



Bird Deaths In Mascoutah, Illinois and Erie, Pennsylvania

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1) Mascoutah, Illinois Red-winged Blackbird Deaths

Last weekend on October 16-17th, a large flock of birds migrating south through the mid-West landed in two fields near Mascoutah, Illinois. That's a small farm community about 30 miles southeast of St. Louis, Missouri. Residents noticed the birds were not moving and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources was notified. Their agents got into the fields to collect birds for analyses. Agents reported that all the birds - mostly male red-winged blackbirds, some grackles and other blackbirds - had their wings outstretched, laying tilted to one side with their beaks sticking straight down into the soil.



Male Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus*
© 1993 Kirtley Perkins.

As of October 21, 1999 the official count was 27,000 birds dead over twenty acres and the cause was declared deliberate poisoning of seed grain with the insecticide, Furadan. A reporter and photographer from the Belleville Illinois News Democrat got to the fields before all the birds had been picked up. I talked with Tim Vizer who is the newspaper's Chief Photographer about his assignment to Mascoutah.

Interview:

Tim Vizer, Chief Photographer, Belleville Illinois News Democrat,

Belleville, Illinois: "There were birds scattered, primarily red-winged blackbirds, scattered all over the ground, this wheat field, as far as the eye could see. Now they weren't piled up, but you couldn't walk through the field without having to really watch where you were. In fact, we weren't allowed to walk through the field. There were two Conservation officers there, one under cover. And they discouraged us from walking through the field just in case there was something toxic out there. They didn't want us tracking on our shoes. But if a person were to walk through the field, you would have to watch your step, that's how thick the birds were.

YOU WERE LOOKING AT RED-WINGED BLACKBIRDS THIS BEAUTIFUL

BIRD THAT'S ON THE FEDERAL REGISTRY OF PROTECTED SPECIES WHAT WENT THROUGH YOUR MIND?

I like all animals and I like to photograph animals. It bothered me to see this many dead birds. I had photographed red-winged blackbirds before. I have done photo stories of animals and nature scenes in the area. And it really just was shocking to see this many birds at one time all dead."

Deliberate Use of Insecticide to Kill Birds?

YESTERDAY, OCTOBER 20TH, THE ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES RECEIVED THE LAB ANALYSES FROM THE BIRD NECROPSIES THAT CONFIRMED CAUSE OF DEATH WAS INGESTION OF A DANGEROUS INSECTICIDE USED TO CONTROL ALFALFA WEEVIL, SO DANGEROUS THAT USERS ARE REQUIRED TO GET A LICENSE FROM THE DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE BEFORE USING THE STRICTLY CONTROLLED POISON. THE FARMLAND IS OWNED BY HARVEY AND MARILYN CULLI WHO HAVE REFUSED SO FAR TO TALK TO THE MEDIA.

JOE KAYOTT IN THE PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICE AT THE ILLINOIS NATURAL RESOURCES DEPARTMENT IN SPRINGFIELD TALKED WITH ME ABOUT THEIR CONCLUSION THAT THE INSECTICIDE WAS DELIBERATELY USED TO KILL BIRDS.

Joe Kayott, Public Information Officer, Illinois Natural Resources Department, Springfield, Illinois: "It appears now that it was a commonly used agriculture insecticide called Furadan that was purposely applied to some grain that was then spread in the field apparently for the sole purpose of eliminating a population of black birds that were perceived by at least some one to be a nuisance. The Animal Disease Laboratory in Centralia, Illinois where the dead birds have been taken for tests has confirmed the use of the insecticide, or at least that the birds had in fact ingested grain that had been treated with that insecticide. We're continuing the investigation working jointly with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Attorney General's Office here in Illinois. And the land owner is cooperating in the investigation.

IS THE LAND OWNER THE ONE RESPONSIBLE?

The investigation continues. But again this was not simply something that was applied as a standard operating procedure or used as properly labeled. This was done specifically. The grain was specifically and purposely contaminated for the sole purpose of killing the birds.

WHAT IS THE PENALTY FOR POISONING WILDLIFE IN SUCH A HUGE NUMBER?

