In Acadia Parish, the rabies outbreak has gotten so bad that officials aren't bothering to test for it anymore. Skunks and raccoons seen acting strangely in the daytime are simply shot and buried.

In Lafayette Parish, animal control employees are handling triple the usual calls, and the city has come up with an action plan that includes moving up the annual public rabies vaccination clinics. A 2-year-old boy is undergoing preventive rabies treatments because he turned up with a wound from an animal bite and no one could figure out how he got it.

Opinion may differ on whether the rabies outbreak in Acadia has reached the epidemic level. All the experts agree, however, that the situation calls for proper vaccinating domestic dogs and cats and being extremely cautious around wild animals. Once rabies symptoms have appeared in humans, the disease is fatal.

“We've got our hands full,” says Rolcy Duhon, manager of the Lafayette Animal Control Shelter and vice president for the Louisiana Animal Control Association.

South Louisiana is by no means the only part of the country confronted with a rabies outbreak. In some parts of the Northeast, the situation is much worse. In New York state last year, an 11-year-old girl contracted a mysterious illness and died within days. She had not complained of being bitten by an animal, and it wasn't determined until after her death that she had rabies.

But Acadia Parish had not seen a case of rabies for 15 years or more, officials say. And some pet owners had become lax about vaccinating their animals. The result is that horror stories are beginning to surface, like the little boy undergoing rabies shots to prevent the development of the disease. Another example: In Mire, a man who was exposed is undergoing rabies treatment, and his three dogs and 12 cats—none of which had been vaccinated—have been destroyed.

Since last year, 25 cases of rabies have been confirmed in the Lafayette area, according to Dr. Louise McFarland, state epidemiologist for the Department of Health and Hospitals. “They’re coming in every day,” she says. But that number doesn’t include all the animals which may be in the process of being tested or being sent for testing by private veterinarians, nor does it include all the probable cases of rabies in Acadia Parish which weren't formally reported.

I've given up trying to keep a count,” says Duhon. At least 13 or 14 cases which were handled by the shelter have been confirmed as rabies. The heads of opossums, squirrels, raccoons, dogs and cats have been tested in addition to skunks, but so far all the positive results in Lafayette Parish have been in skunks.

Duhon says he doesn't think the outbreak has yet reached the level of an epidemic in Lafayette Parish. But McFarland thinks it is an epidemic, albeit comparatively speaking. Some states see 200 to 400 cases a year, while Louisiana usually sees around 40. “It's certainly an epidemic for the Lafayette area because they just haven't seen this before,” she says.

Theories on the sudden outbreak are just that, theories. One theory holds that skunks were driven out of their natural habitat by Hurricane Andrew in 1992 and are turning up in more populated areas. McFarland suggests that skunk rabies has actually migrated from North Louisiana. “It's not anything that is terribly surprising,” she says.

For some years, there have been cases of rabies in the Shreveport, Monroe and Alexandria areas, but those cases have been dropping. That suggests the skunk population may be dying off there while flourishing in the south, she says.

Dr. Richard Smith is an associate professor with the LSU School of Veterinary Medicine and one of the leading experts in the state on rabies. He gives more credence to the north/south migration than the Hurricane Andrew theory. “I don't think the hurricane destroyed as much of their habitat,” he says. And until the recent outbreak, no cases had been reported south of Lafayette.

“Why rabies develops in an area and then disappears and comes back, we don’t know,” says Smith. But the cyclical nature of rabies outbreaks may be the result of species of wild animals, such as skunks, increasing in numbers and then dying off as the disease takes it toll, he says.

For example, an outbreak of rabies in Virginia is thought to have originated with the importation of raccoons from Florida. Hunters had brought in raccoons from Florida to repopulate the state, and the virus spread with them into several Northeastern states.

Wile there is some hope that the skunks might die before the Acadia Parish outbreak gets much worse, no one can make that prediction. “Every skunk should be considered a positive,” says Duhon.

That's the approach being taken in Acadia Parish. A few weeks ago, Egan resident Pat Miller was charged one afternoon by a normally gentle farm animal. Then he saw a skunk "just grazing around." The skunk came at Miller, who tried to shoot it but missed. The next day, he found the skunk in the same place, and the skunk charged him again. This time, Miller shot and killed it.

“Trying to get rid of it was impossible,” Miller says. He called a number of agencies and veterinarians in Acadia Parish. Once he was told to pack the skunk in ice and take it to LSU himself, and once he was told that the animal would be tested if he would cut the head off himself. “I don't know how to go about cutting a skunk's head off. I've never done it,” says Miller.

He complained on a radio show after he was advised to just bury the skunk. The farm animal has shown no signs of the disease.

