The Rabies Reporter

The Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry
MNRF Publication 51709, Volume 31, Issue 1
January — June 2020

The Rabies Reporter is a scientific newsletter about current issues in rabies research and control. It is a joint effort of the Wildlife Research and Monitoring Section of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry; the Rabies Laboratory at the Ottawa Laboratory (Fallowfield) of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency; and the Ontario Ministry of Health. Articles for future issues will be welcomed by the editor. The Rabies Reporter is not peer reviewed and should be cited as a newsletter. Send contributions, letters and inquiries to rabies@ontario.ca.

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ISSN (print): 1186-8961
ISSN (pdf): 1705-2106

Ontario.ca/rabies

Rabies cases continue to decline

Anne McCarthy, Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry

Good news for the first half of 2020! Only two cases of raccoon strain rabies detected in Ontario (Figure 1) and we saw the control zone shrink for the first time since the outbreak began in 2015. The overall number of rabies cases detected from January — June was fewer than previous years, even with a similar level of surveillance. A total of 18 rabies cases (2 raccoon strain, 16 bat strain) were detected — down from 21 during the same time last year.

Raccoon strain: Between January and June, only 2 cases of mid-Atlantic raccoon strain rabies were detected. Both cases were detected in skunks in Hamilton. During the same period last year, there were a total of 14 cases detected in 4 counties (Brant, Hamilton, Niagara, and Waterloo).

Fox strain: There were no fox strain cases detected in the first half of this year. Monitoring and sampling continues to be done regularly for dead, sick or strange acting animals within the surveillance area.

Bat strain: There were 16 bats detected with rabies from January to June 2020 across Ontario, including: Halton (2), Hastings (1), Kent (1), Northumberland (1), Ottawa-Carleton (1), Renfrew (5), Waterloo (1), Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph (3), and York (1). All were big brown bat strain. Last year at this time, seven bats tested positive for rabies.

Between December 2015 and the end of June 2020, there were a total of 472 raccoon strain and 21 fox strain cases detected in Ontario (Figure 2). MNRF will continue enhanced surveillance and rabies control throughout 2020.