You know what, until they complete the investigation and we know exactly what the charges are, we can't speculate on penalties. However, I can tell you of the 25,000 birds that have been killed 80% of them have been red-winged blackbirds which is a migratory species that are federally protected. So the Fish and Wildlife Service has intense interest in this. It's truly a terrible situation. Boggles the mind!

IF YOU WERE GOING TO ESTIMATE HOW LONG IT'S GOING TO BE BEFORE THEY DO SOMETHING HERE IN FILING CHARGES?

I asked that very question this morning and they wanted to assure me that now they know the cause, they want to take their time and do a very thorough investigation and make sure they don't leave any stones unturned and make sure they have all the evidence they need to pursue whatever is necessary. They are going to be very patient and make sure they do it right."

THE INSECTICIDE *FURADAN* COMES WITH PAGES OF WARNINGS AND INSTRUCTIONS THAT CAUTION HOW TO COVER UP SKIN AND USE A DUST/MIST FILTERING RESPIRATOR. THE LABEL STATES:

"This pesticide is toxic to fish, birds and other wildlife. Birds feeding on treated areas might be killed."

THE INSTRUCTIONS ALSO NOTE IN CAPITAL LETTERS THAT USE OF THE PRODUCT FOR BAITING IS A FEDERAL CRIMINAL AND CIVIL OFFENSE. FINES CAN RANGE UP TO \$25,000 OR MORE DEPENDING ON WHICH STATUTES ARE VIOLATED.

2) Erie, Pennsylvania Gulls Dying

Poison is also suspected in the mysterious deaths of more than 200 Ring Billed and Black Backed Sea Gulls at Presque Isle Park in Erie, Pennsylvania on the southeastern shore of Lake Erie. Some eyewitnesses reported seeing gulls literally fall out of the sky while flying and land dead in the water. Others described birds that weren't able to walk or fly and were just sitting on the ground as if in a stupor. I asked Harry Leslie, Park Operations Manager for Presque Isle State Park, how many dead gulls they have been finding on a weekly basis?



Great Black-backed Gull *Larus Marinus* © 1999 by Martin Reid.



Ring-billed Gulls *Larus delawarensis* © 1998 by Marin Reid.

Harry Leslie, Park Operations Manager, Presque Isle State Park, Erie,

Pennsylvania: "Last Saturday, October 9th, we collected 27 birds. And then last Friday, October 15th, we collected 24 on the same shoreline that we collected just the week prior to that. So, it doesn't appear that the numbers are getting greater or less. It seems to be fairly consistent. Again, to reiterate, all these birds we're collecting are along the surf zone of the shoreline of the peninsula which are indicating that they are either coming down and dying right in that area, or washing ashore along in that area as we stick out into Lake Erie by seven miles.

SINCE THIS HAS BEEN GOING ON SINCE JULY, IT SOUNDS AS IF THE NUMBERS INCREASED AND HAVE BEEN REMAINING STEADY ON A WEEKLY BASIS, SUGGESTING THAT WHATEVER IT IS, IS STILL PRESENT AND AFFECTING BIRDS ON A FRESH BASIS?

Yeah, that information is being relayed not only to the Wildlife Center, but also to the investigating agencies that are looking into this. In Pennsylvania, it's the Pennsylvania Game Commission. You're exactly right - those numbers - there are some collection differences between how we did it initially and how we're doing it now. But at least over the recent haul the last three weeks, the numbers seem to be fairly consistent.

AMONG YOUR PRIVATE CONVERSATIONS WITH PEOPLE IN THE VARIOUS AGENCIES, WHAT HAS BEEN THE SPECULATION AND CONCERN ABOUT WHAT COULD BE HAPPENING?

Obviously, the first thing we're looking at, especially with this report that's been written to us, is there any source of contamination that can be identified anywhere? Investigations are going on within the immediate vicinity of those type of things as well as continuing to send in specimens as requested by the Wildlife Center and to see if there is any more information that can be identified through their testing.

IS IT TRUE ALSO THAT BLOOD HAS BEEN COMING FROM THEIR MOUTHS?

That's one of the signs we've had that they were bleeding internally and that was relayed to the lab."

