

WSU research biologist says only matter of time before avian flu virus reaches U.S.

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It's only a matter of time before the avian flu virus reaches the United States, according to a research biologist at Wright State University who said the key is following the migratory patterns of birds.

Thomas Van't Hof, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of biological sciences and ornithologist who has studied different bird species for many years as part of his research in comparative physiology.

“By knowing the migratory patterns of birds and areas where species overlap while traveling between their breeding sites and winter grounds, one can predict precisely where problems will occur,” he explained.

The scientist said birds migrating south from China, where the deadly flu first showed up, likely made contact with species in Bangladesh and Burma that were migrating west through southern India to Turkey. This is how the virus reached Russia and Eastern Europe, and with birds from Europe now migrating south through Turkey to Africa that region will soon be exposed. Van't Hof said links between Asia and North America may take longer to surface, but this will ultimately take place.

“North American waterfowl and shorebirds will likely have contact with species breeding on the Siberian/Western Arctic tundra, which will ultimately infect bird populations in North America and South America. There is really no populated area of the world that will be immune.” He said knowing these migratory patterns can help us prepare for the avian flu virus in the future. “The more precisely we know the migratory

patterns of birds, the better we can predict where exposure will occur. We can then be better prepared if the virus should mutate to a form that will infect humans,” he said.

Van’t Hof spent nine years with the Research Center for Ornithology of the Max-Planck Society in Germany before coming to WSU four years ago.

Source: Wright State University

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