

Power line blamed for bird kill in Louisiana

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Assistant State Veterinarian Dr. Brandon Doss examines dead red-winged blackbirds at the Arkansas Livestock and Poultry Commission Diagnostic Laboratory in Little Rock, Ark., Monday, Jan. 3, 2011. Scientists are investigating whether bad weather, fireworks or poison might have forced more than 3,000 red-winged blackbirds out of the sky, or if a disoriented bird simply led the flock into the ground. (AP Photo/Danny Johnston)

(AP) -- It isn't easy being a blackbird in the South.

First, New Year's Eve fireworks were blamed in central Arkansas for making thousands of blackbirds confused, crashing into homes, cars and each other. Then 300 miles to the south in Louisiana, [power lines likely killed about 450 birds](#), littering a highway near Baton Rouge.

It's almost certainly a coincidence the events happened within days of each other, Louisiana's state wildlife veterinarian Jim LaCour said

Tuesday. "I haven't found anything to link the two at this point."

Mass bird deaths aren't uncommon. The U.S. Geological Service's website listed about 90 mass deaths of birds and other wildlife from June through Dec. 12. There were five deaths of at least 1,000 birds, with the largest near Houston, Minn., where parasite infestations killed about 4,000 water birds between Sept. 6 and Nov. 26.

In Louisiana, the birds died sometime late Sunday or early Monday in the rural Pointe Coupee Parish community of Labarre, about 30 miles northwest of Baton Rouge. The birds - a mixed flock of red-winged blackbirds, brown-headed cowbirds, grackles and starlings - may have hit a [power line](#) or vehicles in the dark, LaCour said. Two dozen of them had head, neck, beak or back injuries.

About 50 dead birds were near a power line 30 or 40 feet from Louisiana Highway 1. About a quarter-mile away, a second group of 400 or more stretched from the power line and across the highway, he said.

Dan Cristol, a biology professor and co-founder of the Institute for Integrative [Bird Behavior](#) Studies at the College of William & Mary, said the Louisiana birds may have been ill or startled from their roost, then hit the power line.

"They don't hit a power line for no reason," he said.

In Beebe, New Year's revelers spent the holiday weekend cleaning up dead red-winged blackbirds. Some speculated that bad weather was to blame. Others said one confused bird could have led the group in a fatal plunge. A few spooked schoolkids guessed the birds committed mass suicide.

Officials acknowledged, though, they may never know exactly what

caused the large number of deaths.

Cristol was skeptical of the fireworks theory, unless "somebody blew something into the roost, literally blowing the birds into the sky."

Wildlife officials in both Arkansas and Louisiana sent carcasses to researchers at the National Wildlife Health Center in Madison, Wis. and the University of Georgia.

LaCour said he didn't expect results for at least two or three weeks.

In 1999, several thousand grackles fell from the sky and staggered about before dying in north Louisiana. It took five months to get the diagnosis: an E. coli infection of the air sacs in their skulls.

"I hope things go faster than that," said Paul Slota, branch chief for the National Wildlife Health Center in Madison, Wis. He said necropsies of the Arkansas [birds](#) began Tuesday afternoon.

"If it isn't strictly trauma, it may take more time to get results back," he said. "When nothing shows up, you run the tests longer and let it incubate longer."

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