

No Time, No Energy & Not Much To Say #1

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Last month I got my zine in early, this month it'll be late (okay, *later*...nothing can be truly late with Marty's getting the mailings into the P.O. on deadline day).

I had intended to do a large section of mailing comments, but, to be completely honest, I can't find the last mailing. I remember reading it so it must be around here somewhere, but that "somewhere" is a mighty big question mark. I've noticed that in a month a zine can work itself two feet down in a pile of misc. paperwork. Carefully trying to hid from me I suppose. I should be used to losing things by now.

Oh well, I'm including in this issue the discussion I had on Valhalla about West Nile. In case anyone is interested I'm the "Demo Dude"...at times it's hard to get me to believe in much of anything.

This will also be posted online...my first e-zine. The only difference in the editions (besides this paragraph) will be the photos and Jim Schumacher's artwork on the last page.

Enjoy.

dK



(l to r) Dwain Kaiser looking like a biker and Jim Keith looking like a football player
(Dwain's house in Upland, "The Magic Door II", Spring 1983, photo by Mark Webber)



Jerry Smith

INTERNET DISCUSSION

**West Nile Virus Outbreak:
A jet age snafu or
terrorist attack?
Edited by: Jerry Smith**

With the advent of air travel hundreds of species of creatures and strains of diseases have left their native habitats to be relocated all over the world. The press has run innumerable stories about these misplaced creatures causing havoc and destruction in environments with no natural enemies, from Vietnamese vines choking the South, to zebra mussels menacing the North. Could international terrorists be using this as a "cover" for a covert attack on America? Is this a wacky "Weekly World News" Conspiracy Theory, or a deadly reality?

As you may have guessed, I am on a number of email discussion groups. I would like to share one group's conversation on this summer's outbreak of West Nile virus with you. At their request I am reprinting their postings unedited, except to change their names.

It all began when one of our members, let's call him "Cranston," scoffed at wild Conspiracy Theories, like the idea that bin Laden might be training mosquitoes to attack America. Taking the bait, "Phoenix" replied .

Cranston,

No, bin Laden didn't train the mosquitoes -- he didn't have to. Anyone who has not yet come to the conclusion that this summer's outbreak of West Nile virus was not the result of intentional seeding has not taken a good look at the casualty map and the timeline of the spread of the disease this year. Check it out: The vast bulk of the casualties (and the vast bulk of infections, period) are all in states that border the Mississippi. The spread of the

virus was *much* faster than what occurred in the previous outbreak in New York. Compared to NY, this outbreak moved like wildfire.

What obviously happened is that someone started at the mouth of the Mississippi in Louisiana and went up river in a boat releasing infected birds (*not* mosquitoes, which Don't live long enough, but birds recently infected with the virus). These birds were the primary carriers and the mosquitoes who bit them were the expansion agents.

Again, you check the timeline of the expansion of the disease and you'll see that it "moved up" the river pretty much sequentially over the course of a few weeks.

I have not heard any scientist or government official explain how it is that this disease, which was fairly easily contained to a limited area of New York two summers ago should suddenly become a rapidly-moving, impossible-to-contain "plague" so quickly. During the initial outbreak it moved slowly, and stayed in a fairly small area. And human cases dropped off to virtually nothing in 2000 and 2001, even as the geographical spread moved out from the New York center to surrounding states -- but it was obviously weakening for the past 2 years. Now, this year, it just "naturally" totally reverses that 3-year history of a slow-moving pathology and just sweeps up the Mississippi and almost four thousand are infected in a mere 3 months? Right...

To which The Gardener replied:

Alternative version: A flock of infected birds moved up the Mississippi flyway, as some birds do every year, infecting the local mosquitoes as they went.

Think "Occam" (or even "Ockham"), and remember that disease-causing organisms can (and often do) mutate into more virulent or more easily-spread forms, with viruses being especially notorious for doing this.

You've been reading too many things Jerry has posted, maybe -- paranoia and Conspiracy Theory are sometimes as communicable as viruses. (If you intended the theory you advanced as a parody, it didn't work because it wasn't quite sufficiently extreme. Granted, it's not easy to be more Extreme than some of the Theories Jerry seems to be promoting, but I think you're good enough of a writer to handle that.)

