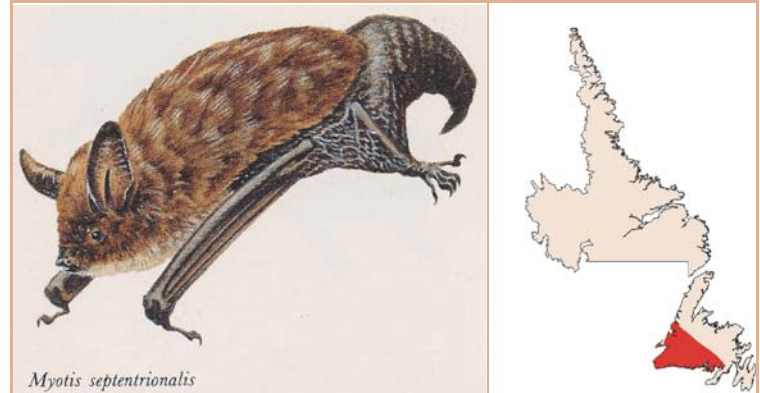
People bitten by a potentially rabid animal can receive treatment that will prevent the disease if given early enough. This factsheet is being written to advise people of the risks associated with bats in this province.

Which bats exist in this province?

The most common bat is the Little Brown Bat (*Myotis lucifugus*) though the Northern Long-Eared Bat (*Myotis septentrionalis*) is also reported in a limited range and there is a single report of a Hoary Bat (*Lasiurus cinereus*).



Little Brown Bat and approximate distribution in province



Northern Long-Eared Bat and approximate distribution in province

Where has bat rabies been found?

Wherever there are bats there is usually bat rabies. Rabies itself probably originated from bats many thousands of years ago. Within any group of bats, rabies probably exists at a very low level, usually less than 1% of the population however if a sick bat infects another animal the consequences can be fatal.

Bat rabies has been reported in every province of Canada. In Atlantic Canada, since 2000, the following cases of bat rabies have been seen:

Province	Cat	Horse	Bat
NL			(1) 2004
PEI	(1) 2004		
NS	(1) 2003		(1) 2000
NB		(1) 2004	(2) 2000 (1) 2001 (1) 2003

In Newfoundland and Labrador we now have two recorded cases of bat rabies. The first was in a fox found dead near Grand Bruit in 1989, the second was in a Little Brown Bat removed from a house in Cartwright in 2004.

Copies of this and other publications may be obtained from the Department's Regional Offices, the factsheet author or by visiting our website at <http://www.gov.nl.ca/agric/>.





Cases of bat rabies in
Newfoundland & Labrador

What does a rabid bat look like?

Rabies in animals is usually characterized by a dramatic change in behaviour and incoordination. In bats this can mean flying around in the daytime, flying in someone's house or flapping around on the ground. If a cat brings a bat home this might mean that the bat was unable to escape the cat due to rabies. In some cases rabid bats show no change in behaviour.

How important is bat rabies?

Rabies spread by land animals (foxes, dogs, raccoons) is a greater threat to people than bat rabies. This is because these animals more commonly encounter people or our domestic animals, and their bites are usually much deeper and therefore better able to cause infection. However, there are more cases of human death due to bat rabies in Canada and the US than any other animal. The most common reason being that an encounter with a bat was not recognized or seen as being important and therefore not reported to public health officials for follow up.

Since 1985, three people have died in Canada from bat rabies. In 1985 a young man encountered a bat in a tent near Fort McMurray (Alberta); in 2000 a young boy encountered a bat in a cabin north of Montreal, and in 2003 a man from Vancouver who was an avid hiker died of bat rabies though the actual means of contact with a bat was never identified.

The small bats that we have are less likely to cause illness as they have very small teeth which do not easily penetrate our skin. However the risk does exist and, as seen by the confirmed cases in domestic animals in Atlantic Canada, we must also be concerned about the impact of bat rabies on domestic animals.

What can we do about bat rabies?

Bats are a part of the natural world and should be appreciated for their beauty and diversity. Many people spend their lives just on the study of these fascinating animals. Destruction of bats is strongly discouraged.

Conflicts can occur when bats share space with people; either by roosting in attics, crawl spaces or storage buildings. There are ways of safely removing bats from buildings and assuring that they do not re-enter. Wildlife officials or pest control companies can be contacted for more information.

Infected bats that encounter our domestic animals can

cause a health risk to the animal involved or subsequently to people if the animal then bites a person. For example, if a cat gets infected with rabies after playing with a bat, the cat will then create a risk to us once they become rabid. Animal owners should speak to their local veterinarian to see whether it is appropriate to have their animal vaccinated against this disease.

People whose work brings them in close contact with bats, either because they study the animals, because they may work at removing them from dwellings or else because they frequently visit bat caves, may be at a higher risk and should consider whether they should receive a preventative vaccination for this disease. Speaking to a family doctor or public health official will help to determine whether the level of risk is high enough to warrant such a measure.

By knowing that a risk exists and that steps can be taken to avoid problems, we can learn to live with these animals.

What should I do if I encounter a bat?

It is very important to report any bat contact to your local public health authority. This could include being bitten by a bat, finding a bat in your home or finding a bat in the room of someone who is unable to reliably report whether they were bitten or not, either due to age or illness. Public health officials will then decide whether the person should receive treatment.

If a pet, such as a cat, brings a bat home, the cat should be taken to a veterinarian for advice and the bat collected for testing. Care should be taken in handling a dead bat, it can be safely picked up with gloves and put into a plastic bag for storage.

Where can I look for more information?

Any suspicion of rabies in an animal should be reported to your local wildlife or veterinary officials. This includes Conservation Officers and private or governmental veterinarians. Suspicion of rabies in 1) a domestic animal or 2) in a wild animal that may have been in contact with a person or domestic animal is reportable by law to the nearest office of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA).

Information on rabies in this province and elsewhere can be found on our website (www.gov.nl.ca/agric). Further information on bats can be found on the following websites:

Salmonier Nature Park: www.gov.nl.ca/snp
Bat Conservation International: www.batcon.org

Image credits:

Paintings of bat species & distribution maps: *Handbook of Canadian Mammals 2: Bats* by C.G. van Zyll de Long. Reproduced courtesy of the Canadian Museum of Nature, Ottawa, Canada.

prepared by:

Dr. Hugh Whitney
Provincial Veterinarian
P. O. Box 7400
St. John's, NL A1E 3Y5
(709) 729-6879/0055 phone/fax
e-mail: hughwhitney@gov.nl.ca