

PUBLIC HEALTH

Psittacosis Cases Increase

Parrot fever, a disease thought suitable for germ warfare, has been hitting increasing numbers of U. S. homes. Popularity of parakeets and related birds for pets believed cause.

► PSITTACOSIS, OR parrot fever, a disease considered well suited to germ warfare, has many health authorities worried.

What worries them is the three- to four-fold increase in cases in the United States during the past two years, and the fact that the increase is continuing so far this year.

The increase is not attributed to germ warfare. And fortunately the death rate has remained low.

So far this year, 23 cases of the disease have been reported by State health officers to the U. S. Public Health Service. At that rate, 23 cases in two months, we may have as many as 138 cases before the year is over. In 1953, at least 100 cases of the disease were traced to infection from psittacine birds. And in 1952, there were 135 cases of psittacosis, of which 61 occurred in a poultry processing plant in Texas. This left 74 cases due to infection from psittacine birds.

For six or seven years before 1952, however, psittacosis cases in the United States had averaged only 25 to 30 per year. So the 1952 cases, excluding the Texas poultry plant outbreak, were about three times the previous yearly averages, and since then we have been having about four times as many cases.

Psittacosis, or parrot fever, is caused by a virus. It gets its name because it was first discovered in birds of the parrot, or psittacine, family. Parakeets and love-birds belong to this family and may be infected with the virus as well as parrots. So may canaries, pigeons, turkeys, ducks and sea gulls.

The increase in the last few years in cases of the disease is believed due to the increased popularity of parakeets and related small birds for pets. As one health authority puts it, "Everybody has gone crazy about the birds."

Because many cases may be mistaken for atypical pneumonia, there may be more occurring than are diagnosed and reported. The symptoms, and even the X-ray pictures of the lungs, are very similar. Antibiotics are used in treatment of both diseases. Before their discovery, psittacosis was often fatal.

The virus of the disease spreads through the air. Two episodes of air-spread infection attacking scientists at the National Institutes of Health some 15 years ago brought this disease into the picture as a possibility for germ warfare. The virus is one that could easily be spread through the ventilating system of a building, to sicken many and perhaps kill some of the workers inside.

Part of the difficulty in checking the

spread of psittacosis comes from the fact that healthy birds may be carriers of the virus, something like the Typhoid Marys who are healthy human carriers of typhoid fever. Scientists are trying to find a way to take blood samples from the small birds so that they can be tested for psittacosis virus without destroying them.

United States quarantine regulations now provide that any birds of the psittacine family must be kept in isolation and observed for 30 days at the importation port. There is no federal quarantine on interstate shipment of birds, but individual states may ban shipments from another state. Many states now require banding of all birds and records of where they are sold, to facilitate investigation if a case of psittacosis is suspected.

Science News Letter, March 27, 1954

ENTOMOLOGY

Pink Bollworm Menace

► BIOLOGICAL WARFARE will be unleashed against a destructive foreign invader of the South's cotton fields, the pink bollworm.

Explorers in India, Egypt and Brazil are looking for insect diseases that can be used in this country to start a deadly epidemic among the bollworms.

Dr. F. C. Bishopp of the Oscar Johnston Cotton Foundation, Brownsville, Tex., reports that insect pathologists are now trying to isolate some virus diseases of the pink bollworm that might help control this threat to the cotton belt's economy.

The bollworm was first reported at Hearn, Tex., in 1917. Since that time, it has spread to many parts of Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Arizona. Last year, it was reported in Arkansas for the first time.

It is rated as potentially the equal of the boll weevil in destructive ability. In a recent year, damage in 38 Texas counties was estimated at \$28,000,000.

Another aspect of biological warfare against the pink bollworm is introduction of its natural enemies. About 150,000 parasites have been liberated in south Texas.

Preliminary observations, Dr. Bishopp said, indicate the parasites may not have become established in their new surroundings. They were introduced from India, the home of the bollworm.

Dr. Bishopp pointed out that frequently parasites do not begin to appear in large numbers until several years after their introduction into a new area. Parasites that

• RADIO

Saturday, April 3, 1954, 3:15-3:30 p.m. EST
"Adventures in Science" with Watson Davis, director of Science Service, over the CBS Radio Network. Check your local CBS station.

Dr. Harry J. Prebluda, biochemist with U. S. Industrial Chemicals Company of New York, will discuss "Growth Speeding Chemical."

TECHNOLOGY

Long-Life Road Signs Use Fibrous Glass Material

► IF CURVE and slippery-when-wet signs always seem in tip-top condition along a stretch of highway that you travel regularly, it may be they are made of a new material, reinforced with glass fiber, that is strong as steel, weighs a third as much as steel and does not rust.

Road signs now are being made of this long-lived material by a Pennsylvania firm. Because the color goes all the way through the material, the signs never need repainting. They are particularly suitable for use along coastlines where salt spray quickly attacks ordinary metal signs, the Highway Research Board reports.

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are effective in one area, however, are frequently not effective elsewhere.

The main reliance of cotton growers now is insecticide spraying and farm practices. Rigid plant quarantines have held the bollworm in check, but each year it manages to increase its range.

Dr. Bishopp is coordinating private, state and federal attacks on cotton pests for the Foundation. Previously, he was with the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

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HERPETOLOGY

Gulf Water Snake Born With Two Tails, One Head

► A GULF water snake with a single head but two tails managed to make only a few weak movements after birth before it died.

The rare snake has been preserved at the University of Illinois Museum of Natural History, Urbana, Ill. It is being studied by James C. List and Philip W. Smith. Both of the bodies were female.

Most of the snake's organs, except the esophagus and stomach, were doubled. Back of the head, the twin bodies were fused for about a third the length of the snake. X-rays showed two completely separate vertebral columns from the skull back.

Only the posterior third of each body was normal, they report in the *American Midland Naturalist* (Jan.).

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