And Digger added:

Phoenix--

"West Nile virus announces its arrival in town in a very Biblical way--all the crows die." --NPR reporter

By Occam's Razor, isn't it more likely that those cute lil' virii were indeed spread by infected birds, but the ole-fashioned way, by flying around within their territories & spreading it to the next bird over? The speed sounds just right for that kinda transmission. Among birds--many species, not just crows--& skeeters, it's very contagious. "_All_ the crows" is barely an exaggeration. And if it did start in Nawlins & move up the Mississippi valley, just what you'd expect from a human or bird arriving at that busy port or airport from the NE.

Also note that most viruses by their simple-yet-insidiously-effective nature mutate rapidly.

For real facts, see <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile/index.htm> Note the spread pattern on the several maps--'twas already well beyond NY in '01.

And That Demo Dude chimed in

Phoenix:

My you are getting paranoid aren't you? Don't worry, we still love you ...

Then Phoenix replied to That Demo Dude:

Nope, I wasn't being paranoid at all... it was obvious that the pattern of attack was proceeding north up the Mississippi -- well away from me [Phoenix lives in Florida] -- so I wasn't worried personally. I kept working on building the house all summer long with no shirt on and only the occasional spray of DEET, getting bit regularly, and didn't think my chances of getting West Nile were high.

That doesn't mean I couldn't read the writing on the wall -- compile the statistics and chart them on a map and trace a timeline and come to an obvious conclusion. Note that you didn't answer or dispute any of the factual points I made which lead me to the conclusion that this summer's widespread outbreak of West Nile was engineered by the hand of man.

How is it they were able to contain West Nile to a limited section of New York two years ago without much trouble, but were unable to do anything similar when it showed up in Louisiana this summer? How is it the virus covered vast areas of land so quickly when two years ago -- erupting in the most densely populated area of the country -- yet it didn't spread much very much geographically? How is it that while generally moving up the Mississippi, the virus "jumped" over whole states, instead of spreading sequentially, but still always staying close to the river? None of these facts are consistent with way we've observed viral spread in a "natural event" scenario, but they all consistent with a series of releases of infected birds from a boat proceeding slowly northward along the river.

What is hard to believe is that so many intelligent, informed people are willing to bend over backwards to hide their heads in the sand and ignore the most-likely explanation, simply because it's too damn scary. After all, it was another of those 'obvious' strategies -- like using commercial jets as guided missiles -- which are only obvious *after* it has taken place and there's nothing you can do to but engage in damage control. And since an attack like this can be easily fobbed off on the populace as a "natural event", there's no

need for anyone to admit to our continued vulnerability and cause people to panic again (and crash the stock market again), unlike the anthrax letters, which couldn't be explained away as "natural". But don't kid yourself, Demo Dude, they were both terrorist actions.

Digger then added:

Phoenix--

Better take more precautions--there've already been 17 confirmed cases in FL. With enuf Deet, even hungry skeeters will form an eager cloud about 1/2" from your skin, but can't bear to land long enuf to bite. Just Don't miss any spots--at the aptly-named Mosquito Creek in Alberta, I got 5 bites on the 2 places I missed, under one temple of my glasses & the back of my little finger.

[Quoting Phoenix]

"How is it they were able to contain West Nile to a limited section of New York two years ago without much trouble, but were unable to do anything similar when it showed up in Louisiana this summer? How is it the virus covered vast areas of land so quickly when two years ago -- erupting in the most densely populated area of the country -- it didn't even jump the Hudson into New Jersey?"

They didn't contain it, it contained itself. Tiny initial outbreak, & lots fewer places for mosquitoes to breed in NYC than Louisiana swamps, especially with both organized & voluntary efforts after people got alarmed. And then there are the Noo Yawk winters, killing all outdoor mosquitoes, & infected birds faster.

[Quoting Phoenix]

"How is it that while generally moving up the Mississippi, the virus "jumped" over whole states, instead of spreading sequentially, but still always staying close to the river?"

