



Publication AP001
October 1, 2004



Wildlife Diseases FACTSHEET

Rabies in Labrador

What is rabies?

Rabies is a deadly viral disease of the brain spread by the bite of infected animals. It is commonly seen in Labrador in peaks every 4-5 years though we still see individual cases between these peak years. The primary carriers of the disease are red and white foxes.



Red fox



Arctic fox

Other wild animals such as bats may carry the disease, in 2004 a Little Brown Bat was found with this disease in Labrador.



Little Brown Bat



Rabid animals can bite other foxes, dogs, cats, wolves, caribou, other animals, and people and make them sick. Once bitten by an animal with rabies, it usually takes from two weeks to six months before the bitten animal shows signs of the disease. In some cases however, the time between bite and symptoms can be as short as four days or as long as in excess of one year. Once the signs start to appear, the animal is usually dead within 10 - 14 days.



Wolf



Husky dog

The signs 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 also start biting and chewing more. This could include biting at people and animals or biting and chewing at skidoos, wood, stones, buildings, etc. They may even break their teeth doing it. One of the signs of rabies in dead animals is broken teeth. Another 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 seen staggering, drooling, have a change in voice or paralysis of part of the body (such as a hind leg).

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. Rabies is seen more often when fox populations are high so it may happen that the conditions that bring foxes closer to communities (hunger) also bring rabid animals closer. ***Wild animals should not be fed, as this makes them less wary of people and increases the chances of injury to people and unneeded sacrifice of the wild animal if it becomes too friendly.***

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/>.



GOVERNMENT OF
NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR
Department of Natural Resources

Where is it found?

Historical records suggest that rabies has been in Labrador as long as people can remember. In past years, it would only affect the more northern communities such as Nain, Davis Inlet, and Hopedale. In more recent years (such as 1988, 1992, 1996, 2001 and 2004) it has been seen throughout Labrador. The map shows those communities that saw at least one case in 1996. We don't see a lot of cases (commonly 10-20) but with the large size of Labrador and the relatively small human population, there are no doubt hundreds of cases unseen or unreported during these outbreaks.



What can I do?

Nothing can be done to rid Labrador of this disease. The area is too large and is connected to other regions that also have this disease. What we can do is expect that it will happen and do what is reasonable to prepare ourselves.

Pets should be kept under control at all times, especially when rabies is around. It may be impossible to know if a dog was in contact with a rabid fox if it is left to run loose in the community. As well, with the possibility that an animal may only show signs of the disease in excess of one year after having been bitten, in many cases, no one remembers back to when it might have started.

Vaccinating dogs and cats against this disease is very important. The Department of Natural Resources supports the vaccination of animals in Labrador by providing vaccine to public health officials in coastal communities and by subsidizing vaccination through private veterinarians where they operate.

Do not feed or otherwise encourage wild animals to be friendly with people. The natural fear that wild animals have of humans helps protect them as well as ourselves. Any change in this predictable behaviour can be misinterpreted and result in injury to humans or death to a wild animal that ends up being shot.

*If someone has been bitten by a wild animal or pet, they should wash the area well with soap or disinfectant and water and then contact their local Public Health Nurse or doctor as soon as possible to see what else should be done. If the bite came from a domestic animal, such as a dog, the animal is usually kept under quarantine for 10 days for observation. **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 whether they were in contact with the bat or not.***

Report any sightings of possibly rabid animals to local officials. This could be your Provincial Conservation Officer, Public Health Nurse, Police Detachment, or Veterinarian. 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” in Canada which means that by federal law all suspicious cases must be reported to federal officials (Canadian Food Inspection Agency or the RCMP).

Where can I look for more information?

The officials mentioned above as well as the Agriculture Representative (Goose Bay, 896-3405) and the author can provide more information including recent sightings. An article has appeared in “Them Days” (“Rabies in Labrador”, volume 17, number 3, April, 1992) describing more of the history of this disease. Posters, factsheets and brochures are also available. Our website (www.gov.nl.ca/agric under Animal Diseases) contains the information in this factsheet 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.

prepared by:

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