

## **BIRD FLU FEARS**

**By James H. Phillips**

**W**ould you risk death to shoot a duck?

This is the question hunters will ask themselves this autumn if, as predicted, the new, deadly strain of bird flu is detected in North American waterfowl.

The threat facing hunters is greater than for the general population because the virus in its present form is transmitted from bird-to-human. Most hunters come into direct contact with each duck they kill, during the retrieve and when picking and gutting it in preparation for cooking. The latter greatly increases the risk of infection. As the American Council on Science and Health notes, most human cases confirmed to date involve individuals who “slaughter and clean the birds themselves.”

This contrasts starkly with most members of the general public who rarely come into contact with a living or recently killed bird. The public's fear is the pandemic that health authorities predict would erupt if the H5N1 strain mutated into a form that fostered human-to-human transmission.

The salient facts for waterfowl hunters *at this time* boil down to this: The odds are very low that you will kill a duck this autumn carrying the virus. The risk is even lower that you will become infected. But if you bag one and become infected, the odds are very high that you will die. More than half of the individuals infected to date have died. The council cites these dire statistics: “In the first 175 cases of bird-to-human transmission of H5N1, there were 96 deaths. This mortality rate of 54 percent is one reason public health authorities worldwide are so concerned.”

A number of European and Asian nations this year banned the spring shooting of waterfowl, including Russia, a nation never celebrated for being overly concerned about the health and welfare of its citizens.

What does this mean for those of us who hunt ducks and geese?

Authorities believe migratory birds – particularly waterfowl and shorebirds – that cross the Bering Strait from Asia to Alaska this spring will introduce the virus into North America. The “Asian” birds will mingle with and infect nesting and molting “native” birds that migrate the length and breadth of the North American continent, which will expose other migratory and resident populations to the virus.

Government agencies have begun extensively monitoring and testing some 30 species in Alaska. Given the unexpected, rapid advance of the virus this spring into Europe, many believe it could spread rapidly across Canada and the United States.

Concern is particularly worrisome along the Pacific Coast, where many Alaska-nesting waterfowl spend the winter. The situation is viewed with such gravity in the Pacific Flyway that today – six months before the start of the hunting season – duck and goose hunters are being warned to take protective measures.

Hunters are advised to wear latex gloves when handling or cleaning ducks this autumn. Knives and scissors should be washed in a bleach solution, as well as counter or table tops. The ducks when cooked should be heated to a minimum temperature of 165 degrees.

Hunters should disinfect waders and decoys after each hunt by immersing them in a bleach solution. Hunters also should carefully wash their hands in soap and water, or dip them in a bleach solution, after handling ducks or going into the field.

These precautions are believed sufficient to kill the virus.

Some worry less about the disease than the future of waterfowl hunting. They fear that if the strain is detected in our wild flocks authorities may close this autumn's waterfowl hunting season, as happened this spring in parts of Europe and Asia. Others fear a quarantine may be imposed on areas where infected birds are found – and this may be the area where you hunt.

What should each of us do?

Most authorities suggest that it is too soon to decide whether waterfowl hunting this autumn poses too great a risk. New reports will be issued in the next few months about the incidence of infection in Alaska and possibly elsewhere in the United States. We should pay close attention to updated reports and advisories.

Each of us should carefully scrutinize information coming from governmental agencies and organizations with a vested interest in the continuation of waterfowl hunting. In the past many of these organizations have tended to downplay risks to human health from game animals and fish.

An example of the latter occurred recently when the California Waterfowl Association sent out an e-mail teaser declaring “the virus will need to mutate to a human virus in order to affect humans and no one knows if or when this might happen.” This ethically unconscionable statement is patently false – as graveyards attest.

Why would wildlife agencies downplay the risk? The answer can be found in CWA's assertion that “rational and sound decisions regarding avian flu are our best defense against hunting restrictions and the detrimental effects that such restrictions would have on wetland conservation.” Our wildlife agencies and organizations are more concerned about their financial health than our physical survival.

By the same token, many health and disease-tracking agencies – as well as the media – tend to dramatize the danger because of the potential for a pandemic. It is important to note that if a pandemic erupts, our concerns as waterfowlers will become moot.

To date the only reassuring finding – if reassuring is the proper adjective in this case – is that, as the council points out, “The current virus is not easily transmitted from bird to human.” This is as true for those who slaughter and clean birds as those who do not.

Ultimately, each of us will need to individually decide whether the risk of continued waterfowl hunting is acceptable. A number of waterfowl hunters already have dropped out.

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If we take care of the ducks, the ducks will take care of us.

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