Do you have some kinda official Web map showing that? The CDC ones don't show other than annual progress, but don't reflect that.

For states in the Mississippi & Ohio valleys, the cumulative case counts at <http://www.cdc.gov/od/oc/media/wncount.htm> look better-correlated with population than anything else--IL, MI & OH being the really populous states.

[Quoting Phoenix]

"There is a map (look for map # 2) from the CDC that shows this progression. Check it out at: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile/surv&control.htm> "

"And since an attack like this can be easily fobbed off on the populace as a "natural event", there's no need for anyone to admit to our continued vulnerability and cause people to panic again (and crash the stock market again)..."

I agree that would be this gummint's action, even if convinced it were terrorism, to an epidemic that's impossible to control & difficult to minimize, with no vaccine. Somebody at the CDC would squeal soon enuf, tho.

Phoenix then replied to The Gardener:

Well, obviously that was the first thing I thought -- along with everybody else. Early on, I assumed a flock of 'naturally' infected birds was making their way up the Mississippi flyway as the simplest, most likely explanation -- and I felt that was probably the case for maybe the first 3 or 4 weeks -- but as the number of infections rose and the death total mounted -- and I started relating the statistics to a map -- too many things cropped up that didn't fit into the "completely natural" scenario, as I just mentioned to That Demo Dude, but will repeat here:

How is it they were able to contain West Nile to a limited section of New York two years ago without much trouble, but were unable to do anything similar when it suddenly popped up in Louisiana this summer? How is it the virus covered vast areas of and so quickly this time when two years ago -- erupting in the most densely populated area of the country -- it didn't

even jump the Hudson into New Jersey? How is it that while generally moving up the Mississippi, the virus "jumped" over whole states, instead of spreading sequentially, but still always staying close to the river? None of these facts are consistent with the way we've observed viral spread in a "natural event" scenario, but they are all consistent with a series of releases of infected birds from a boat proceeding slowly northward along the river. Besides, when you look at all the data from the past 3 years, the idea of a "naturally" infected flock is plainly not the simplest explanation anyway. Consider:

Sure, the Mississippi is a big fly-way, but there are plenty of other north-south flyways leading up from the Gulf into the continent - yet no outbreak occurred along any of these other flyways. Nor have there been reported cases in Mexico or Central America, where one assumes this "naturally" infected flock came from. What, some birds infected in New York two years ago make their way south -- not infecting anything along the way for over a year -- then they hung a right at the Gulf until they got to the mouth of the Mississippi (still not infecting anything on the way) and only then they started moving up the Mississippi did they begin infecting things? Yes, I know that the warmth-loving mosquitoes wouldn't have been active during this whole time, but there was still an entire summer in between New York and Louisiana -- where was the natural progression of the virus during the interim? Why can't we trace a "natural path of incidents over time" from the New York infection to the Louisiana outbreak?

No, this year's outbreak, which started in Louisiana near the mouth of the Mississippi, almost certainly did not find its way "naturally" from New York. How would the virus get from New York to Louisiana without infecting anything in-between? of course, one can come up with a couple of long-shot explanations that ease the mind because they say "non-intentional" - a shipment of mosquitoes/birds somehow arrived on a ship from Africa at the Port of New Orleans unnoticed, etc., etc. But those long-shot explanations honestly are *not*

the "most simple explanation that fits all the known facts". The simplest explanation that works with *all* the facts is that the virus was planted in New York two years ago and was planted again along the length of the Mississippi starting in Louisiana early this summer.

My final thing that convinced me is something you mentioned: viral mutation. Please note that there is plenty of evidence that the virus does indeed mutate quickly. But not as you suggested. Instead it seems to actually *lose* its virulence as it spreads. Given the rapid, widespread infections from the Gulf to the Great Lakes, one would have logically expected the virus to continue to spread out from both sides of the Mississippi and flow across the whole country all the way to both coasts. But that didn't happen. Why? Because the pure virus seems to lose potency rapidly once released "into the wild" as it mutates through multiple hosts. The bulk of the deaths tend to "cluster" in geographical clumps (again, close to the river) - they are not spread out evenly across the infected populace. The only explanation as to why the Mississippi Outbreak didn't spread to the rest of the country is that it appears that once the pure West Nile is released into the wild, it seems to quickly mutate into a less and less virulent form as it spreads out. That's a lucky pathology for us, but it is also another piece of damning evidence which tends to indicate that the geographic clusters of high mortality probably correlate with nearby releases of the pure virus-infected birds.