Lab Analysis of Dead Gulls

I DID TALK WITH A BIOLOGIST AND WILDLIFE DISEASE SPECIALIST AT THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE HEALTH CENTER IN MADISON, WISCONSIN. KATHRYN CONVERSE HAS WORKED AT THE HIGHLY RESPECTED LAB SINCE RECEIVING HER PH.D. IN FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE BIOLOGY IN 1985 FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS. DR. CONVERSE EXPLAINED THAT SINCE THE SEA GULL DEATHS STARTED AT THE END OF JULY LIKE THE DOZENS OF CROWS THAT DIED FROM WEST NILE FEVER VIRUS IN CONNECTICUT, NEW YORK AND NEW JERSEY HER LAB IS ALSO COORDINATING WITH THE CENTER FOR DISEASE CONTROL TO TEST THE GULLS FOR ANY EVIDENCE OF WEST NILE VIRUS. DR. CONVERSE WAS INVOLVED IN NEW YORK DOING BLOOD WORK ON WEST NILE AFFECTED CROWS.

THE NEW YORK STATE HEALTH DEPARTMENT SAID ON OCTOBER 15TH THAT TWO MORE CASES OF WEST NILE FEVER VIRUS HAD BEEN CONFIRMED IN A CUCKOO BIRD AND A CROW FOUND DEAD NORTH OF ALBANY, NEW YORK. DR. CONVERSE DOUBTS THAT THE GULLS ARE INFECTED WITH THE VIRUS, BUT EXPLAINED THE NEED TO TEST FOR IT ANYWAY.

Kathryn Converse, Ph.D., Wildlife Disease Specialist, National Wildlife Health Center, U. S. Geological Survey, Madison, Wisconsin: "From the ones we have in, we have some tests pending, but what we're doing first on them because they're from Pennsylvania and because of the work that's been going on with the West Nile Virus.

THAT WAS ONE OF MY QUESTIONS.

We're running virus isolation on them so at this point the other types of lab analyses are somewhat on hold until we finish and get the results of that. And as soon as we get a positive or a negative on the West Nile Virus we're expecting to get a negative but we want to clear that first. And once we've gotten a negative on West Nile, we'll continue with other tests just because we don't want to be sending West Nile Virus tissues all over the place.

IS THERE ANYTHING ABOUT THESE SYMPTOMS OF THE HEMORRHAGING THAT WOULD BE CONSISTENT WITH ANY KNOWLEDGE KNOWN ABOUT BIRDS CONTRACTING SOMETHING LIKE WEST NILE FEVER VIRUS?

No, at this point we haven't seen any changes in the birds that would indicate that it is West Nile Virus. This is more of a rule out that just because mortality is going on and it is in Pennsylvania which is certainly near enough to the New York area. At this point we don't have confirmation of West Nile Virus in any gulls.

I TALKED YESTERDAY WITH THE PARK SUPERINTENDENT AT PRESQUE ISLE STATE PARK, HARRY LESLIE. HE SAID THAT AS OF YESTERDAY THE COUNT ON THE GULLS THEY HAD BROUGHT IN FROM THEIR SURF ZONE WAS OVER 207. THEY ARE NOW GOING OUT AND COLLECTING EVERY FEW DAYS. THE COUNT HASN'T GONE DOWN AND IT HASN'T GONE UP, BUT IT'S REMAINING ON A STEADY DEATH

DOES THAT SUGGEST THAT WHATEVER IS THERE, IS STILL PRESENT?

There is some concern which has been expressed to us from within the field and one of the things that we will be ruling out on the birds is the possibility of them being exposed to a rodenticide. And this is because we have been seeing an unusual amount of hemorrhaging in the birds that does not seem to be associated with any type of injury or trauma.

RODENTICIDE WOULD BE WHAT?

Rodenticides are compounds that are primarily used to remove rodents when there is a problem with rodents. And usually it's a compound and one of the side effects of the compounds used for rodenticide is hemorrhage. There is blood thinning.

THIS WOULD SUGGEST THAT THIS POISON MIGHT BE ACTUALLY IN THE WATER IN LAKE ERIE IN A QUANTITY HIGH ENOUGH TO KILL THESE GULLS?

