

Citizen Scientists on guard for West Nile Virus

Port Rowan, ON, 23 October 2002: When most people think of West Nile Virus, they think of its effects on people. Despite the publicity surrounding its human impact, the virus is primarily one that affects birds. And just what kind of effect is it having on birds? Researchers at Bird Studies Canada invite bird-feeding enthusiasts to help them find out.

Since 1976 Bird Studies Canada has been conducting Project FeederWatch (PFW), a winter bird survey that invites bird enthusiasts of all ages, skill levels, and backgrounds to count the numbers and kinds of birds that visit their feeders from November through early April. Researchers analyze the data to determine changes in population distribution and abundance of some 100 species that regularly visit feeders.

Although crows and jays were among the first species known to be affected by West Nile Virus, more than 110 species of birds have been infected, according to the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP). What will this mean for North America's beloved feeder birds?

"Because Project FeederWatch has more than 25 years' worth of data, we have a strong baseline to determine population changes in recent years that may be attributable to West Nile virus," says Becky Whittam, Canadian Coordinator, PFW. "But to be able to make an accurate assessment, we need as many people as possible to tell us which bird species they're seeing at their feeders and in what numbers."

The CDCP points out that the virus is spread among birds and to people by mosquitoes, and reassures that there is no connection between bird feeding and West Nile Virus.

Currently, almost 17,000 "citizen scientists" from across Canada and the U.S. are signed up for the project and contribute their observations to researchers. Participants count birds for as long or as little time as they wish on select days throughout the winter. They may submit their observations over the Internet or on paper forms sent by regular mail. Data are combined and the findings are published in scientific journals, magazines and through BSC's web site.

FeederWatch data have already contributed to important breakthroughs in scientist's understanding of bird diseases. In recent years, FeederWatchers have been helping track the spread of mycoplasmal conjunctivitis, or "House Finch eye disease." The illness primarily affects a common bird called the House Finch, manifesting itself in the form of swollen, crusty eyes and frequently leading to blindness and eventually death as the birds starve or are caught by predators. Results of the study were published in the prestigious Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. Researchers continue to rely on project participants to help them understand the dynamics of this disease and why it persists.

Project FeederWatch also produced the first study to document cyclical changes in Varied Thrush abundance and the irruptive movements of the Common Redpoll. “These findings have been possible simply because so many bird-feeding enthusiasts are serving as our eyes and ears, since researchers can’t be everywhere at once,” says Whittam. “Involving the public in our research is the best way to acquire vast amounts of data.”

Participants in Project FeederWatch receive a Research Kit that includes a full-colour feeder-bird poster, a bird-feeding calendar, and the FeederWatcher’s Handbook containing bird-feeding tips and other useful information. They receive summaries of FeederWatch data and other findings in Bird Studies Canada’s quarterly publication, BirdWatch Canada. The \$25 fee helps offset the cost of materials and data analysis and provides membership in Bird Studies Canada.

FeederWatchers and others especially look forward each year to the “FeederWatch Top 10 List”, the 10 most frequently reported species in North America. This year’s list reads: 10) House Sparrow; 9) American Robin; 8) White-breasted Nuthatch; 7) Northern Cardinal; 6) Blue Jay; 5) American Goldfinch; 4) House Finch; 3) Downy Woodpecker; 2) Mourning Dove; and the species most frequently reported by FeederWatchers is 1) Dark-eyed Junco.

For more information about Project FeederWatch or to sign up, call Bird Studies Canada at 888-448-2473 (Americans, contact Cornell Lab of Ornithology at 800-843-2473) or visit the FeederWatch web site at www.bsc-eoc.org.

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