

TerranearPMC Safety Share

Week of June 10, 2013 – The Birds is Coming!

Just before Alfred Hitchcock's legendary film, *The Birds*, hit the silver screen, billboards across the country were advertising the 1963 thriller with the catchy phrase, "The Birds is Coming." I remember many conversations centered on whether the sentence structure was correct or incorrect (as funny as it sounds, it is correct and was probably used as a very clever marketing tool, making the movie a topic of conversation even before it was released). The film delved into our hidden fear of birds: a psychological condition known as ornithophobia (from the Greek *ornitho*, meaning bird and *phobia*: fear). Like any other phobia, the reason behind a specific fear is still not well understood. But the old notion that a fear of something – whether it is closed spaces, open spaces (anyone remember Goldfinger's card cheating scheme?), air travel or birds – is simply an extreme irrational fear, is no longer accepted. Experts now acknowledge a connection with one's genetics, cultural upbringing as well as life experience.

The fact is, while birds attacking people are quite rare, there still is a reason for humans to keep their distance as they are associated with quite a number of health issues – serious health issues. True, these consequences may not warrant one to develop a fear or phobia of birds, but caution should still be practiced when encountering them. Recently, there have been a number of incidents at work locations where dead birds have been showing up in tight spaces, such as hollow bollards (those metal posts typically found in parking lots that all too often we accidentally hit, causing a fender-bender which, in turn, follows with a barrage of insults aimed at the bollard, itself and those responsible for installing such useless things in such ridiculous locations!). I remember conducting a fire inspection test at a well known department store in downtown Los Angeles where I came across a few dead pigeons in the sprinkler system control closet. Apparently they entered the sprinkler system from what is called the 2-inch drain line, located on the outside of the building and travelled through the system to the sprinkler riser.

During job walk-throughs and pre-inspections of abandoned buildings that are scheduled for decontamination and decommissioning (D&D) activities, it is not unusual to encounter a host of biological factors, including dead birds (one may also run into live animals too! – rat nests, and a host of wild animals – in which case it is necessary to leave the building and inform the client, followed by developing a plan to have these "hazards" removed prior to proceeding). In the case of dead birds, handling them should always be avoided. If we do not take the appropriate precautions, we are placing ourselves in a high risk scenario.

Diseases are associated with birds in numerous ways, including when the bird defecates, or when the disease lives in the birds surrounding environment and is spread by the birds lifestyle, as well as when the disease lives inside a parasite that the bird harbors. Typically, there are four ways diseases are passed by the bird to humans (aka "vectors"): 1) The most obvious example is when the diseased bird directly defecates into a human food or water source. 2) As bird feces and/or the contaminated soil it rests on, dries or is disturbed, microscopic pieces break off and become airborne. These airborne particles can contain dormant fungi and/or bacteria. When breathed into the lungs, the warm, moist environment of the lung lining provides a breeding ground for the

infectious agents. 3) Infection occurs when a worker or resident gets fecal dust or droppings in an open wound or cut. This commonly occurs when handling old rusty, sharp porcupine wire ledge products which are covered with bird feces. 4) Pest birds harbor ticks, fleas, mites and other ectoparasites. Parasites transfer disease in the following manner. The parasite bites an infected animal and sucks in blood containing the germ. When the bug bites its next victim it passes along the germ to the new victim. This occurs because parasites inject some of their saliva into the host when feeding

Some of the more prevalent transmissible bird diseases are Histoplasmosis, Candidiasis, Cryptococcosis, and St. Louis Encephalitis: all having associations with pigeons, geese, starling and house sparrows. Below is a brief description of these diseases.

- Histoplasmosis is a respiratory disease that may be fatal. It results from a fungus growing in dried bird droppings.
- Candidiasis is a yeast or fungus infection spread by pigeons. The disease affects the skin, the mouth, the respiratory system, the intestines and the urogenital tract.
- Cryptococcosis is caused by yeast found in the intestinal tract of pigeons and starlings. The illness often begins as a pulmonary disease and may later affect the central nervous system.
- St. Louis Encephalitis, an inflammation of the nervous system, usually causes drowsiness, headache and fever. It may even result in paralysis, coma or death. The disease is spread by mosquitoes which have fed on infected house sparrow, pigeons and house finches carrying such bacteria as Salmonellosis and E. Coli.

Handling dead birds always should be conducted by those properly trained to perform this task. Similar to hanta virus clean-up activities (from rodent droppings), persons need to be protected from physical contact as well as the potential inhalation exposures due to dried droppings becoming airborne from either windy conditions or just simple disturbances like moving boxes or feet inadvertently kicking up dried particulate. Typically, some form of respiratory protection is used in these situations, which means people performing clean-up activities need to be trained in respirator use as well as being medically qualified to wear a respirator and fit-tested (all of which are annual requirements).

When working in an area where dead birds are present, nitrile gloves (or a similar type of protective material like neoprene) should be used. When the task is completed, regardless of whether physical contact was made, hands (and other exposed skin surfaces) should be washed thoroughly with soap and water. If running water and soap are not immediately available, use hand sanitizers; however, wash your hands with soap and water as soon as a sink is available.

Some people are more likely than others to get diseases from birds. A person's age and health status may affect his or her immune system, increasing the chances of getting sick. People who are more likely to get diseases from birds include infants, children younger than 5 years old, organ transplant patients, people with HIV/AIDS, and people being treated for cancer.

You can never cross the ocean until you have the courage to lose sight of the shore.

Christopher Columbus