

# Seabird deaths at St. Lawrence Island: Frequently Asked Questions

## What is killing the birds?

Laboratory tests on a murre, fulmar and auklet sent from Savoonga confirm that the birds have a bacterial infection called avian cholera. Worldwide, this is the most common infection that kills tens of thousands of wild birds annually, especially water fowl. It is very well known for causing sickness and deaths in poultry. What is unusual is that we have not previously detected a die-off due to this infection in birds in Alaska. However, it is common and causes annual die-offs in other areas of United States and Canada.

## Can this spread to people?

The bacteria is a strain of *Pasteurella multocida* that is contagious to birds but is very difficult for people to get. That means the risk of people getting seriously ill are very low. However, to be safe, precautions should be taken whenever handling any birds found sick or dead.

- Don't eat sick birds, especially birds with white spots on the liver, or birds that have died of unknown causes.
- When handling sick or dead birds, wear waterproof gloves, and do not touch your face, rub your eyes, eat, drink or smoke.
- After handling birds, wash your hands with warm soapy water to
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prevent infection through cuts or breaks in the skin, or by touching your mouth. Wash or discard the gloves.

- Alcohol based hand sanitizers can also be used.

10% bleach and water solution can be used to disinfect equipment, boats, knives, etc.

## What is being done?

Bird deaths usually run a short course and end quickly, however the remaining carcasses contain bacteria that can spread to other birds and continue the outbreak. To help stop any further bird infections and to reduce beach contamination, cleaning up the dead birds is usually advised. The State of Alaska is coordinating distribution of gloves, disposal bags and instructions.

## How can a hunter recognize this disease?

Infected birds die suddenly and are still in good body condition. Sick birds appear weak, unable to fly, swim in circles and may hold 1 wing upright or unafraid of people. On the inside, there may be white spots on the liver, bleeding on the heart and gizzard, or yellow bloated intestines.

## We need your help!

Please report new or additional areas with dead birds. Birds other than murre, fulmars or auklets are important for determining the impact on

bird populations, especially Spectacled eiders, sea eagles, or unusual species. Specific locations and photos are appreciated.

**Please report sick or dead birds (prior to collecting carcasses) to**

**[dfg.dwc.vet@alaska.gov](mailto:dfg.dwc.vet@alaska.gov)**

or call:

- **Gay Sheffield: 1-800-478-2202 or 443-2397 (UAF-MAP, Nome)**
- **Brandon Ahmasuk: 443-4265 (Kawerak, Nome)**
- **Peter Bente: 1-800-560-2271 or 907-443-8188 (ADF&G Division of Wildlife Conservation in Nome)**

**Clinical Signs of this disease in birds:**

- Lethargic
- Convulsions
- Swim in circles
- Erratic flight
- Head resting on back
- Nasal discharge
- Ruffled, soiled feathers
- Death upon handling
- Death may be so rapid that birds literally fall out of the sky or die while eating with no previous signs of disease.

**Example of swimming in circles and outstretched wing, arched back (photo USGS National Wildlife Health Center)**

