

Gulf Coast Gnat Outbreak Leads To Bird Deaths

The toxic bite of *Cnephia ornithophilia* has killed several birds in the past week.

By Anastasia Thrift

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Photo courtesy of Dr. Javier Navarez, Louisiana State University School of Veterinary Medicine. A gnat outbreak in the Gulf Coast has led to several bird fatalities. This owl has been affected.

Birds in the southern United States are succumbing to a parasite outbreak. Bites from the gnat *Cnephia ornithophilia*, closely related to the southern buffalo gnat, have killed a number of birds in Louisiana and other Gulf Coast states over the past week.

Thomas N. Tully, Jr., DVM, MS, of Louisiana State University School of Veterinary Medicine, issued an advisory to companion bird owners in the region — Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida — after witnessing the fatal outcome of these gnat bites beginning at the end of April. The toxic bites were originally attributed to the southern buffalo gnat, but were reclassified by LSU ornithologist Dr. Lane Foil, who is working on the classification of gnat species in this hatch.

“There may be more than one species involved, but at this time *Cnephia ornithophilia* seems to be the problem bug,” Tully said. He emphasized that this is subject to change with more investigation.

Tully says the gnats appear to target certain avian species but the selection seems random. In addition to chicken, peafowl, quail, emus, ostriches and cassowaries, affected psittacines include Amazon, African grey, caique and macaw parrots. Tully says there are likely more affected species. While pet bird owners cannot stop the gnat’s population growth, owners can limit exposure by using “screens, wind [fans], or keeping the birds inside.”

Owners should look for birds that shake their heads and have small flies around the face, Tully says. Affected birds appear depressed and physical symptoms, in macaws particularly, include swollen red face patches.

“This is an occurrence that bird owners in other parts of the country should be aware of where this species of gnat is known to occur,” Tully said. Bird owners can contact their state department of agriculture for information on whether their region is affected. He adds that this serious problem for outdoor aviaries will cause problems to birds and possibly death.

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