No, it wouldn't be in the water. The thought would be if in fact that's what's occurring, it would be a non-target species. It would be more a type of poisoning where the gulls would not be the intended target, but because gulls have a tendency to feed in land filled areas and other types of places that might have a rodent control problem, the gulls could have possibly been either catching or eating rodents that have ingested the rodenticide, so it would be a secondary poisoning. Or they may be attracted to whatever the bait is used to make the rodenticide available to the rodents.

COULD YOU COMMENT ON WHAT I UNDERSTAND WERE SOME TURQUOISE-COLORED SPECKS FOUND IN THE STOMACHS OF

SOME OF THE GULLS THAT WERE ANALYZED AT YOUR LAB?

There are several different pesticides and there is apparently at least one rodenticide that does have that color. The coloring is used primarily to identify if you have seeds that have been treated. The color is present and indicates that the treatment is there. It's not part of the specific chemical compound actually. It's color that's been added, so it's not a very definite way of defining what the compound would have been.

BUT IT SORT OF GIVES YOU A QUICK HEADS UP WHEN YOU GO INTO STOMACH OR INTESTINAL CONTENT AND FIND THIS KIND OF SPECK?

Sure. In the past in other cases, we've often found purple specks or blue specks or gold specks - colors that are not naturally occurring foods or naturally occurring within any animal, it is of course recorded as one of the things that we would flag for further investigation.

IN YOUR YEARS OF WORKING AT THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE CENTER, HAVE YOU EVER SEEN ANYTHING QUITE LIKE THIS IN THE GULL POPULATION OR OTHER BIRD POPULATION THE HEMORRHAGING AND THIS SORT OF STEADY SUSTAINED DEATHS LIKE THIS?

I haven't particularly seen a situation with rodenticide in gulls with this high number of birds affected. I have seen rodenticide in Canada geese.

DO THEY HEMORRHAGE AND BLEED OUT OF THEIR MOUTHS AS WELL?

That's one of the indications - hemorrhage that's present with no indication as to why it's occurring. In other words, there are no cuts or bruises or trauma, but hemorrhage is present. That is an indication that in that animal for some reason its blood was not clotting properly, either because of some underlying condition or because it had ingested a medication that caused that.

IS THAT A COMMON SIDE AFFECT OF POISONING BY PESTICIDES, BLEEDING FROM THE MOUTH?

No, it is more commonly seen with rodenticides.

HAS THERE BEEN ANY SIMILARITY IN NECROPSY FINDINGS BETWEEN THE CROWS AFFECTED BY WEST NILE FEVER VIRUS AND THE LAKE ERIE GULLS?

The main finding in the birds that we received that appear to be positive for West Nile Virus is that they have enlarged, very large spleens. Other than that, there really haven't been any characteristic findings that we see when we examine the birds internally. Most of the changes that confirm that it appears to be a virus are changes that we see microscopically in the tissues - brain, liver, spleen. The findings for West Nile Virus are more microscopic, rather than what you can see grossly with the naked eye.

COULD YOU SEE ANY ENLARGEMENTS IN THE SPLEENS OF THE GULLS FROM ERIE?

I looked quickly through the three cases we have on-going at this point and I haven't seen - the statements are that the spleens are within normal limits for size and shape. So basically, the reason for testing the gulls has been based on the proximity of the area in which the mortality is occurring to New York and New Jersey.

THE FACT THAT THE CROW AND CUCKOO WERE FOUND AND REPORTED OCTOBER 15TH NORTH OF ALBANY?

The fact that there have been some observations by people that the gulls were showing some clinical signs of neurological changes. Many times if you have a bird that is very ill, especially if you have a bird that's near death, you'll often see what appears to be neurological changes and they are more associated with the fact that the animal is dying."

More Information:

By the end of October, Dr. Converse hopes to have the results of both the West Nile Fever Virus and avian botulism tests. She expects to confirm a rodenticide as cause of death, or another toxin. But where IS the source of the toxin? That's what the Pennsylvania Game Commission and other authorities are trying to find out.

In Mascoutah, Illinois, the poisonous contamination of the fields might be so extensive that other migrating birds such as Canadian Geese could be affected as well. Already there are reports that red-tail hawks, owls, coyotes, possum and raccoon have been found sick in the area. The next step is expected to be federal legal action against the people responsible for the illegally baited killing fields.

Credits

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