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NEWS RELEASE
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Avian Cholera Confirmed on St. Lawrence Island

An unusual number of sick and dead seabirds around St. Lawrence Island is caused by Avian Cholera, a bacterial infection relatively common in waterfowl other places, but previously undetected in Alaska.

The highly contagious bacterium, *Pasteurella multocida*, has caused many large die-offs of wild waterfowl worldwide and causes one of the most common diseases of domestic poultry. The closest avian cholera events to Alaska in the past decade involved common eiders and snow geese in Nunavut and Northwest Territories, Canada. It is not related to the infection in people referred to as 'cholera'.

Dr. Kimberlee Beckmen, Wildlife Veterinarian and Wildlife Disease Specialist says that the speedy detection of the disease was a result of two factors. Citizens of Gambell and Savoonga quickly reported seeing sick and dead birds beginning November 20th. The University of Alaska's Marine Advisory Program Biologist Gay Sheffield who is stationed in Nome received a dead thick-billed murre, a Northern fulmar and a crested auklet and sent them to the U.S. Geological Service National Wildlife Health Center in Madison, WI. The diagnosis was made on December 4.

Dr. Beckmen said that before the diagnosis was confirmed, local residents had shared concerns about possible causes relating to the environmental, and were worried that humans might be susceptible.

Pasteurella multocida is commonly found among both domestic and wild birds but different strains or subtypes are found in other animals such as rodents. "Strains of the avian cholera bacteria are adapted to infect birds are not generally a high risk for infection for people," Dr. Beckmen said. "However, it is always advisable to cook meat thoroughly and never eat sick birds or animals that may have died from a disease. Anyone touching a sick animal should wear gloves and wash hands with soap and water after handling animals or butchering meat."

Dead birds in these outbreaks still contain high numbers of bacteria and can infect other birds. Outbreaks are usually handled by removing the carcasses as soon as possible, but options for disposal on St. Lawrence Island are limited. The Dept. of Environmental Conservation recommends putting carcasses in vented, empty fuel drums that prevent scavenger spread and allow the carcasses to decompose though next summer.

Avian cholera outbreaks are typically localized events that end fairly quickly within a few weeks, and Beckmen noted that the number of sick and dead birds reported is decreasing.

People who wish to report sick or dead wildlife should send an email to dfg.dwc.vet@alaska.gov or phone the nearest ADF&G office.

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