

Despite swarms of public awareness, the mosquito-borne killer remains a statewide threat.

West Nile Virus in 2007

Story By Joe McFarland

Thinking about relaxing your guard against mosquito bites this summer? Is the deadly West Nile Virus scare over in Illinois? Not one bit, according to health officials who monitor mosquito populations statewide.

"Vigilance is still needed," advised Richard Lampman, an entomologist and research scientist for the Illinois Natural History Survey in Champaign. Lampman said West Nile Virus—the potentially fatal illness first documented in the United States in 1999—hasn't cured itself. While 215 reported human cases occurred in Illinois last year, public concern seems to be fading.

"There tends to be less and less vigilance as time passes," the scientist explained of people's reaction to a crisis. "It's part of our psyche."

West Nile Virus leaped into national headlines when it was first documented in the United States in New York in 1999. Everybody speculated about how far and how quickly it would spread.

In September 2001, the Illinois Department of Public Health announced that two dead crows found in Chicago tested positive for WNV. The following year, Illinois' first human cases and deaths were recorded. Then, virtually overnight, the Prairie State became the center of national attention: By that fall,



(Photo by Kathy Andrews.)

WNV was identified in nearly all of the state's 102 counties, with 884 reported human cases and 67 deaths—more than any other state.

During the following winter months, Illinois residents braced for what many feared would be a West Nile epidemic. With no vaccine available to the millions of residents, officials statewide quickly boosted their public-awareness campaign, urging residents to drain mosquito-harboring receptacles and to always wear repellents outdoors. West Nile Virus became a near-daily media story.

And then it wasn't. During the following year, Illinois experienced a dramatic improvement as a comparatively modest 54 cases were reported in the state, with only one death. Meanwhile, other states saw their fortunes shift. Colorado led the nation with a staggering 2,947 cases in 2003. California led in 2004 with 779—but Illinois reported just 60.

While headlines no longer grab our attention, the threat of WNV in Illinois

Illinois Natural History Survey scientists prepare to put CDC miniature light traps and nets in the woodland canopy to collect adult mosquitoes.

appears to be outlasting the public's willingness to take basic precautions. Hundreds of new victims—252 cases were reported in 2005, and 215 last year—indicate West Nile Virus remains a deadly threat in Illinois.

"One in 10 mosquitoes can be infected," Lampman said.

For more information about West Nile Virus and its prevention, visit the Illinois Department of Public Health Web site at www.idph.state.il.us/envhealth/wnv.htm.



(Photo by Susan Ellis.)



Illinois West Nile Virus reported human cases by year:

1999 – 0	
2000 – 0	
2001 – 0	
2002 – 884 *	
2003 – 54	
2004 – 60	
2005 – 252 **	
2006 – 215	

* Highest in U.S.

** Second-highest in U.S.

Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention