

Halton free of West Nile virus but officials warn— 'it's early'

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Special to The IFP

As Halton heads into the months when human cases of West Nile (WNV) virus are most likely to show up, the Region's health department is encouraging residents to cover up and wear bug spray.

While the virus actually hasn't been detected in any local humans, birds or mosquito pools this season, Halton manager of enteric and vector-borne diseases Lisa Fortuna says "it's still early."

"The most important thing people can do is wear proper protective clothing and an insect repellent containing DEET," she said. "They should also remove standing water on their properties where mosquitoes can reproduce."

In addition, Fortuna noted that residents are being asked to call the health department to report dead bird sightings as soon as possible, which helps the Region track the presence of WNV.

Since starting the annual surveillance program in May, Halton residents have reported 658 dead birds— down from the 987 found by the same time last year.

"The bird population is so depleted from past seasons, there may not be as many around for the die off," Fortuna explained, noting numbers all across the province are down.

So far eight of the local reported birds—

three crows and five blue jays— have been sent for testing, but all came back negative. By the end of July in 2006, one crow had tested positive for WNV.

Fortuna said in order for a bird to be eligible for testing, it has to be a crow or blue jay, be in good shape and have died very recently.

"The birds are not getting to us in a timely manner," she said.

If the bird isn't going to be picked up, staff will give instructions on how to dispose of it safely.

In addition to tracking dead birds, the health department has also been busy applying mosquito larvicide to standing water in the region.

So far 220 larvicide applications have been made, which is up from the 71 applications made by the same time last year.

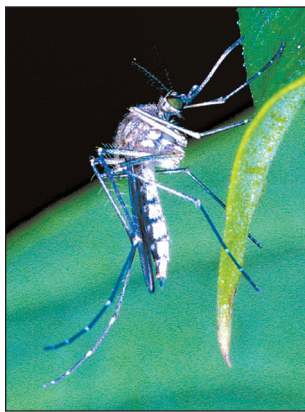
Fortuna said staff only uses the larvicide when a certain species of mosquitoes able to carry West Nile is discovered.

"We have a very comprehensive prevention program," she added.

The health department has consistently found WNV activity in Halton's bird population since 2001 and the mosquito population since 2002.

There was only one case of WNV diagnosed in a Halton resident last year.

For more information visit www.halton.ca/wnv. To report a dead bird call 905-825-6000 or e-mail wvn@halton.ca.



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