

# Wild Birds Help Scientists Understand West Nile Virus



***N***ational West Nile Virus surveillance primarily utilizes the testing of dead birds to detect the presence of the virus. Effective surveillance depends on an educated public to report or collect dead birds, primarily crows. Individuals can call their local or state WNV hotline or health department for additional details. Information on WNV in dead birds is used by local health agencies to determine public health risk and make decisions about mosquito control.

Since the fall of 1999, USGS has been testing wild birds and mammals for West Nile virus (WNV) infection and incorporating epidemiological data on West Nile outbreaks into a geographic information system (GIS) for display and analysis. West Nile is an insect-borne virus that had never been reported in the Western Hemisphere prior to 1999. Birds are the natural hosts for the virus, which can be transmitted from infected birds to humans and other animals through the bites of mosquitoes. Wild birds, primarily crows, were affected in the initial outbreak in the greater New York City area; horses and people were also infected. The virus caused encephalitis in 62 people in the New York City area, seven of whom died.

In the year 2000, wild bird mortality due to WNV was first detected in May in southeastern New York and northeastern New Jersey. The disease expanded both geographically and in the number and variety of species



*A USGS pathologist examines a suspect West Nile Virus Crow.*

infected. The virus was once again reported in horses, causing illness in 65 horses from 7 states. Nineteen people were diagnosed with the disease and there were two fatalities.

Surveillance efforts detected more than 20 positive mosquito species, including species active at dawn and dusk and species active during the day. Mosquito species found positive include species that feed on both birds and mammals.

In September 2000, USGS alerted Federal and State wildlife and conservation agencies that the fall migration of millions of birds through the 500-mile-wide region where infection had occurred would probably move the West Nile virus farther south into the Atlantic and Gulf coast states.

In 2001, WNV transmission was detected 2-3 weeks earlier in the spring and was noted in 6 geographic foci. This finding suggested that further geographic expansion was likely; the virus spread to 16 new states.

So far in 2002, WNV transmission was detected as early as February in Florida and March in Louisiana. Activity in the northern states occurred in more states and began 3-4 weeks earlier than in 2001. By October of 2002, WNV was active in 43 states, 5 Canadian provinces and the District of Columbia, compared to 25 states at this time last year. Further westward expansion has already occurred into Colorado, Kansas, Minne-

sota, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, Washington and West Virginia. To date, the virus has been found in over 120 bird species and 9 mammal species.

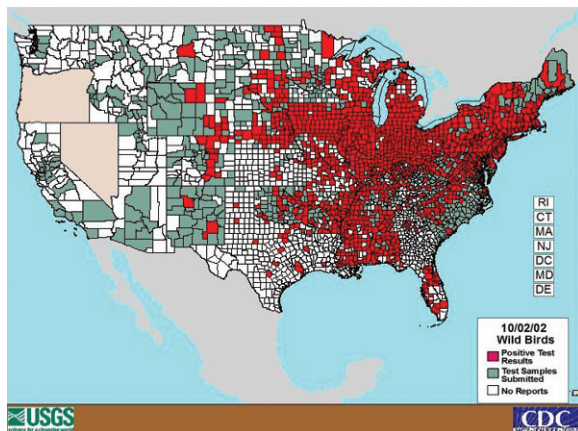
Wild bird mortality has been used as an indicator of the extent of WNV, and it continues to provide an early warning system for the emergence of the virus in new locations. The probable dissemination of the virus along migratory corridors offers new challenges for both public health and wildlife disease specialists. Wildlife involvement in expanding WNV activity in the United States has become more intense and complex with the increasing number and variety of bird species that are testing positive.

Wildlife disease scientists from the USGS National Wildlife Health Center (NWHC) are continuing to provide diagnostic support to Federal, State, and local wildlife agencies, as well as to public health departments and other Federal agencies that are utilizing dead wild birds as sentinels for detecting WNV. Monitoring the geographic expansion of the virus is critical: active surveillance is ongoing in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, and State wildlife agencies. Free-ranging wild bird populations throughout the eastern United States are being sampled.

