

Don't get stung by myths

Home remedies no panacea for West Nile virus

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

Don't eat bananas from now till the snow flies. Rumour has it, giving up the fruit will ward off the dreaded West Nile virus.

Seems there's something in banana oil that attracts those pesky mosquitoes, which are responsible for spreading the disease to humans after feasting on infected birds.

Or, here's another idea — wipe yourself from head to toe with a Bounce fabric softener sheet. Apparently, the sheets are the best thing ever used in Louisiana (presumably, the Bayou makes that a relevant point) to keep mosquitoes away from babies.

Looking for more home remedies to avoid the virus? E-mails making the rounds are full of "helpful" hints.

How about planting marigolds around your yard, smothering yourself in Vick's Vaporub, swallowing a Vitamin B-1 pill daily, slathering a concoction of Avon Skin-So-Soft and alcohol on your body or using vanilla, although it must be the "real" kind sold in Mexico.

When all else fails, get a frog.

The e-mails say these are sure-fire protection against West Nile virus.

And who could doubt them?

After all, they're endorsed by "Bob," a fisher who hasn't had a mosquito bite in 33 years, thanks to daily Vitamin B-1 pills from April to October, and "tough guy" marines, who prefer the Skin-So-Soft and alcohol mix.

Too bad there's no proof the remedies work, warn York Region health experts.

"What is really fact and what isn't sometimes gets blurred," said Margaret McCaffrey, a health protection manager with the region's

public health department.

"I understand where (people's search for remedies) is coming from. Maybe somebody didn't eat bananas and they weren't bitten by a mosquito, but that could be for another reason. The important thing is that people take the proper precautions.

Ms McCaffrey appreciates people's anxiety about the relatively new virus, which was introduced to York less than two years ago.

A dead crow found in Newmarket at the end of last month, Canada's first bird this year with West Nile virus, has only heightened people's fears.

"What that could indicate is it's endemic. We can no longer say it's something coming in with migrating birds. It's here and it's here all year long," Ms McCaffrey said.

"Yes, it is here and there are things people can do to personally protect themselves.

Although information about the virus is being updated constantly as more is learned about the disease, provincial and regional health experts say residents should be aware of the following:

- Symptoms of the disease include fever, muscle weakness, stiff neck, confusion, severe headache, sudden sensitivity to light and extreme swelling or infection at the site of the mosquito bite.

- While most people infected with the virus exhibit no symptoms or suffer a mild reaction, there is growing evidence the potentially fatal disease can cause long-term neurological effects in some victims.

- The disease is spread by mosquitoes, which pick up the virus by feeding on an infected bird. The virus cannot be spread from person to person.

- It can be spread through blood transfusions or through organ or tissue donation. People who feel unwell should not donate blood.

- Because mosquitoes breed in water, residents must ensure standing water is eliminated from their properties. That includes water that has gathered on swimming pool covers, in eavestroughs or in tires.

- Although many people believe mosquitoes breed in rural areas, in

fact, urban residents need to be more cautious because the insects have more opportunity to spread the disease due to increased human contact.

