West Nile Virus hits home
Virus may be to blame in on-campus bird deaths

By Laura Sass
Executive Editor

There have been about 2,000 human cases of the West Nile Virus reported in the US and at least 98 deaths in the past year, according to the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services. The spread of this disease is often overshadowed by the death of birds, especially crows. Out of the 569 crows that have tested positive for the virus in New Jersey this year, 39 of them were found in Mercer county.

“We have found five dead birds on campus so far,” said Captain John Hanusi of Rider Security. “They have not been tested, so we are not positive that the West Nile Virus caused their deaths, but that is the assumption.”

According to Hanusi, the security office notified the Department of Health upon finding the first dead bird but were told that it was not needed for testing.

“The health officials told us that they could only test so many birds due to the cost, and as it had already been established that the virus was in Mercer county, the birds were not needed,” Hanusi added.

The West Nile virus, according to the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene website, is a mosquito-borne virus that can cause encephalitis, which is the inflammation of the brain, or meningitis, which is the inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord.

It is most commonly spread to humans through the bite of an infected mosquito, although recently people have become infected through organ transplants. Whether blood transfusions can also spread the virus is still uncertain.

In areas where mosquitoes do carry the virus, less than 1 percent are actually infected. If a person is bitten by an infected mosquito and contracts the disease, they have a less than 1 percent chance of becoming extremely ill. Most people experience mild symptoms that dissipate after a few days.

“There is a risk of getting infected by the West Nile Virus. We know it’s out there,” said Valerie Kamin, Director of the Student Health Center. “But what people have to remember is that most of our students are young and healthy. They could have become infected and experienced flu-like symptoms for a few days and simply have gotten over it.”

“The ones who are really at risk are older people and those who are unable to fight infections for whatever reason,” she added.

Symptoms, according to the Health Department, are mostly either very mild or nonexistent. Some of these symptoms include fever, headaches and body aches, often accompanied by a skin rash and swollen glands. More severe infections are marked by high fever, neck stiffness, muscle weakness, stupor, disorientation, convulsions, paralysis and, rarely, death.

There is no specific therapy for treating the West Nile Virus. In extreme cases, treatments include hospitalization, (IV) intravenous fluids, airway management, respiratory support, and constant nursing care.

“People should be careful,” said Kamin. “Mosquitoes bite most frequently before dawn and after dusk. So if you go outside during that time, wear a long sleeved shirt, or spray yourself with an insect repellent that contains DEET.”

Dr. Anthony Campbell, vice president in charge of student affairs, agrees.

“It really comes down to a matter of common sense; of taking simple precautions,” Campbell said. “That’s the best thing that students can do.”

Mosquitoes are the carriers of the West Nile Virus disease.

How To Lessen Your Chances of Getting the West Nile Virus

1) Apply insect repellent containing DEET(N,N-diethyl-meta-toluamide) when outdoors.

2) When possible, wear long-sleeved clothes and long pants treated with repellents, as mosquitoes may bite through thin clothes.

3) Consider staying inside at dawn, dusk and early evening, which are peak mosquito biting times.

4) Limit the number of places available for mosquitoes to lay their eggs by eliminating standing water from around your home. Such places include discarded tires, blocked gutters, unclean bird baths, poorly maintained pools and any type of receptacle with decaying organic matter.

In the photo at left, Dr. Peters, a professor in the English department at Rider, and the formal recording secretary for the AAUP, sample some of the food at the AAUP cocktail party Wednesday, September 25, following the recent teacher contract developments. For more details, see the strike article on the front page.

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