

July 9, 2003

First bird with West Nile virus found in Alberta

Edmonton... A magpie found near Camrose in the parkland natural region of Alberta has tested positive for West Nile virus. Other than two travel-related cases of human illness in 2002, this is the first sign of the virus recorded in Alberta to date. One hundred and fifty birds have been tested since May 1, 2003.

As part of the province's West Nile Response plan, the Fish and Wildlife Division of Alberta Sustainable Resource Development has been testing birds of the corvid family, including crows, magpies, blue jays and ravens for evidence of the virus.

"We expected West Nile virus to arrive in Alberta this summer," said Dr. Margo Pybus, Wildlife Disease Specialist, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development. "It has been carried across North America by migratory birds, so we've been testing crows, which are particularly susceptible, and other members of the Corvid family."

After an initial test in Edmonton indicated the bird was likely infected, a specimen was sent to the Animal Health Centre laboratory in Abbotsford, BC to confirm the result. That confirmation was received today. A second magpie, collected near Medicine Hat also has been sent for further testing.

The results from the second bird are expected within the next few days. There was a delay in receiving this bird. Sustainable Resource Development is following up to ensure all birds are submitted in a timely fashion according to their guidelines.

Only a small proportion of mosquitoes are likely to carry the virus in Alberta. The risk of infection remains low even if a person is bitten by an infected mosquito. Most infections are mild, with no serious symptoms. However, health officials warn that in rare cases, infection can be serious.

"It is important for all Albertans to take precautions to avoid being bitten by mosquitoes," said Dr. Gloria Keays, Associate Provincial Health Officer. "There are some simple steps that should become part of everyone's routine - using a mosquito repellent containing DEET or another approved active ingredient when outside, and wearing long-sleeved shirts and pants in the evening and at dawn when mosquitoes are most active."

The Government of Alberta will continue to monitor for other evidence of the virus around the province, in birds, horses, and humans, and now in mosquitoes in the regions where the birds were located. Medical officers of the affected health regions have been notified to institute enhanced surveillance for cases of human illness. Albertans will be notified as further evidence is discovered.

Mosquito repellents should be used according to label instructions. DEET should not be used on children under six months of age, and a concentration of no more than 10 per cent DEET on children up to 12 years of age.

Mosquitoes can lay their eggs in very small amounts of standing water. Reducing standing water around the yard is another good way to reduce exposure to mosquitoes. For example, clean eavestroughs so that water can drain freely, remove old tires or make sure they are covered so they don't collect rainwater and cover rain barrels.

Albertans spending time outdoors are encouraged to be aware of West Nile virus and to take precautions. Detailed information on West Nile virus and how to protect yourself and your family is available on the

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