Ontario

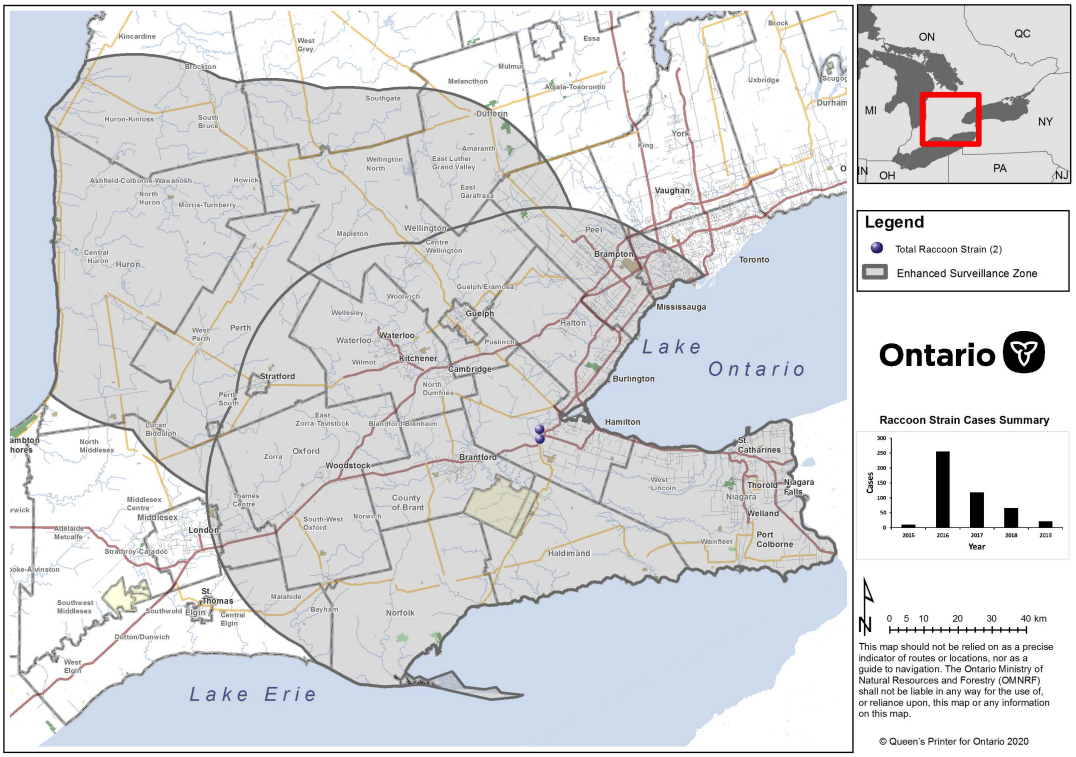

Figure 1. Terrestrial rabies cases (N=2) detected in southern Ontario from January–June 2020.

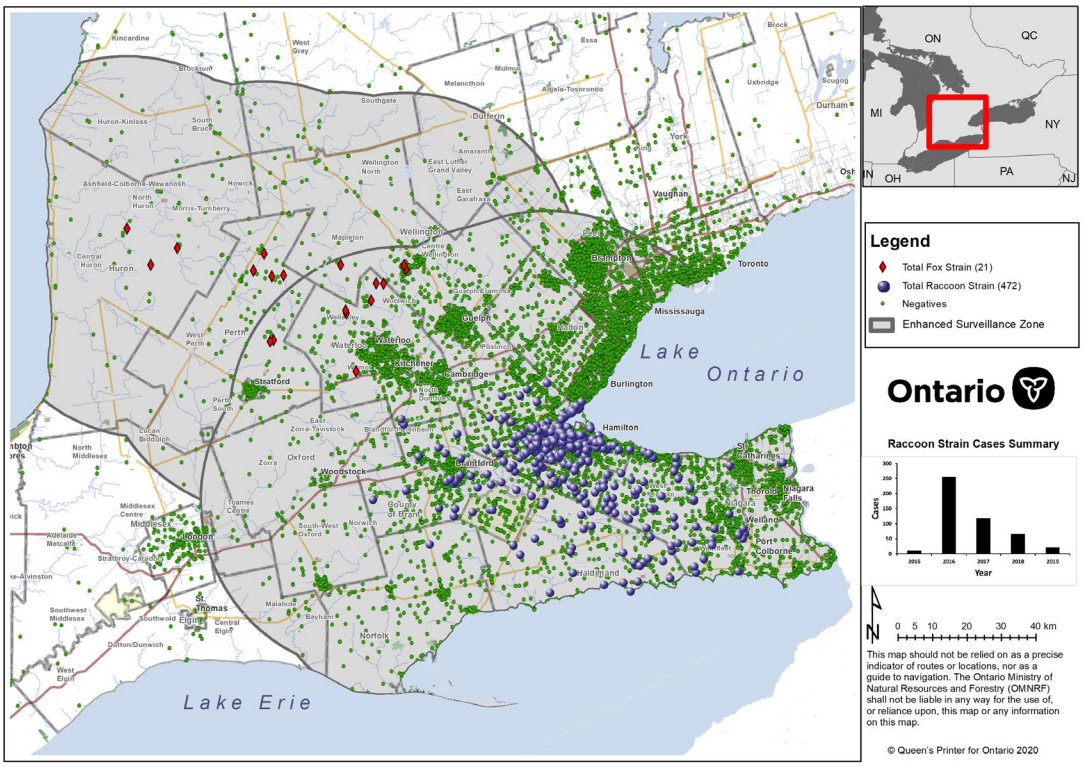

Figure 2. Total terrestrial rabies cases detected in southern Ontario from December 2015–June 2020 along with the current surveillance and control zone.

Rabies control program – working through the COVID-19 pandemic

Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic brought some new challenges to the MNRF's rabies control operations. When the province began implementing measures in March to stop the spread of COVID-19, we continued to operate as a provincial essential service.

The rabies control program responded quickly, implementing additional health and safety measures to allow operations to continue safely and without interruption. During this time, the field season had not yet started and weekly testing of rabies samples in the lab was able to continue. Lab occupancy was limited to 3 individuals who conducted daily health screenings, wore appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) and stayed at least 2 metres from each other whenever possible. Additional disinfection steps were implemented, particularly for high contact entry points. However, the existing safety and disinfection protocols in place such as gloves and face shields used to protect staff from rabies meant that there was little additional work or adjustment necessary.

