SPECIAL REPORT

JEFF COATS

This fall, wildlife health officials will again sample harvested waterfowl for avian flu at several sites across the United States.

Avian Flu Update
North America remains free of deadly H5N1 virus

Since the federal government began monitoring North American wild bird populations for highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) virus, also known as HPAI H5N1, waterfowl and other migratory birds have completed another annual migration cycle and a hunting season has come and gone. Fortunately, as of press time, HPAI H5N1 has not been detected in any birds, anywhere in North America.

The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) National Wildlife Health Center has created the HPAI Early Detection Data System to report the results of ongoing avian flu surveillance being conducted jointly by the U.S. departments of Agriculture and Interior. According to Paul Slota, a USGS microbiologist, "It is fairly reassuring to know that after testing over 140,000 wild bird samples from throughout the United States in 2006 and over 12,000 wild bird samples in Canada, there is no evidence

of the highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 in North American wild bird populations." The 2007 sampling season is well under way, and during the first four months, more than 8,000 samples have been tested. All have come back negative.

It is common to find flu viruses in wild birds, so it is not surprising that among all those samples, some viruses have been

detected. "While six H5N1 avian influenza viruses were isolated during the 2006 surveillance effort," Slota says, "all of them were low pathogenic, and genetic tests indicated that all of them likely originated in North America and are not closely related to the deadly highly pathogenic H5N1 virus." More detections of low pathogenic viruses are expected but are not a cause for concern.

This is not to say the risk of HPAI H5N1 reaching North America has

passed. The virus could still arrive here in wild migratory birds or through the movement of domestic poultry or captive birds. Based on recent scientific findings, U.S. agencies have made adjustments in their sampling plans. According to Rick Kearney, USGS wildlife program coordinator, "We plan to put a greater emphasis on the collection of samples from dead birds. High-path H5N1 outbreaks in Europe, Asia, and Africa have almost always resulted in death among susceptible birds. Experts now feel that the presence of dead birds, especially in large numbers, may provide the earliest indication of high-path H5N1 being present. We plan to investigate more reports of wild bird die-off events in 2007." Scientists have also changed their protocol for swabbing live and hunter-harvested birds to increase the chances of detecting the virus.

Worldwide, the situation is worse. HPAI H5N1 outbreaks continue in Asia, Africa, and Europe, and the disease has been confirmed in at least 59 countries. In 2007, fewer cases of the virus involving wild migratory birds have been reported than in 2006. But in June and July 2007, HPAI H5N1 resurfaced in wild birds in Germany, the Czech Republic, and France, where the virus was detected in dead swans and a goose. The World Health Organization has also confirmed 319 human

cases, with 192 deaths. Human cases are concentrated in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Indonesia reported its 100th human case in June 2007, and about 80 percent of those cases have been fatal.

Health officials advise waterfowl hunters to continue to take routine precautions this fall, including wearing disposable latex gloves while cleaning birds. Hunters should also report the discovery of large numbers of dead wild birds to their state wildlife agency.

—Dr. Jasper Lament

TESTS HAVE BEEN PERFORMED ON MORE THAN 140,000 WILD BIRD SAMPLES ACROSS THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA, AND THERE IS NO EVIDENCE OF HIGHLY PATHOGENIC AVIAN INFLUENZA IN NORTH AMERICAN BIRD POPULATIONS.

STAY INFORMED For more information and the latest updates on avian flu, visit the Ducks Unlimited website at www.ducks.org/birdflu.