

School of Environment and Natural Resources

What is Going on with the Birds? Mysterious Illness Affecting Ohio Birds

Marne Titchenell, Extension Program Specialist - Wildlife, School of Environment and Natural Resources, The Ohio State University.

Recently, there have been reports of ill or dying birds found around Ohio and in nearby states. These birds often have swollen eyes, discharge from their eyes that may appear crusted, or a lack of clarity to the eyes. Affected birds may also exhibit neurological signs, for example their head may hang to one side then flop to the other side.

In late May of this year, wildlife biologists in Washington D.C., Virginia, Maryland, and West Virginia began received reports of sick and dying birds. Since then, reports have surfaced in additional states, including Ohio.

Which birds are being impacted?

The illness appears to affect multiple species of birds. In Ohio, primary bird species affected include blue jays, common grackles, house sparrows, European starlings, and American robins. Other common backyard birds may also be affected. Currently, no reports exist of other animals being impacted by this illness or its symptoms.



American robin displaying symptoms. This picture was taken by Kristi Anderson and posted to the Preservation Parks of Delaware County Facebook page on June 15, 2021.

What is causing the illness?

Currently, the cause of the bird deaths and/or symptoms are unknown. Connections to pesticide exposure, the recent cicada emergence, and a possible viral illness are being explored. That said, *no conclusions as to the cause of the illness have been made at this time*. Diagnostic laboratories, including the USGS National Wildlife Health Center, are currently accepting and analyzing samples to learn more about the illness and to determine the cause.

What can you do?

Report sick or dying birds.

- As the cause is still unknown, specimen submission is critical at this stage. Please contact your nearest wildlife rehabilitator if you find a sick bird. To track the spread of the disease, the ODNR-Division of Wildlife is accepting reports of dead birds through their online reporting system at: <https://apps.ohiodnr.gov/wildlife/speciessighting/>. Choose 'Bird - Diseased/Dead' in the 'Species' drop-down menu.
- Avoid touching sick or dead birds by wearing disposable gloves and taking other precautions. USGS recommends disposing dead birds in a sealable plastic bag with household trash.

Take down your bird feeders and empty your bird baths until more is known about the cause of the illness.

- The National Wildlife Health Center recommends temporarily removing bird feeders and bird baths *"during a disease outbreak observed at bird feeders or when sick and dead birds are consistently turning up at a feeder to prevent congregation of infected and non-infected birds at the feeding site."*



Blue jays (left) and common grackles (right) are one of several species that have been reported as sick/dying.

Clean and disinfect bird feeders and bird baths.

- Clean bird feeders and bird baths with a 10% household bleach solution (9 parts water:1 part bleach) and remove any spilled and potentially contaminated feed from under the feeder.
- Clean the feeders, bird baths, and any items contaminated with bird droppings in an outdoor space or in another area of your home that is not used for food preparation or bathing. Some avian pathogens, such as Salmonella, can cause sickness in people and cleaning bird feeders and baths with you and your families health in mind is very important.
- Remember, even when there isn't an outbreak, it's still important to regularly clean your bird feeders and baths to reduce the spread of other diseases that may spread among songbirds.

Useful References

Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife
[Bird Disease Reporting and Updates](#)
 1-800-WILDLIFE, wildohio.gov

USGS National Wildlife Health Center
www.usgs.gov/centers/nwhc

Licensed Ohio Wildlife Rehabilitators
[Listed by County](#) (or visit wildohio.gov and click 'Orphaned and Injured Wildlife')

But won't the birds go hungry/thirsty if I take down my feeders and bird baths?

Birds are hardy and resourceful. A temporary lapse in feeder food/water likely won't set them back too much. More importantly, summer is when plants are producing nectar, seeds, fruits, and attracting insects, all of which serve as food for birds. There is often an abundance of natural foods for birds this time of year. Remember also that birds have the ability of flight, allowing them to travel further distances if needed to find food and water. Right now, it's important to keep the safety of the birds a priority and take a break from feeders and baths until more is known about this outbreak.

