

Recent Disease Outbreak in Some Songbirds

Summary

Beginning in May, Washington, D.C. and surrounding area wildlife rehabilitators began receiving an increase in fledgling European starlings, blue jays, and common grackles. These young birds present with neurological and/or ocular symptoms. The epicenter for these cases continues to be in Washington, DC, but cases have since been reported from TN, KY, VA, WV, MD, DE, IN, OH, FL, PA, NJ, and MI – primarily in the Mid-Atlantic and northern Midwest regions. Samples have been submitted to multiple diagnostic labs. As of 30 June, many of the lab results are still pending, and the cause of the disease remains unknown.

Affected Birds and Clinical Signs:

Age: fledgling or juvenile (no adults have been confirmed with this condition)

Species: European starling, blue Jay, and common grackle; a scattering of other species* has been reported, but these three are by far the most common species affected.

Ocular signs: squinting, discharge, eyes crusted shut, redness, swelling, uveitis, corneal edema and opacity, and hypopyon.

Neurologic signs: stumbling around (ataxia), not standing, rolling, tremors, excessive vocalizations, paraparesia.

Birds may have neurological signs, eye issues, or both. Most of the birds appear to be in good body condition [most likely still being fed by the adults].

At first, the eye lesions look similar to the conjunctivitis seen in house finches which is usually caused by *Mycoplasma gallisepticum* (MG). But unlike finches with MG, the infection does not appear to extend into the sinuses, however it does appear to affect the eyes themselves. As mentioned above, the birds may have corneal lesions, inflammation of the iris, and/or possibly pus inside the eye (hypopyon); many of these lesions can cause permanent vision damage.

*(American robins, Northern cardinals, Carolina chickadees, red-winged blackbirds, some raptor species)

Causes:

There has not been a confirmed diagnosis as to what is causing this condition. Many theories have been proposed – from neurotoxins, bacteria, or potentially as a result of pesticides used on cicadas, or the cicadas themselves. At this point, no one knows for sure if all of the cases are related to a single pathogen or toxicant, or if multiple agents are acting concurrently. Several pathologists and diagnostic labs are investigating to try and get to the bottom of the causative agent. Tests for Avian Influenza, New Castle Disease virus, West Nile virus, Chlamydia, and most commonly used pesticides have been negative.

Handling & Reporting:

It is not yet known whether this is an environmental toxin or contagious disease; therefore, gloves and a mask should be worn when handling these birds. Remember to change gloves before handling other birds.

Please practice good biosecurity. You should assume for now that this condition may be contagious to other birds.

Consult with your state agency regarding reporting of cases, handling of public inquiries, and disposition of carcasses.

Treatment:

Unfortunately, this disease appears to have 100% mortality. Some rehabilitation facilities attempted treatment early on in the outbreak, but none has had significant success.

Given the lack of any treatment success from multiple facilities and the lack of knowledge regarding the cause and transmissibility of this disease, many rehabilitators are electing humane euthanasia in birds exhibiting these signs to limit their suffering and limit the risk of spreading the disease within the facility.

Prevention:

Until we know for certain what the cause is, we must assume that it might be infectious. In areas where affected birds are being found, encourage people to stop feeding birds and remove all feeders until the event is over or a cause has been determined (some states are requiring this; check with your state wildlife agency). Instruct them after taking down feeders and bird baths, to thoroughly clean them, and then disinfect with a 10% bleach solution and allow them to air dry. Remind them to thoroughly wash their hands after handling bird feeders or baths. Instruct them to keep pets away from any sick or dead birds. And finally, ask them to please report any additional sick or dead birds they find.