

Raptor center ramps up Biosecurity protocols

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As avian flu cases continue to spread among birds in the Willamette Valley, it has been a trying time for veterinarian Ulrike Streicher and other staff members at the Cascades Raptor Center in Eugene.

In the past two weeks, roughly a quarter of the 40 red tail hawks brought in have shown symptoms of the disease and had to be euthanized. There is no way to treat it, Streicher said, and it's necessary to prevent spread.

"I know it's important for containing the disease and particularly also protecting other birds in our care, but at the same time it's totally heartbreaking," she said.

The area's first reported cases of avian influenza were found in several geese in Eugene's Alton Baker Park last month, according to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. This is the first time the disease has been reported in Oregon, ODFW said.

Officials said they expect it to spread beyond Lane and Linn counties over the next several weeks.

It is often seen in waterbirds such as ducks, geese and gulls; shorebirds such as sandpipers; chickens; turkeys; eagles; crows; raptors; and vultures. Scavenger birds can be infected after eating a sick bird.

The highly contagious disease has been spreading from the eastern U.S. for months. The raptor center stopped accepting rescued waterfowl in March, since they are the most common carriers of the disease.

A nonprofit animal wildlife hospital and nature center, the Cascades Raptor Center is home to 36 resident birds of prey and a varying number of animals there for treatment.

The center has ramped up its biosecurity protocols to protect the birds from the disease, and all newly rescued birds are required to go through a five-day quarantine period in an isolated space before they enter the normal treatment area. Staff has been taking steps to ensure they don't accidentally spread the contamination, including putting on protective clothing in the quarantine space.

With the increased precautions and threat of disease spread, Streicher said it has been mentally exhausting on the center's workers.

"You go into full battle gear when you work in the quarantine area with the new arrivals," Streicher said. "It's very time-



Ulrike Streicher, staff veterinarian at the Cascades Raptor Center in Eugene, stands in the doorway of the isolation ward set up to treat sick birds in an attempt to contain the bird flu within the center. CHRIS PIETSCH/THE REGISTER-GUARD

consuming, but it's also very stressful because you have to really keep control of what comes into the quarantine area so that nothing that leaves is infected or just gets disposed of in there."

The common symptoms of avian flu in hawks include respiratory issues, pneumonia and encephalitis, which leads to convulsions and more.

"They start vocalizing, they go in circles, it's a very horrid scenario," she said.

Some owls brought in have also shown these symptoms, Streicher said.

Anyone who sees an injured or sick bird should still report it to the raptor center's hotline for rescue, although there may be a few more questions due to the disease, Streicher said.

The disease has already had an impact on local bird populations, Streicher said, especially this year's number of baby ducks and geese.

"We got it at a very unlucky time because it basically came to Lane County at the time young goslings hatched, so it literally wiped out a whole generation," she said.

The cold and wet weather this spring has also contributed to the impacts of avian flu, since the virus survives better in those conditions, Streicher said.

There have been no cases of avian flu that have infected any resident birds at

the raptor center so far, Streicher said. The disease is often transmitted to hawks when they eat a goose or duck.

To protect from disease spread, those hiking and especially those near waterfowl habitat should wash their hands and shoes, Streicher said. Residents should be careful to not bring any dirt into their homes from waterfowl habitats and should avoid contact with goose and duck feces, she added.

Chicken owners should also be careful about cleaning their hands and shoes.

The risk to humans is low. While it usually is not transmitted to humans, it can infect people and can range from no symptoms to more severe ones, according to the CDC.

Portland Audubon has a similar policy to Cascades Raptor Center and is not accepting any rescued ducks or geese at this time, but will admit most other native wildlife species, according to a Q&A page on the disease.

Anyone who sees a sick or injured bird can report it to the raptor center's call line at 541-485-1320, and also should report avian flu symptoms to ODFW at 866-968-2600.

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A red tail hawk being treated in the isolation area at the Cascades Raptor Center. PHOTO PROVIDED BY CASCADE RAPTOR CENTER

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