Scientists in the USGS Geographic Analysis of Disease Project are providing the Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as public health agencies, with a GIS incorporating Landsat 7 Thematic Mapper imagery, land-use and land-cover data, roads, and hydrography. These data are being used by scientists in the field to identify bird and mosquito habitat and to determine the best locations for placement of mosquito traps. Information from the National West Nile Virus Surveillance System is being used to compile and produce graphical displays and animations showing the pattern and spread of the virus. An additional analysis is being performed to detect clusters of infections and, possibly, the geographic origin of the outbreak. Maps documenting West Nile virus activity in 2000 are available at [www.nationalatlas.gov/virusmap.html](http://www.nationalatlas.gov/virusmap.html) (National Atlas). Maps documenting 2001-2002 activity are available through [cindi.usgs.gov/hazard/event/west\\_nile/west\\_nile.html](http://cindi.usgs.gov/hazard/event/west_nile/west_nile.html).

USGS is working with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to learn the current geographic extent of WNV, to understand how it moves between birds, mosquitoes, and humans, and to predict future movements of the virus. The 3-year study utilizes active wild bird surveillance along the Atlantic and Mississippi Flyway, with simultaneous collection of mosquitoes, to detect the presence of WNV. USGS is working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, and other Federal agencies to identify appropriate sampling



***This map shows the counties testing for WNV in green. Counties in red are those in which wild birds tested positive for the virus up through October 2, 2002. Maps showing WNV surveillance can be found at the websites given below.***

sites, including a survey of over-wintering birds at sites in Florida. This system, based on the ubiquitous presence of birds and their potential exposure to disease, will indicate the diffusion of pathogens across eastern America and provide a mechanism to detect novel pathogens in the environment, determine their geographic extent, and identify their relationship to the landscape and the environment.

The surveillance system will provide basic information on the geography of WNV. The combination of this data with information about landscape characteristics and weather conditions, over space and time, will provide the foundation for developing spatial analytical and forecasting models. Hypotheses about the necessary precursor conditions of landscape and weather that enable outbreaks can be formulated and tested.

USGS is using its Biological Safety Level 3 containment facility in Madison, Wisconsin, to conduct research studies to determine the virulence of WNV in crows, waterfowl and other species. The fatality rate in captive crows experimentally inoculated with WNV was nearly 100%.

For more information on the West Nile Virus, please visit the NWHC web site at [www.nwhc.usgs.gov](http://www.nwhc.usgs.gov). For surveillance questions, contact Dr. Emi Saito, USGS National Wildlife Health Center, (608) 270-2456. For research information, contact Dr. Christopher Brand, USGS National Wildlife Health Center, (608) 270-2440, or Dr. Stephen Guptill, USGS Geographic Sciences Branch, (703) 648-4520.

Aransas NWR, TX	8
Big Branch NWR, LA	71
Bogue Chitto NWR, LA	110
Camp Lejeune Marine Base, NC	24
Cape Lookout National Seashore, NC	37
Cape May NWR, NJ	594
Chincoteague NWR, VA	1026
Croatan National Forest, NC	120
Gateway National Park, NY	996
Great Meadows NWR, MA	631
Great River NWR, IL/MO	256
Homestead Air Reserve Base, FL	109
J.N. 'Ding' Darling NWR, FL	77
Key West City Park, FL	120
Laguna Atascosa NWR, TX	50
Lower Rio Grande Valley NWR, TX	173
Merritt Island NWR, FL	76
San Benito, TX	175
Savannah NWR, GA	682
Shelby County Park, TN	387
St. Marks NWR, FL	517
Upper Mississippi River NWR, WI	272
Wertheim NWR, NY	488

### Migratory Bird Study -- Sites and Captures

