

West Nile virus discovered in Marion County

Silverton couple find infected scrub jay in garden

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SILVERTON — Marion County Health officials have discovered evidence of West Nile virus at a Silverton home, the first documented case in Marion County.

A little longer than two weeks ago, Silverton resident Philip Clites awoke to find a dead scrub jay among lush squash plants in his backyard. The night before, both he and his wife, Raggie, had spent time in the garden, not noticing the dead bird.

Despite the fact that scrub jays are common around their home, Philip knew that something was not right.

“There was no evidence of physical damage, like a cat had gotten to it,” he said of the bird. “We called the Marion County Environmental Health Department, and someone came out within an hour.”

When a health department employee arrived, a swab sample of the bird’s mouth was taken, and then sent to Oregon State University’s Veterinary Diagnostic Lab.

The bird was then double-bagged and thrown away, Philip said, normal procedure for infected birds.

A week later, officials confirmed that the bird had indeed died of the West Nile virus, making this case the first in Marion County.

“We had no idea,” said Philip. “We figured that it was inevitable, though. The West Nile is spreading from the East Coast.”

Raggie also expressed similar feelings.

“There are lots of birds in our yard,” she added. “Sometimes you’ll find feathers, but not too many dead birds like this.”

While Marion County residents may be surprised by the recent discovery, Oregon is one of the last states to feel the effects of the West Nile Virus.

The West Nile Virus is passed from birds to mosquitoes and from mosquitoes to humans and horses, primarily. Symptoms of the virus in humans may include flu-like symptoms, such as fever, aches and neck stiffness. According to an information pamphlet distributed by Marion County, approximately 20 percent of those bitten by an infected mosquito may

develop the virus, and less than 1 percent of infected humans will become seriously ill.

So far in 2006, 18 humans have tested positive for the West Nile virus along with five birds and 10 horses in Oregon. Last year, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) documented 3,000 cases and 119 deaths from the West Nile virus nationwide.

“There are a few different theories on how the West Nile virus came to the United States,” said Rick Sherman, Marion County’s Department of Environmental Health program supervisor. “Infected mosquitoes could have hopped on a plane to the United States or infected birds from Africa could have come over and infected mosquitoes that way.”

Either way, he said, the virus is now across the United States. This year’s hot spot is Idaho, making many of Oregon’s cases on the border in Eastern Oregon. Last year, the hot spots for the virus were Nevada and California, and years before that was Colorado.

“Marion County is out monitoring mosquitoes,” Sherman said. “If we find mosquito larva in bodies of water, we spray it with BTI [bacillus thuringiensis].”

Sherman also said that if homeowners have bodies of standing water – perfect breeding ground for mosquitoes – they may receive free BTI spray by calling the Department of Environmental Health.

Also, while there is not a vaccine against the West Nile virus for humans, one does exist for horses, which are highly susceptible to the virus.

The vaccination is not required for horses, but is highly recommended, said Lynn Caldwell, veterinarian for Silverton Equine Veterinary Services.

She said that the body is slow to respond to the vaccine, and pregnant mares may not respond at all.

“Ninety-nine percent of the horses in my practice are immunized,” Caldwell said. “It’s never too late to get horses vaccinated, but owners should get on it.”

One vaccination costs approximately \$30, and, said Caldwell, it’s well worth it.

“There’s a 40-percent fatality rate for horses with West Nile virus, which is very high,” she said, “and even if they survive, there’s no telling if they’ll come back 100 percent.”

If you have concerns or if you think you may have contracted the West Nile virus, the CDC recommends that you contact your physician.