Avian cholera has been found for the first time in Alaska. Die-off on St. Paul Island. This is one of the first 3 dead birds sent to a biologist in Nome, who sent them to a USGS lab in Wisconsin that made the avian cholera diagnosis.

SHEFFIELD UAF-MAP

Hundreds of dead sea birds found on the beaches of St. Lawrence Island were the victims of Alaska’s first detected avian cholera outbreak, officials said this week.
One hunter in Gambell spotted a bird on the beach, its head flopping backward, said Kimberlee Beckmen, a wildlife veterinarian with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. The bird acted like it was having a seizure. Then it dropped dead.

Avian cholera, common in certain areas of the Lower 48 and Canada, causes mass die-offs of wild birds in places like California, Nevada and Texas. The fast-spreading disease can kill birds in six to 12 hours, though it isn’t much of a threat to humans.

"It’s super, super common," Beckmen said. "The only unusual part is us finding a die-off in Alaska."

The outbreak on St. Lawrence Island -- 200 miles from the mainland in the Bering Sea -- is apparently already declining, wildlife authorities said. Seabird carcasses are also less plentiful than expected, according to reports from the island villages of Gambell and Savoonga during a teleconference Friday. A local biologist will try to get an aerial count of infected birds or carcasses next week.

Authorities learned about the sea bird die-off Nov. 20, according to a Fish and Game press release issued this week. Residents in Gambell and Savoonga, worried something in the environment killed the birds, notified them. Early reports put the number of dead birds at 200 to 300 bird per square kilometer.

Most of the birds turned up in Savoonga on a 10-mile beach frequented by seal hunters.

"People out there did a fabulous job of responding, reporting, getting the word out," said Gay Sheffield, a Nome-based biologist with the University of Alaska’s Marine Advisory Program. "It’s only because of their actions that we’re learning what this is all about."

Sheffield received three bird carcasses: a northern fulmar, a common subarctic resident that’s white and gray; a thick-billed murre, a black and white bird in the auk family; and a black crested auklet, a small, deep-diving seabird with a distinctive plume above its bill. She sent the birds for testing to a U.S. Geological Survey lab in Madison, Wis.

The avian cholera diagnosis came back Wednesday, according to the Fish and Game press release.

Officials warn anyone touching a sick bird or animal to wear gloves and wash hands with soap and water after handling animals or butchering meat. Never eat sick birds or animals that may have died from a disease.

State wildlife officials working with Sheffield and community representatives on Friday came up with a typically Alaskan solution to dispose of any bird carcasses locals find.

Usually, diseased bird or animal carcasses are burned or buried. Even dead birds still have high numbers of bacteria and can infect other birds.

But, it being December, the ground is frozen on St. Lawrence Island. Burning the birds' bodies would take fuel. That’s an expensive solution, given the high cost of diesel in rural Alaska. It would also leave petroleum waste on the beach.

Instead, residents will don protective gloves to pick up what carcasses they find and put them into doubled garbage bags. Then they'll wait for the spring burial season and put them in the dump. Or maybe the bodies will go into another Alaskan landmark, a 55-gallon drum.

Either way, the birds will decompose away from scavengers that could spread infection.

"The bacteria probably won't last through the winter," Beckmen said.

That bacteria is a strain of Pasteurella multocida, a wholly different type of bacteria than the one that causes
cholera in humans.

Alaska's first reported case of avian cholera isn't the first in the north. Previous die-offs of common eiders and snow geese have been reported in Nunavut and Banks Island in Canada, as well as Russia, according to state veterinarian Robert Gerlach, who works within the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation.

Wildlife officials say it's possible other avian cholera die-offs have occurred, undetected in Alaska because of the state's huge but sparsely populated coastline.

"It's not surprising this happened here," Gerlach said. "We get 6 million birds migrating back and forth."

The size of Alaska's avian cholera outbreak, while reportedly in the hundreds, is actually considerably smaller than similar events in other places, Beckmen said.

"There are seabird die-offs in the Bering Sea that wash into villages all the time," she said. "For this disease, actually, these numbers are really small, which makes me think there's a lot more birds that died somewhere else that we didn't see."

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