

Take Care, Corvus!

Many years ago, I had a pet crow. He was originally from Maine, where raccoons or something killed his parents, leaving him an orphan in my sister's horse meadow. Judging by the pictures I would later see in researching the American crow, I realized he was only one week old and, afraid that the horses would trample him; we fed him an in situ meal of wild strawberries and brought him home. We called him "Corvus", Latin for crow.

Raising him was a blast! He was a prankster, enjoying such mischief as removing my clothespins from the line and taking money right out of your hands. He could be extremely gentle as he examined the hairs on your finger or strong and determined as he pecked your ring. He enjoyed playing tug of war, turning on his side and fiercely kicking with his claws while holding on to a pine cone with his beak. As with children, he grew up too fast and by autumn he had successfully joined the crows of Plympton.

I miss Corvus and I think of him often, especially ever since West Nile virus arrived in the U.S. While some birds can become infected with the virus and survive; crows, along with robins and jays, succumb to it easily. These birds serve an important role in public health, as they serve as sentinels as to the presence of West Nile virus in the area. The Department of Public Health has set up a hotline for reporting dead birds for many years now. It has been a highly successful method of public health research with the unique and crucial involvement of the public. Ordinary you-and-me-people see a dead bird and call in to the hotline. There, they ask questions such as to its type, time of death and its physical condition. If it sounds like the bird is suitable for testing, they give you a tracking number. Then the reporting party calls the local public health department or board of health. We arrange for the bird to be sent in to the epidemiology department of DPH and we wait. In only a few days' time we find out if it had the West Nile virus.

Last week, I was fortunate enough to have some observant and informed people call me to report a dead crow. I am thankful for their awareness of this health campaign. I suppose they didn't have to be all that observant, though, in this case. For you see, they were taking a walk when a crow fell, dead at their feet, right out of a tree! When I heard that story I knew that it was suitable for testing because it had just died and it was a crow and since you don't usually see birds fall dead out of a tree, I figured there was a good chance that it died of an illness. Poor thing. It roosted as long as it could and then succumbed.

On Wednesday morning, August 15, the crow was properly packed up, labeled and shipped off to DPH for testing. On Friday I received the call to tell me the news. The crow had, in fact, died of West Nile virus.

Last Friday stands out in my memory for something else, too. I was still contacting day care centers and recreational groups with the news of Eastern Equine Encephalitis being found in Plympton, Kingston and Halifax when I delivered an enforcement letter regarding stagnant water in a backyard swimming pool. Unfortunately and disappointingly, I told the same homeowner last summer about the importance of preventing standing water. I explained to the woman last year that all mosquitoes like stagnant water but the mosquitoes that carry the West Nile virus are container breeders and the more polluted the water, the more they like it. WNV may not be, on the whole, as

deadly as EEE but the elderly can die from it. Unfortunately for me, the Center for Disease Control defines the elderly as fifty-five and over.

So, there I was, all “elderly” fifty-five years of me, knocking on the door, just as I did last summer, to talk to the same homeowner about people dying from mosquito borne diseases. She wasn’t home. I left the letter in the door and took photos of her polluted, brownish-green swimming pool water and then I took photos of the little inflatable child’s pool with areas of stagnant water left in the folds of plastic. As I turned to leave, I saw the pink training two-wheel bike and other toys indicating the presence of a little girl. I couldn’t help but wonder what Kimberly King wouldn’t give to have her little girl back. Her daughter, Adreanna, died of EEE in 2005.

I also couldn’t help but wonder where did I go wrong? What had I not explained? What did this woman, and others, not understand about the key role they can play in preventing mosquito borne disease and death. I say “can” play. We don’t have to but we can make a difference.

The only sympathy I can muster is that I suppose all this talk about bird-biting mosquitoes and birds can get confusing. There are four main differences between EEE and WNV: impact, occurrence, habitat and degree of prevention.

EEE is by far the deadlier of the disease, killing a third of its victims, but at least it has, at least so far, been cyclical, reoccurring every 18 or so years. WNV usually kills only the elderly. We don’t know as much about WNV as we do about EEE. It may come and go with migrating birds or it may be back to stay. We’ll see.

The mosquitoes carrying EEE tend to breed in swamps. Think about that. Can we control swamps? No, we can’t. So, we had better control ourselves. We had better wear repellent, long sleeves and avoid outdoor activities from dawn to dusk. However, the mosquitoes carrying WNV breed in containers. We can control containers! Almost all containers are man-made. Drill holes in tires so that they can drain or fill them with dirt or get rid of them! Flush out birdbaths at least twice a week. Walk your property and look for tarps, buckets, toys and anything else that holds water. Tip them over or flush them out.

As I cleaned my gutters last weekend, I was shocked to see how clogged they were. I did not see any mosquito larvae but I could not help but think what a perfect breeding “container” for WNV I had unwittingly provided.

Corvus, I hope you are still out there, as mischievous as ever. I hope that as you fly around, looking for your next meal, you do not see containers of any type, holding water for more than a few days. I hope you see people busy flushing their birdbaths and disposing of old tires, cleaning their gutters and treating their swimming pools. Take care, Corvus.