

United Nations Report: Bird Flu Could Reach U.S. in Six Months

Associated Press

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UNITED NATIONS — The virulent H5N1 strain of bird flu could reach the Americas in six to 12 months or even sooner as infected wild birds migrate toward the Arctic and Alaska, the U.N. bird flu chief said.

Migratory patterns will probably take birds carrying the virus from West Africa to the Arctic and Alaska this spring, Dr. David Nabarro said Wednesday. Some infected birds will then likely move south in the fall on a migratory route to the Americas.

"I think it's within the next six to 12 months," Nabarro told a news conference, "And who knows — we've been wrong on other things, it may be earlier."

The H5N1 strain has spread rapidly through Asia and Europe and recently reached Africa, devastating poultry stocks. Virtually all people who have gotten bird flu have had close contact with infected poultry.

Human cases are uncommon, but scientists worry that the virus may mutate into a form that can pass easily between people and lead to a worldwide flu epidemic.

Nabarro reiterated the World Health Organization's warning that "there will be a pandemic sooner or later" in humans, perhaps due to H5N1, or perhaps another influenza virus, and it could start any time.

"Because it is moving and because we believe wild birds are implicated, predicting where it's going to flare up next is a very tricky thing to do, and being able to know the scale of the flare-up is also quite tricky," Nabarro said.

Nabarro said the United Nations was focusing on controlling the H5N1 strain in domestic poultry through slaughters and vaccinations. The focus at the moment is on Africa, especially West Africa, where 50 percent of people live on less than \$1 a day and many families rely on chickens for their livelihoods, he said.

"There is a regional crisis in West Africa," with outbreaks in Nigeria and Niger, Nabarro said. "But we are frankly anticipating that we will find the virus in other West African countries and there is a lot of preparatory work under way."

In Western Europe, several countries have detected H5N1 in dead wild birds, but there have been few cases in domestic and commercial poultry populations, he said.

One or two cats are also reported to have H5N1, and the WHO says more research is needed on transmission to other mammals, he said.

The U.S. government hopes to test 75,000 to 100,000 live or dead birds this year, a significant increase over past years, with the effort focused on Alaska, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture officials.

"Some of the challenges we face now are really quite dramatic and call for a lot of technical expertise," Nabarro said.

For example, the FAO reported in September that wild birds are able to carry the H5N1 strain while remaining asymptomatic, yet swans in Western Europe are dying from the strain and nobody knows why, he said.

Nabarro said an international conference on wild birds will be held in June and will hopefully include the results of research now under way. The next major international review of global bird flu efforts will also be in June, he said.

FDA Report Shows How Company Missed Toxin That Killed Dogs

The Food and Drug Administration has found that Diamond Pet Foods failed to follow company guidelines for aflatoxin testing prior to shipping contaminated products that apparently killed dozens of dogs.

Diamond voluntarily recalled the products on Dec. 21. According to statements from the company, Diamond cooperated fully with the FDA and supports the findings of the investigation.

"The company has taken the necessary actions to prevent these oversights from happening in the future," according to the company.

The FDA inspection showed that 16 batches of Diamond pet food manufactured between Sept. 1 and Nov. 30, 2005, at a plant in Gaston, S.C., contained aflatoxin in amounts meeting or exceeding the action level of 20 ppb—with one sample reaching 376 ppb.

Aflatoxin, which can cause severe liver damage, is a byproduct of the growth of certain fungi on corn and other crops. Corn is an ingredient in many Diamond pet foods, and the company tests incoming shipments for aflatoxin. However, the FDA found that four shipments of whole corn between Sept. 16 and Nov. 21 at the Gaston plant showed high aflatoxin concentrations—ranging from 90 ppb to 1,851 ppb.

The FDA also found the following:

- Records for incoming shipments didn't always document whether anyone conducted aflatoxin testing or whether the test was performing properly.
- Confirmatory testing of corn samples for aflatoxin showed four false-negative tests and two false-positive tests.
- More than half the retention samples were missing for corn shipments between Sept. 1 and Nov. 30.

In response to the situation, according to the company, "Diamond has strengthened its testing procedures on incoming shipments of corn and initiated final product testing as an additive step to its procedures. This additional step will provide an extra layer of protection prior to the bagging and shipping of products."

Details about the recall are available from Diamond at www.diamondpet.com. Details of the investigation are available from the FDA Center for Veterinary Medicine at www.fda.gov/cvm/.

The FDA regulates pet food under the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act. Other manufacturers have voluntarily recalled pet food for various reasons, such as *Salmonella* contamination, in the past several years. The Center for Veterinary Medicine also posts recall notices on its Web site.

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About the Photo in This Issue...

The Harlequin Duck (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) is a small, relatively uncommon sea duck. It gets its English name from characters in Italian comedy that wear masks and have oddly painted costumes. The colourful male, or drake, is one of the most attractive of sea ducks. At an average weight of less than 700 g for males and less than 600 g for females, the species is roughly half the size of an average Mallard.

It is characterized by slate blue plumage, chestnut flanks, and streaks of white on its head and body. The most distinctive markings on the head are a crescent-shaped white patch at the base of the short bill and a round white ear patch. The belly is slate grey.

Females and young birds lack the lustre of the drakes. The female has plain, brownish-grey colouring that is darkest on its head, a white patch extending below and in front of each eye, and a prominent white ear patch. The belly is white with brown speckles. Young birds strongly resemble the adult females. They have the white spot between the bill and eyes, as well as the prominent round ear patch. However, the feathers on the upper body of the young are darker than those of adult females, and the belly is more finely barred, giving an overall greyer appearance. The young males achieve some adult features during their first winter, but do not grow full adult plumage until two or three years of age.

Harlequin Ducks have an unusual life history. During most of the year, these birds are found in coastal marine environments. However, in spring they leave the salt water to ascend fast-flowing rivers and streams to breed.

During winter, Harlequin Ducks congregate at traditional sites to feed in the swirling waters of shallow and rocky coastal areas. In northern wintering areas, they seek rocky shores and ledges near turbulent water where ice buildup is minimal.

Like many other waterfowl, male Harlequin Ducks leave the breeding areas once the female begins to incubate, or warm the eggs, usually by mid-June to early July. After leaving their mates, males migrate to specific sites to undergo their annual moult, or shedding of old feathers. Females normally join males at these sites and moult one to two months later.

Harlequin Ducks are also called "rock ducks" due to their habit of hauling out on rocks. Other local names include "lords and ladies," "ladybirds," "white-eyed divers," "painted ducks," and "totem-pole ducks."

I photographed this drake Harlequin Duck in Monterey, California in August 2004..

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