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Publication AP002
May 18, 2004

Wildlife Diseases
FACTSHEET

Rabies in Newfoundland & Labrador

What is rabies?

Rabies is a deadly viral disease of the brain spread by the bite of infected mammals. It is most commonly seen in red or arctic foxes in this province though other wild animals such as bats may carry the disease. Sick foxes can bite other foxes, dogs, cats, wolves, caribou, other animals 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 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 is usually dead within 10 days.

Arctic fox

Red fox

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 or even the animal's own limbs and tail. They may even break their teeth doing it. One of the signs of rabies in dead animals is broken teeth.

Another sign of rabies 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).

Where is it found?

Historical records suggest that rabies has been in Labrador as long as people can remember. On the Island of Newfoundland, the oldest record is 1954 (Botwood). Previously it appeared to only affect the more northern communities such as Nain, Davis Inlet and Hopedale. In recent years (1988, 1992, 1996 and 2001) it has spread much further south to the Strait of Belle Isle, inland to Labrador West or even onto the Island of Newfoundland.

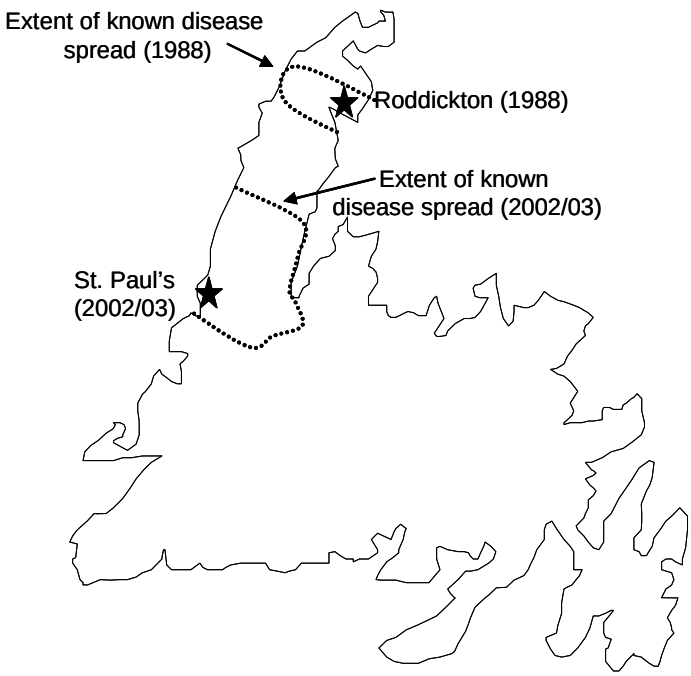
In 1988 the outbreak in Labrador spilled over onto the Island of Newfoundland, predominantly on the Great Northern Peninsula. It is assumed that sick foxes brought it across on the ice.

In 2002, it again arrived on the Island of Newfoundland resulting in a large scale eradication program that lasted up to April 2004. The extent of these two outbreaks is shown on the map.

In Labrador, we don't see a lot of cases (commonly 10-20 per outbreak) but with the large size of the region and the relatively small human population there are no doubt 100's of cases unseen or unreported during these outbreaks.

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



Extent of rabies spread during the 1988 and 2002/03 outbreaks

There is a 4-5 year pattern in Labrador where cycles in the fox populations predispose white and red foxes to sickness when their numbers get high. We had outbreaks in Labrador in 1988, 1992, 1996 and 2001. A few cases have emerged outside of such patterns. In July 1995 cases were reported in Makkovik. In April/May 2002 cases were seen in Cartwright. In 2004 cases have been seen in Nain and Natuashish. This suggests that there are pockets of the disease that maintain themselves permanently in Labrador.

In January 1989, a fox in Grand Bruit (south coast of Newfoundland) died of bat rabies. Since there were two more cases of bat rabies on Cape Breton Island around the same time it was assumed that a storm may have blown infected bats into that area during that period as normally this is not a problem. Bat rabies exists sporadically in the Maritime Provinces and elsewhere in Canada.

Historically fox rabies existed in New Brunswick from 1966 until 1977. A wave of raccoon rabies from the US is now entering southern Canada (entry points so far are Ontario and New Brunswick).

What can I do?

Little can be done to stop the natural movement of wildlife whether it be foxes coming down the coast of Labrador or bats flying through the Atlantic region with this disease. What we can do is expect that it may happen and do what is reasonable to prepare ourselves. Pets should be kept under control at all times but especially when rabies is known to be 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 a period of up to one year before the dog may show signs of the disease, in many cases no one remembers back to when it might have started.

Vaccinating dogs and cats is very important as well. The Department of Natural Resources supports the vaccination of animals in Labrador either through private veterinarians where they exist or otherwise through public health and conservation officials. In other areas of the province animal owners should contact their local private veterinarian.

If someone has been bitten by a wild animal or pet they should wash the area well and contact their local Community Health Office or doctor to see what else should be done. Report any sightings of possibly rabid animals to local officials. This could be your local Veterinarian, Conservation Officer, Public Health Nurse, Police Detachment, or Municipal Council. If an animal must be shot, avoid hitting the head as the brain is 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 can provide information on recent cases and other local issues. Current and historical records of rabies in this province as well as links to other information is available on our website (www.gov.nl.ca/agric under Animal Diseases). Posters and other public education materials are also available on request.

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