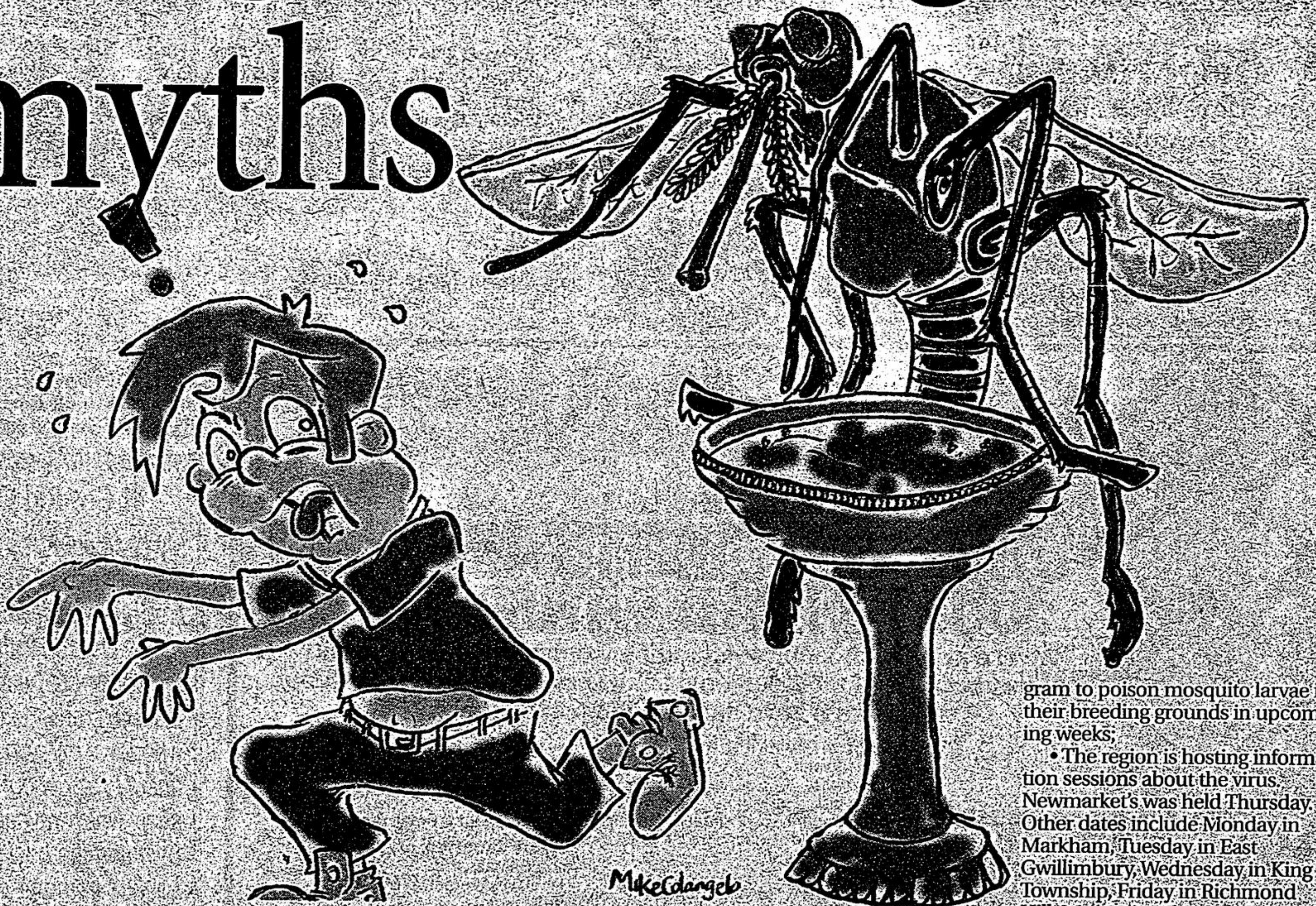
- Although residents were encouraged in the past to report a list of several species of birds, crows are the only birds currently of concern in the battle against the virus. For unknown reasons, crows are more susceptible to the virus and are more likely to die from it, prolonging the cycle of the disease.

- To avoid contracting the disease, people are urged to wear long pants and long-sleeved shirts at dawn and dusk and to use insect repellent with no more than 30 per cent DEET for adults and 10 per cent for children over the age of six months.

- York had six confirmed human cases of the virus last year, all of whom recovered.

- The region had 53 "hot spots" where positive dead birds or mosquito swarms were discovered in 2001 and 2002, although there could have been more that weren't tested.

- York will be starting its pro-



gram to poison mosquito larvae in their breeding grounds in upcoming weeks.

- The region is hosting information sessions about the virus. Newmarket's was held Thursday. Other dates include Monday in Markham, Tuesday in East Gwillimbury, Wednesday in King Township, Friday in Richmond Hill, May 20 in Whitchurch-Stouffville, May 21 in Vaughan, May 22 in Aurora and June 10 in Georgina.

- To report a dead crow or obtain more information about the virus or information sessions, call Health Connection at 1-800-361-5653 or visit the province's website at www.health.gov.on.ca.

Although health experts are promoting public education, Vaughan resident Biagio Nasuto complained it's not just residents who need a better response to the virus.

He's disappointed by the reaction he received from the region's public health department when he tried to report a dead bird.

Mr. Nasuto was irked he called three times on three separate days and each time was put through to a voice message machine.

Finally, he received a message on his answering machine asking what type of bird he had found.

"No one came to test the bird," said Mr. Nasuto, who found it in the Weston and Rutherford roads area April 29.

"I was trying to keep the kids away from it."

—with files from Roger Varley

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