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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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FOWL CHOLERA BREAKS OUT IN TEXAS REFUGE WHERE 600,000 DUCKS WINTER

Fowl cholera, which two years ago killed more than 36,000 ducks wintering in the Texas Panhandle country near Bull Lake, broke out again on January 15, Secretary of the Interior Oscar L. Chapman announced today. A total of 250 dead birds were picked up by refuge workers in the first three days on Muleshoe National Wildlife Refuge, the Fish and Wildlife Service advised Secretary Chapman.

More than 600,000 migratory waterfowl—mostly pintails, mallards, baldpates, and greenwing teal--are wintering in the area of Bull Lake and the Muleshoe Refuge. The 5,800 acre refuge is the center of an important waterfowl wintering area in Lamb and Bailey Counties, Texas. Minor outbreaks of fowl cholera have occurred in recent years in the refuge region besides the big die-off two years ago.

In preparation for any such eventuality, the Fish and Wildlife Service has had a cooperative research project and field laboratory set up to study refuge conditions. Under the direction of Dr. George Petrides, Leader of the Cooperative Unit at Texas A & M College, the study had been underway for several weeks before the present cholera epidemic broke out. William Hanna, a full-time graduate student worker, is engaged in a field study, collecting samples of soil and water and trapping sick ducks for observation. Mr. Hanna is from the University of Texas, where he is working for his doctor's degree under Dr. O. B. Williams--also concerned with the fowl cholera study.

Fowl cholera, caused by a micro-organism (Pasteurella), is a disease similar to blood poisoning. The cholera organism enters the fowl by way of the mouth--multiplying rapidly in the bird's blood and internal organs until paralysis and death occur. In acute outbreaks the birds may not show evidence of sickness until 24 hours before death. Death usually follows three days after infection, but some birds continue to live for several weeks and serve as carriers of the disease.

As sick waterfowl are unable to migrate far, the disease must be contracted within a few hundred miles of the refuge. The cholera organism does not live in the soil from season to season, and infection must be reintroduced yearly from nearby domestic poultry. Evidence indicates that cholera is endemic in domestic poultry on the farms in the immediate vicinity of the refuge. Birds dying in markets and at farms are often dumped along the roads instead of being buried. Texas, however, has laws which forbid the roadside disposal of carcasses of domestic animals, including poultry.

The bodies of decomposing poultry contain billions of the cholera organisms. Not only do these organisms poison the immediate area, but rats and carnivores eat the dead birds and spread the organism in their droppings. One of the basic methods of cholera control requires the gathering up of dead birds and burying or burning them. Not only does the Fish and Wildlife Service dispose of dead waterfowl, it also encourages farmers in the immediate vicinity of the refuge to follow similar sanitary practices.

Other methods of management and control of fowl cholera may be developed by the research project now underway. Some suggested methods, which may prove practicable, are the spraying of the areas where dead birds have decomposed, the spread of medicated grain, supplemental feedings, dispersal of birds "loafing" in borrow pits along roads and contaminated areas, and similar procedures.

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