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Migratory geese and ducks are free of COVID-19: researcher

“In no case has there been any detection of COVID-19, in any birds, or wild or domestic”



Geese like this group of snow geese by the road between Iqaluit and Apex do not carry COVID-19, as far as researchers have been able to determine. (Photo by Jane George)

By Jane George

Now is the time of year when people throughout the North await the arrival of geese and other waterfowl migrating north—and here’s the good news: as far as biologists can determine, these birds are not infected with COVID-19 and do not carry the virus.

“Based on the latest scientific knowledge, there is no risk with geese,” said Gilles Gauthier, from Université Laval’s Department of Biology and Centre d’Etudes Nordiques, commenting on questions that have been asked of public health officials in Nunavut and Nunavik.

“In no case has there been any detection of COVID-19, in any birds, or wild or domestic.”

The current hypothesis is that COVID-19 was transmitted from bats to humans, so it’s present in other mammals, Gauthier said, but it’s not present in birds.

Birds can become infected with influenza and get sick, but these avian flu viruses do not normally infect humans, he said.

And the new coronavirus is a different kind of virus from the traditional influenza virus, he said.

While some coronaviruses can be carried by birds and mammals, that appears to not be the case with COVID-19, as far as the experts know, he said.

That’s because there are different kinds of coronaviruses, he said. “Like in animals we can talk about foxes, and there are Arctic foxes and red foxes. So it’s the same thing with viruses.”

“The only caveat is that ... [this] is based on current scientific knowledge, because, of course, viruses are living things, and they evolve and things always change,” he said.

“That’s why we have to be careful: COVID-19 wasn’t known a year ago, but now it is here.”

Biologists at Université Laval have previously conducted respiratory tract screening, with swabs, on Arctic birds.

“We have never detected avian influenza,” Gauthier said.

Laval’s monitoring program intended to swab geese in Quebec this spring for COVID-19 before the birds head north at the end of May, but the monitoring program was suspended. They’re now waiting for the go-ahead.

“We have absolutely no evidence it is present in birds, but it was just to be further reassured,” Gauthier said about the testing for COVID-19.

As for heading to Bylot Island, where Laval has maintained a research camp for more than 20 years, that is unlikely to happen this season. This is because the Polar Continental Shelf Program in Resolute Bay, which provides logistics to Arctic researchers, has suspended its activities for the season.

But things may change, so it could be possible to do some goose banding in August—if that's supported by the local community, Gauthier said.

This year there are likely to be more geese than ever heading north, Gauthier said. There has been less disturbance of migration, especially for snow geese, which were not subject to hunting this spring, he said.

“The [low] level of disturbance is something that they have never experienced for a century,” Gauthier said.

The population of geese in North America is booming: there are about 15 million snow geese and about eight million Canada geese.

Although there is no COVID-19 in birds, the advice from Environment and Climate Change Canada is that hunters should follow guidelines from the health authorities as they relate to travel and access to the land, physical distancing, and sanitary measures to limit the spread of COVID-19 among humans.