Sue Gall, who lives near Miller, shot and killed a raccoon a couple of weeks ago. Gall saw the raccoon at dawn, when she went to the barn. “It was walking funny and acting sick, not like a raccoon does,” she says. When she notified local health officials, she was told just to bury it. Gall says all her dogs, cats and cows had been vaccinated for rabies.

Wild animals are seldom seen in daylight and should not be approached. Children, particularly, should be warned to leave them alone.

Dr. Jim Rumore, a Rayne veterinarian, had seen seven skunks tested for his clients. All were positive for rabies. "We're just telling people to keep them now," he says. "What difference does it make if it's two or 200?"

Acadia Parish moved its regular rabies clinic up to Feb. 5, and people brought in 1,400 pets to be vaccinated. "That's amazing. I never expected that," says Rumore.

But the turnout also points up the number of pets that aren't vaccinated. "We have a very large percentage of dogs and cats that aren't vaccinated," says Smith. Because racoons has been under control in the domestic canine population and because there have been no cases for years in South Louisiana, people have neglected to stay current with their pets' vaccinations, he says.

Cats are even more likely to tangle with wild animals than dogs, but many people don't think about vaccinating them. As for livestock such as cattle, horses and sheep, Smith says it's probably not necessary to vaccinate them, in part because they instinctively stay away from a wild animal behaving strangely.

McFarland says that area parishes are being urged to move up regularly scheduled rabies clinics, which are normally held in the middle of...
the year. In Lafayette, tentative plans are to hold clinics on March 19 and March 26.

In response to a City Council resolution, the administration has submitted an action plan to respond to the outbreak. The council may well have to appropriate more money for animal control—the plan asks for additional personnel and recommends holding a free rabies vaccination clinic.

The plan also asks Mayor Kenny Bowen to petition the state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries to handle wildlife calls. Duhon says the animal control shelter is supposed to deal with domestic animals but has ended up dealing with the rabies cases or suspected cases in wild animals.

The rabies outbreak has also raised a couple of other issues. One is overreaction. Duhon says the rumors of rabies cases in Lafayette Parish far outnumber the actual cases. Skunks are nocturnal animals, but there have been instances when someone has seen a skunk at dusk and called the shelter to come get it.

Another issue is the effectiveness of rabies vaccines sold through feed stores and catalogs. Under state law, a rabies shot must be administered by a veterinarian. If a person gets a mail-order vaccine and then gives it to his or her dog or cat, the animal officially is considered unvaccinated and will be treated as such if exposed to a wild animal with rabies.

Rumore and others say the difference is critical. Rabies vaccines must be carefully packed and shipped cold to remain effective. If a batch gets warm accidentally during the shipping process, it's no good. Additionally, the type of vaccine sold other than through a veterinarian may not be 100 percent effective. And if a person doesn't know how to administer the shot correctly, it is as if the animal never had the shot, Rumore says.

He knows of cases in which dogs that had been vaccinated with a mail-order or store-bought shot later tested positive for rabies, and one case in which a pet skunk was given a vaccine and developed rabies from it, exposing an entire family. And, says Rumore, one store in Acadia Parish was selling B-12 vaccines and passing them off as rabies vaccines.

But an ordinance being considered by the Acadia Parish Police Jury to limit sales of rabies vaccines to veterinarians has drawn some opposition. Even Miller, who almost certainly killed a rabid skunk, says the ordinance is an infringement on personal freedoms and the reports of a rabies epidemic have been overblown. Some see the ordinance as a way for local vets to make money, a charge Rumore emphatically denies. Towns in Acadia Parish, Lafayette and other cities and parishes already have similar ordinances on the books.

If a domestic animal is suspected of having been exposed to rabies and it has not been vaccinated, it must be destroyed and tested or quarantined at a veterinary facility for six months. The second option is very expensive and most vets are reluctant to take the risk, according to Duhon. If it has been legally vaccinated and licensed, says Rumore, it still must be confined and watched for 10 days. If a dog or a cat has bitten someone, it must be quarantined at the shelter for 10 days whether or not it has been vaccinated for rabies.

A long-term solution to the spread of rabies in wild animals is probably years away, but researchers are experimenting with vaccines that can be put in bait for foxes, coyotes and raccoons. Smith says a dose can be hidden in sausage or a chicken head and left out. The wildlife vaccine worked in foxes in Switzerland and helped contain a raccoon epidemic in the Northeast.

But until a wildlife vaccine is determined to be thoroughly effective and made widely available, there are really only two actions that can be taken to combat an outbreak of rabies.

Avoid wild animals. And vaccinate pets.