

## Rabies in Newfoundland



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### 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 cycles of unpredictable length, though we still see individual cases between these 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.

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 two weeks to six months before the bitten animal shows symptoms of the disease. In some cases, however, 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 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.

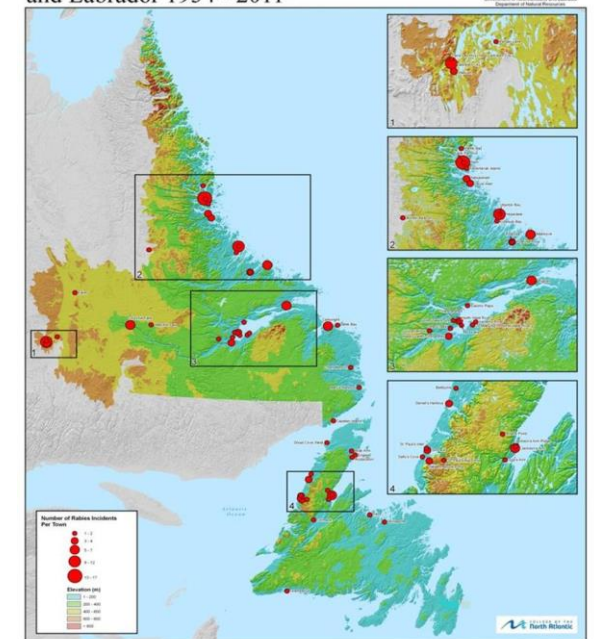
Rabid animals may also be observed staggering, drooling, or can have a change in voice or paralysis of part of the body (such as a hind leg).

### Where is it Found?

Historical records (see map below) suggest that rabies has been in Labrador as long as people can remember. On the Island of Newfoundland, the oldest record is 1954 (Botwood). In any one year, it is difficult to predict whether it will remain restricted to a small geographic area or whether it will potentially affect all of Labrador and possibly the Island of Newfoundland.

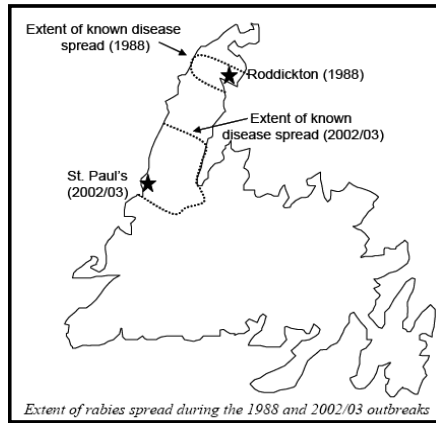
In 1988 the outbreak in Labrador spilled over onto the Island of Newfoundland, predominantly on the Great Northern Peninsula. It is assumed that sick foxes brought the disease with them across the ice.

Rabies Incidents Per Town in Newfoundland and Labrador 1954 - 2011\*



In 2002, rabies arrived again on the Island of Newfoundland resulting in a large-scale eradication program that lasted up to April 2004. The extent of these two outbreaks can be seen on the following map.

In Labrador, we do not 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 is no doubt that hundreds of cases go unseen or unreported during these outbreaks.

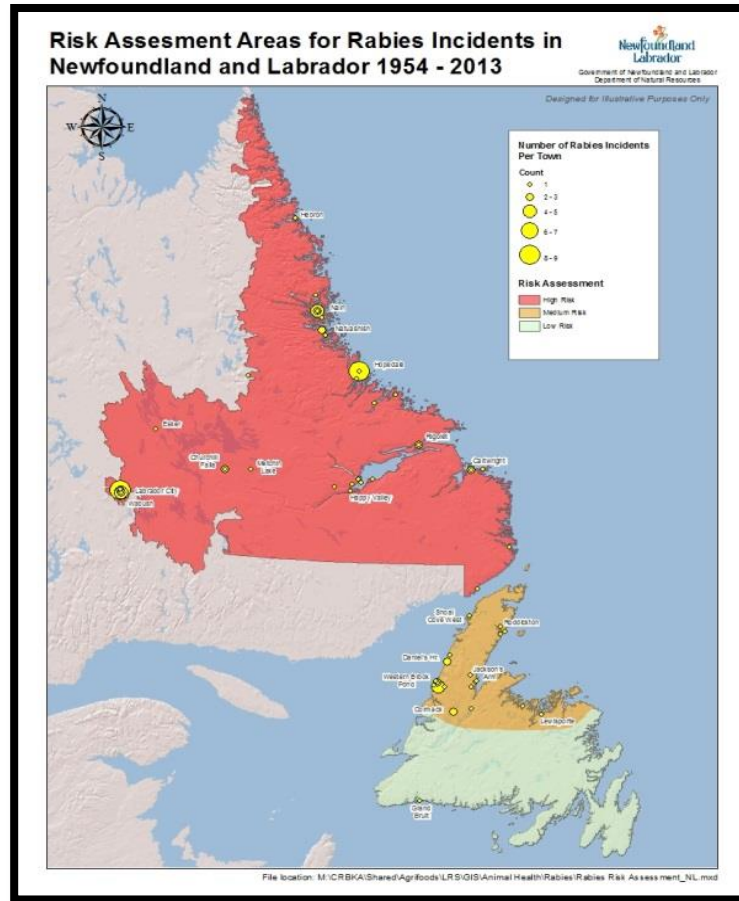


Rabies appears in cycles in Labrador due to peaks and troughs in the fox populations and the ability of the virus to persist when populations are low. When numbers of white (Arctic) and red foxes are high, the animals are more prone to illness and spreading of the virus can occur.

However, cases can occur between peak years, so the risk of rabies in Labrador is considered constant. Though less common, bat rabies also exists in this province and has been seen both on the Island of Newfoundland as well as 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 the area. Bat rabies exists sporadically in the Maritime Provinces and elsewhere in Canada. In 2004, a bat recovered from a house in Cartwright (Labrador) was also found to carry the rabies virus.

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, Quebec and New Brunswick). The following map indicates the areas of highest risk in our province. The Northern Peninsula and corresponding exposed coastline are the highest risk areas of the island.



## 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 rabies.

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, especially when rabies is known to be in the area.

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 the animal may have been exposed.

Vaccinating dogs and cats is very important as well. The Forestry and Agrifoods Agency supports the vaccination of animals in Labrador, either through private veterinarians where they exist, or otherwise through public health, conservation officials or the Chinook Project. 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, the wound and surrounding area should be cleaned well with soap and water, a disinfectant if available, and their local Community Health Office or doctor should be contacted for further advice. 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 this province which means that by provincial law all suspicious cases must be reported to provincial officials (Conservation Officers or Chief Veterinary Officer).

## Further Information:

Forestry and Agrifoods Agency website:  
[www.nr.gov.nl.ca/rabies](http://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.

