

From the Editor

Author: Faaborg, John

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From the Editor

Most ornithologists are content to work in relative anonymity. We may work for years on a project, starting with long hours of field work in uncomfortable conditions, followed by weeks of data-entry and often tedious statistical analyses, and finishing with the often difficult process of fitting our findings into the theoretical complexity of modern ornithology and conservation. Later, when the resulting paper is accepted by a journal such as *The Auk*, we are elated. The fact that only a few thousand people in the world receive any of the ornithological journals does not bother us, let alone the fact that only a few hundred people may actually read a given paper. Rather, we know we did good science and put it in an excellent journal, where anyone who cares about the topic can read it. We ornithologists must resign ourselves to a very different set of rewards than rock stars or professional athletes.

Every once in a while, an exception to this rule of anonymity occurs, and ornithological research makes the national news—even, when the stars are in alignment, national television. People we know and see at AOU meetings are occasionally on the same news shows as politicians and movie stars, talking about some new discovery in ornithology and what it means. There are two situations that tend to put ornithology in the news. One is a discovery so unusual and unexpected that the whole world needs to know about it, and the other is a threat to human health from a bird-borne disease. Of course, the first situation is far more enjoyable both for the public and for ornithologists. In the past year, two such startling discoveries (or rediscoveries) have gotten lots of airtime. First, we had evidence that the Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*) is not extinct; this made for headlines, news conferences, and even televised features on programs such as *60 Minutes*. We saw former AOU President John Fitzpatrick and his Cornell crew on TV, often in long, detailed presentations. More recently, we heard of the discovery of a piece of New Guinea that seemed wholly unaffected by humans, with numerous new species of vertebrates, including some birds. In this case, AOU member Bruce Beehler was all over the media, showing the kind of enthusiasm that such an incredible discovery evokes.

Unfortunately, the other kind of news—birds and disease—has also been much in the news. The West Nile virus appeared on the East Coast about a decade ago and is just now reaching the Pacific Coast. As this virus entered a region, it often caused high mortality in birds, as well as negative effects—including death—in a variety of other organisms, including humans. After a year or two in a region, though, West Nile virus seems to become fairly tame with regard to long-term effects on birds and humans, though perhaps this is because it has shifted to smaller birds that are harder to track. The media seemed to find West Nile virus “sexy” enough that our local television stations even noted its absence last summer, presumably because drought conditions resulted in few mosquitoes.

Recently, the interest in West Nile virus has been replaced by concern over avian influenza, popularly called “bird flu.” Almost daily, the major media provide new information about bird flu: new cases of dead waterfowl in Europe, more human deaths in southeast Asia, calls for more scientific research or more studies on possible vaccines. As an ornithologist and as a human, I find this scary stuff. Influenza has caused pandemics in the past, and it is possible that new strains of bird flu will kill millions of humans and birds.

We can base our response to a disease like bird flu on what we know about the spread of other avian diseases. In this monograph, a group of experts on avian disease provides state-of-the-art knowledge about how disease works in avian systems. Papers deal with avian influenza, West Nile virus, a bacterial disease that has affected finches at feeders, and some malaria-like diseases in seabirds on the Galapagos Islands. Several of these diseases seem pretty innocuous and of little threat to humans, and the reality is that both avian influenza and West Nile virus are widespread and have little negative effect on infected birds through most of their ranges, most of the time. Unfortunately, multiple forms of these diseases exist, and sometimes circumstances can result in forms that are virulent in wild birds, get transferred to domestic birds and, with the right set of circumstances, turn into a form that can affect humans, often with severe results. As recently as

1983–1984, an outbreak of bird flu in Pennsylvania resulted in the destruction of more than 17 million birds in poultry flocks at a total economic cost of more than \$900 million; recent outbreaks in The Netherlands and Southeast Asia have almost matched that cost. The flu pandemic of 1918 killed between 20 and 50 million humans. The threats are real.

Obviously, the more we know about how these disease organisms live, change, and move around, the better we can prevent modern pandemics. This monograph does a great job of showing both what we know and what we need to know in regard to bird-carried disease and human health. Hopefully, with continued support for good science, we will see fellow AOU members on television, talking about new discoveries that will help control the movement of avian diseases to save both bird and human lives.

John Faaborg