

Calling all wildlife observers!

USGS needs your help to test for new virus!



USGS scientists, in collaboration with researchers from the California Academy of Sciences and UC San Francisco, have just discovered a new virus (tentatively named Poecivirus) that is strongly associated with the occurrence of beak deformities in Black-capped Chickadees, Northwestern Crows, and Red-breasted Nuthatches in Alaska. The virus was present in 100% of the birds with beak deformities (30 individuals tested) and only 4.5% of 89 birds tested without obvious signs of the beak disorder.

Please monitor your backyard feeders and other birding hotspots this winter for any species that has an overgrown or crossed beak. We are interested in receiving all reports of beak deformities to track changes in the geographic and temporal distribution of the condition we've termed 'avian keratin disorder,' as

there is some evidence that this disease may be spreading globally. Photographs of affected birds are extremely valuable for determining whether the deformities are characteristic of avian keratin disorder. Outside of Alaska, we have documented abnormal clusters of beak deformities in the Pacific Northwest region of North America, the UK and Europe, South America, and India. We are designing an experimental study to determine whether the virus actually causes the deformities or is just associated with them for some other reason.

We are able to screen for this new virus from buccal swabs and cloacal swabs from live birds, and would like to test more individuals with beak deformities from inside and outside of Alaska. We are interested in establishing collaborations with anyone who knows of a cluster of birds with beak deformities so we can arrange for viral testing.

For more information or to report any beak deformity, please visit the USGS website:

http://alaska.usgs.gov/science/biology/landbirds/beak_deformity/index.html

To arrange for possible viral testing of birds in your area, please contact USGS biologists Colleen Handel, cmhandel@usgs.gov, 907-786-7181, or Caroline Van Hemert, cvanhemert@usgs.gov, 907-786-7167.