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## Bird-flu testing migrates to Calif.

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By John Ritter, USA TODAY

NEWARK, Calif. — The nervous little western sandpiper has seen a lot in its short life. Born in the Alaskan wilderness just weeks ago, it flew more than 2,000 miles, probably non-stop and without its parents, to the food-rich salt ponds here next to San Francisco Bay.

Now the white-breasted juvenile, weighing less than an ounce, is getting a gentle work-over from biologists who are part of a vast network trying to learn if a deadly bird-flu virus plaguing Asia has arrived in the USA.

The sandpiper, caught this week when it flew into a net slung across the mud on the pond's bank, is inspected, banded, measured and swabbed in its throat and rear end. A few feathers are pinched off and put in a plastic bag. The swab samples will be flash-frozen in vials, stored at minus-70 degrees and shipped with others to a U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) lab in Madison, Wis.

Tens of thousands of samples are arriving at Madison and labs in 36 states to be tested for the H5N1 virus, which has killed 138 people in nine Asian countries along with untold numbers of poultry since 2003. So far, none of the U.S. samples has tested positive.

Shorebirds, species that feed and roost along beaches, estuaries, ponds and lakes, are the first arrivals in the contiguous 48 states from breeding grounds in Alaska, where they mingled this spring with birds from Asia and could have acquired the H5N1 virus. This fall, ducks, geese and other waterfowl, which migrate later, will get the same attention.

"The bay is hugely important to shorebirds," says Nils Warnock, co-director of the wetlands program for PRBO Conservation Science, a non-profit research group working with geological survey biologists. Up to half the world's 4 million western sandpipers, to name just one species, stop here sometime during the year, Warnock says.

Daily counts in the spring have found as many as 1 million sandpipers here at a time, he says.

### 'Beautiful habitat for shorebirds'

Thousands of acres of artificial ponds built more than a century ago to harvest salt line the bay. A few ponds are still producing salt, many are being restored to marshes, and some will be retained because of their value to shorebirds. Birds retreat to the ponds to feed when the tide comes in and covers mud flats along the bay shores.

"People fly over these salt ponds and think, my God, it's terrible, but it's beautiful habitat for shorebirds — big, wide-open, lots of food like brine flies and brine shrimp," Warnock says.

August brought the first shorebirds here along the Pacific Flyway and three other continental flyways, or corridors,

that define migration routes to and from breeding grounds in Alaska and sometimes Siberia. Federal and state teams are also sampling in the Central, Mississippi and Atlantic flyways.

U.S. scientists plan to sample 100,000 wild birds by year's end. The team here, with a quota of 1,000-1,200 shorebirds, has logged 106 so far. One day this week, with light winds that didn't rustle nets enough for the birds to see them well, the team gathered 48 samples.

They came from two of three "targeted" species, western sandpiper and long-billed dowitcher. Dunlins, the third target, don't arrive until October. Short-billed dowitchers, which hang out with their long-billed cousins, and semipalmated plovers also flew into the net and were sampled.

"Given that the dowitchers' life histories are so similar, we're sampling both in our early-detection program," USGS lead biologist Sam Iverson says.

The Pacific Flyway isn't confined to the coast. Birds fly from the Arctic and winter in the agricultural Central Valley, along the western Great Basin on the east side of the Sierra Nevada, even in Idaho, Utah and Arizona. San Diego Bay is another important shorebird habitat. Birds range south into Baja, Mexico, and sometimes as far as Chile. Sampling is also underway in coastal Oregon and Washington, particularly Puget Sound.

Because so many wild birds come to California, the state's \$2.5 billion-a-year poultry industry is closely monitoring the sampling. "We're pretty confident that it's going to continue to be just a bird disease, not a people disease," says Bill Mattos of the California Poultry Federation. "But our bio-security measures are pretty strong right now."

Extensive sampling of birds that flew south from Europe to Africa last fall, then back to Europe this spring yielded no positive results, despite the disease being confirmed in Africa. So far, the same pattern holds in North America.

### **Not captives for long**

"It adds to the mystery of just how much wild birds are involved in the spread of this disease," says Christopher Brand, chief at the Madison lab. "We suspect it's present in live wild birds, but we can't confirm it in samples."

Since an infected wild bird "sheds," or overcomes, the virus in a few days, it's possible that infected Asian birds were clear of H5N1 by the time they reached Alaskan breeding grounds.

The risk to humans from an infected wild bird is thought to be slight, though biologists, wearing gloves and masks, take no chances. Human deaths from bird flu so far have been of people slaughtering or in close contact with infected poultry. Scientists believe the virus would have to mutate before human-to-human transmission is possible.

As for the sampled birds, their five to 10 minutes as captives leaves them no worse for the wear. They suffer short-term stress, and the biggest concern is when a bird lands low in a net, drops into the water and drowns.

"They lose a little bit of weight immediately after sampling, then they're good to go," Warnock says.

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