Figure 3. 2020 rabies control program staff working safely to protect Ontario.

The surveillance team which picks up samples from our partners (animal control agencies, trappers, rehabbers, etc.) on a weekly basis were able to quickly adjust their work to meet the new health and safety requirements. They were limited to one person per truck, and implemented new hand hygiene, mask and disinfection protocols. They also worked with surveillance partners to develop methods for safe transfer of samples.

Interviews and on-boarding of new field staff was conducted remotely, and program leads adapted communication methods so that staff training could be delivered effectively remotely using tools like Microsoft Teams, Skype, and Kahoot. When the field season began, staff were paired up into

two-person teams, to be maintained throughout the field season. Each crew included one new staff and one returning staff, so that the experienced staff members could conduct hands on training in the field that could not be provided online. Each crew had a dedicated vehicle, conducted daily health screenings, and were provided with hand sanitizer and masks to be used whenever they would be in less than 2 metres of each other or the public to reduce the possibility of virus transmission. Lunch was typically enjoyed in the outdoors at a safe distance.

Support staff, including project biologists, administrative staff and science transfer staff, were able to work remotely providing the same excellent services and support from home offices and dining room tables. The team stayed in touch with regular planning meetings and video calls.

We wish to say a big thank you to all staff for their diligence, creativity and adaptability. It has meant that we did not miss a single week of surveillance. At the end of June we had started field operations in-time, including the Trap-Vaccinate-Release program, hand-baiting and bait stations, and were ready for aerial baiting in August. The health and safety guidelines developed for the rabies program and the lessons learned helped to lead the way for other MNRF teams resuming field and lab operations.

MNRF communications

Anne McCarthy, Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry

MNRF works closely with municipal and ministry partners to inform and engage the public and key audiences about rabies in wildlife. We geared up for the 2020 season by developing communications to educate and inform the public and stakeholders about rabies and MNRF's rabies control operations. We used tools such as media bulletins, stakeholder notifications, First Nation notifications and social media to reach target audiences. We reviewed feedback and questions from previous social media posts to improve our 2020 social media campaign.

The rabies information line continues to operate during regular business hours. Between January and June 2020, we responded to 175 messages from the public. Of which:

- 40% were requested for dead animal pick up
- 22% were about sick or strange acting living animals
- 10% were about potential human or domestic animal exposure to rabies
- 10% were about bats
- 18% were calls about general rabies questions, oral baits, test results and chronic wasting disease

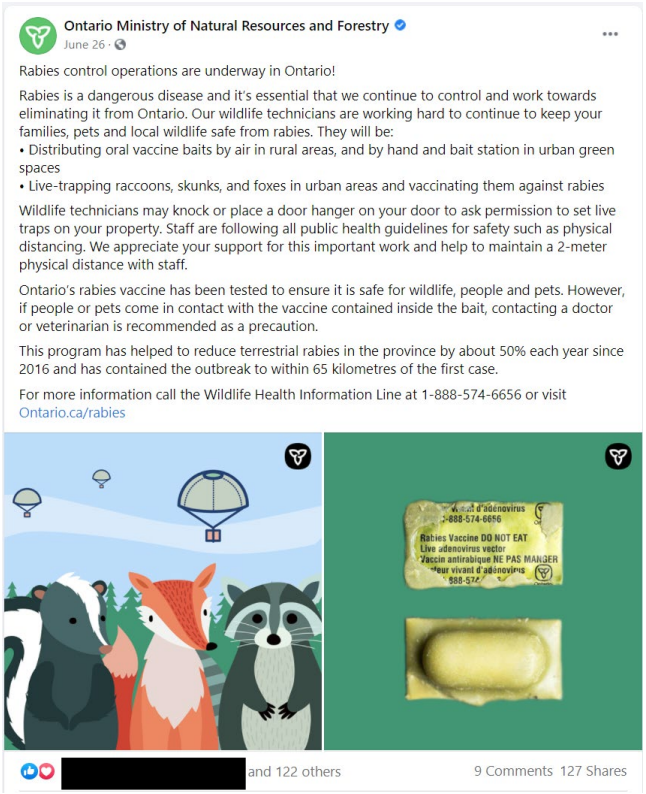

Figure 4. Social media post advising the public of the start of annual rabies control operations.