

NEWS

POLITICS

BLOGS

ARCTIC

CULTURE

MULTIMEDIA

PROJECTS

Email

Tweet

Print

Single Page

### Science

# Fairbanks scientists zero in on duck flu at temperatures 40 degrees below

Suzanna Caldwell | Dec 18, 2012



Enlarge This Image

#### RELATED

Bad news for birds: Avian malaria exists as far north as Fairbanks

Avian cholera could spread into Arctic, scientists warn

FAIRBANKS -- Chilly weather isn't enough to keep ducks out of open areas of the Chena River, which means it's not enough to keep scientists out either.

Despite temperatures in the Interior Alaska city of 30,000 dipping toward 40-below zero Saturday, scientists waded into the slushy Chena River, nets in tow, collecting a handful of mallard ducks and bringing them back to a makeshift lab in downtown Fairbanks.

In taking blood and fecal samples, the scientists hope to understand how avian influenza moves through a bird population.

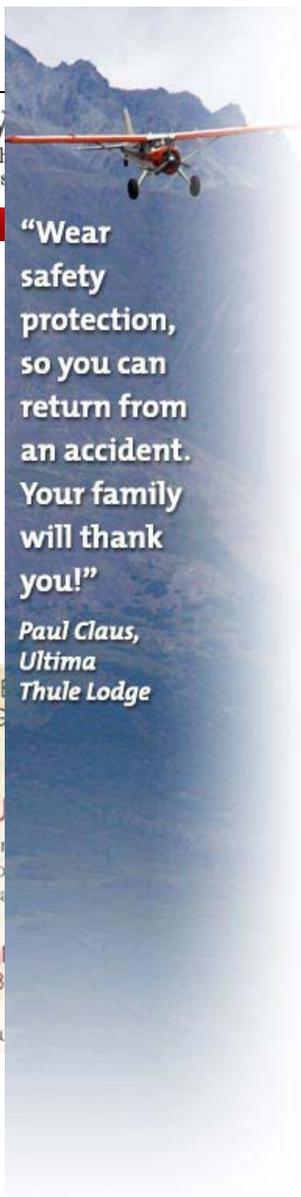
The Chena River birds are ideal, according to Mark Lindberg, wildlife ecologist and project leader from the University of Alaska Fairbanks' Institute of Arctic Biology. The open water keeps the usually migratory birds in Fairbanks instead of bound for warmer climates farther south. That gives scientists like Lindberg the chance to see how the flu moves through the population, something that's generally a hard prospect

considering migratory birds tendency to, well, migrate.

But the Chena birds stay. Exactly why is debated. A group in Fairbanks has taken to feeding the birds each winter. Lindberg said 72 birds were counted on the Chena in 2003. That number has hovered around 100 for the last decade, with more than 600 counted in 2010 -- through Lindberg believes that number is high and is probably closer to 300.

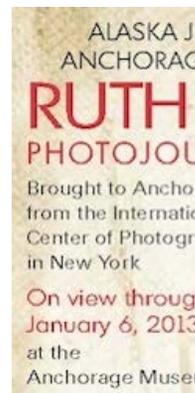
He noted that migratory birds have been found sticking back in lakes and streams across the state. While the intention of the study isn't to determine why the birds hang back, gathering more information on the population might offer the duck feeders a little more insight.

"People who make decisions about this might be informed by it," he said.



"Wear safety protection, so you can return from an accident. Your family will thank you!"

Paul Claus, Ultima Thule Lodge



### Avian flu researchers use Chena River ducks

Sign up for Alaska Dispatch News Alerts

SIGN UP

duck trap on the Chena River. Ducks were slowly lured in using cracked corn thrown into the river. Dec 15, 2012

◀ Previous Next ▶



Suzanna Caldwell photo

However, the primary focus of the scientists is the flu, although it's not what most think of when it comes to the flu. No runny duckbills or chicken soup for these guys. Brandt Meixell, a wildlife biologist and co-investigator with the U.S. Geological Survey Alaska Science Center, said it's almost impossible to tell apart a sick duck from a healthy one and the virus very rarely leads to death.

**SAVE**

-  **GAS**
-  **MONEY**
-  **OUR PLANET**



**PEOPLEMOVER.ORG**  
**343-6543**

“Holding one bird that has it and one that doesn't -- there's no discernible difference,” Meixell said.

Duck influenza hasn't received as much attention as avian influenza. So far as is known, it stays within bird populations, only produces mild illness and cannot be transferred to humans.

The virus generally moves through the birds in the fall, especially young ducks, thanks to their “naive” immune systems, Meixell said. Not only are the Chena birds all staying back for winter, they're also packed tightly together allowing for easy transmission of the virus. Checking them throughout the winter will give scientists a better idea how long the virus and its antibodies remain in the animals.

That data will help the scientists understand any potential concerns to humans in the event a virus in the bird population becomes highly pathogenic and may help thwart a potentially lethal outbreak.

Scientists will continue to sample about 50 birds a month through the spring of 2013.

Contact Suzanna Caldwell at [suzanna\(at\)alaskadispatch.com](mailto:suzanna(at)alaskadispatch.com)

 [Email](#)  [Tweet](#)  [Print](#)  [Single Page](#)

**You must be logged in to comment**

**Username**

**or**

[Connect](#)

**Password**

[Log in](#)

[Not a member?](#)

[Register Now](#)

Paying too much for your  
**Auto Insurance?**  
Contact us for a **FREE Quote today!**  
**(907) 451-7733**



**Hood Agency**  
Click for Quote