

Keeping local birds safe from avian influenza

BY REBECCA LEXA

Backyard bird flocks across the Northwest are facing a dangerous threat. In neighborhood chicken yards, local waterways and parks, birds are dying suddenly as a result of avian influenza, ravaging both domestic and wild bird populations.

A highly contagious disease, avian influenza is almost always fatal, and there's no vaccine currently available. The last major U.S. outbreak was in 2014. However, Europe and Asia have since seen multiple avian influenza strains rip through domestic flocks.

Spring migration patterns are a key factor in the uptick of cases. As wild birds migrate north toward their summer breeding grounds, they congregate at communal feeding and resting grounds along the way. While domestic poultry are highly susceptible to this disease, wild waterfowl are as well. Raptors, like bald eagles, that scavenge the remains of birds killed by avian flu are also becoming infected. For a backyard flock to be infected, just one sick bird can land in the same yard or pasture. It might eat or drink from a communal feeder or water source. A bird flying overhead can drop its feces in a poultry yard. Once just one domestic bird comes in contact with the virus, a whole flock can soon be infected.

Caretakers can also inadvertently spread the virus by tracking infected matter from one place to another, or by carrying the virus on their clothing after handling sick birds. Commercial flocks are especially at risk, as handlers often travel from one building to the next, tending to thousands of birds packed tightly together. Disease can spread in places like these within just a few days.

Unfortunately, due to how contagious avian influenza is, entire flocks must be culled once some of the birds have been infected. This includes all poultry on a single property, even if they were housed in different areas.

While fatal for birds, avian influenza is far less dangerous to humans. While it is a zoonotic disease, meaning it can pass to humans from other animals, transmission



ABOVE: A hen tends to a set of young chicks. **BELOW LEFT:** A flock of poultry feeds in a neighborhood enclosure. **BELOW RIGHT:** Chickens stand beside a patch of grass.

Photos by Rebecca Lexa



is extremely rare. The first U.S. case ever reported occurred in April, infecting a man

working on a commercial poultry farm in Colorado. This individual was involved in

culling a large number of infected poultry. Nine other people either participating in the cull or who were considered close contacts of the infected person all tested negative.

The majority of reported avian influenza cases among wild and domestic birds have occurred outside of the Pacific Flyway. Three other major U.S. flyways, particularly the Mississippi and Atlantic flyways, have been much harder hit. Most reported outbreaks in the U.S. section of the Pacific Flyway, which includes the Northwest region, have been in either wild birds or backyard flocks.

One of those reports comes from close to home for those of us here in the Columbia-Pacific region. Last month, a lab detected avian influenza from samples collected the day before from a backyard flock in Pacific County. Given how many waterfowl travel through our area during migration, it's not at all surprising that infected birds were among them.

To protect backyard flocks from infection, report sick birds to the appropriate fish and wildlife department. Keep domestic poultry flocks indoors when possible. Outdoor flocks can be covered to prevent wild birds from landing, while food sources should remain in coops or shelters to discourage wild birds from feeding among the flock. If you have multiple flocks, wear different clothing and footwear for each flock and wash your hands thoroughly before going to visit the next group. Be careful and sanitize items when needed.

As for bird feeders? Songbirds have not been found to be susceptible to avian influenza. That said, those with domestic poultry should bring in feeders, just to be safe. Otherwise, simply keep outdoor feeders clean.

Fortunately, avian influenza tends to taper off in warmer weather, so there's hope for the outbreak to subside over the summer months. Until case numbers decline, though, keep an eye out to protect both domestic and wild birds.

Rebecca Lexa is a naturalist, nature educator, tour guide and writer living on the Long Beach Peninsula. Find more about her work at rebeccalex.com.

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