And to Digger, Phoenix wrote:

There is a map (look for map # 2) from the CDC that shows this progression. Check it out at: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile/surv&control.htm>

Don't be fooled by the fact that this map doesn't include 2002. The first Mississippi Attack happened in 2001, as can be plainly seen by this map, but wasn't very successful, with virtually no human infections in the Mississippi basin, except for some around the mouth of the river.

Perhaps because there was only one release -- around New Orleans - or perhaps it was launched too late into the season, or because of an insufficient number of birds released or possibly a weak batch of the virus used to infect them. In any event, the disease moved up the river, but had little impact. They tried again in 2002 and were obviously much more successful with the same Up-The-Mississippi dissemination plan.

If you check the "daily case statistics" at the CDC, (<http://www.cdc.gov/od/oc/media/wntrend.htm>) you see the geographic/progression/death timeline I'm talking about for 2002. Scroll to the very bottom of the page and work your way up, starting with August 8, 2002. If I find I have nothing better to do with my life, I plan to generate an animation, possibly using a spreadsheet, that will show each individual human incident appearing in chronological order (like the map in Dustin Hoffman's OUTBREAK), including the "fatality clusters" indicating release points. But I Don't really need that to be able to visualize the pattern in my head, just looking at the daily case data -- and neither should you.

Please note virtually NO activity in 2000, just a little to-be-expected residue from the 1999 New York attack. They decided, as you pointed out, that while the New York area was a "high image target", it just did not offer the environment necessary for this type of attack to be successful, so they developed a new strategy and came up with the Mississippi Riverboat gambit, which was first tried in 2001. I'd really love to see how many of those Mississippi-basin incident

While it is true there is warm, stagnant water in places along the Mississippi River, much of the area is running water. While they have mosquitoes and birds, they Don't have anything like the extensive stagnant swamp waters and vast flocks of migrating birds that Florida has. And yet we've had only 17 human incidents and no fatalities in Florida. This factalone debunks the "naturalist" theory of the spread and incidents of the disease.

Finally, note the real big picture statistic:

From 1999 through 2001 -- three years -- there were 149 cases of West Nile virus human illness in the United States reported to CDC and confirmed, including 18 deaths, almost all of that was in the first year 1999 -- the year of the initial release. But for 2002, suddenly we get hit with in one year with 3475 cases of West Nile virus human illness in the United States reported to the CDC and confirmed, including 201 deaths -- all in one 3-month period.

That's a complete, sudden, unexplainable-by-natural-causes reversal of the trend the disease had established in the previous 3 years.

Why the sudden reversal? The big jump in number of incidences in a disease which had previously shown itself to be not that contagious and was even "fading away" in the two years prior to this? And why the complete switch of geographical locales? None of this lends itself to the "natural progression" of the disease from the 1999 initial outbreak, which was a diminishing spiral -- but it is completely symptomatic of a focused attack along the Mississippi using plenty of birds and a fresh batch of the virus.

An interesting exception to this year's concentration of human incidents and fatalities along the Mississippi is the President's own home state of Texas, which was the *only* other area of the country outside the Mississippi basin to be "hard hit" this year. But that's just a coincidence, I'm sure...

The disease occurrence in Florida is nothing compared to that along the banks of the Mississippi this summer, and yet just looking at the just the "favorable" environment, Florida should have been the worst hit in a "natural" scenario. There have been 17 cases of human incidents of West Nile in Florida, but no fatalities so far. Why? Big land buffers between the two primary areas of attack: New York and Louisiana/Mississippi. The virus "mutates down" as it spreads, losing virulence as it

moves through multiple hosts. By the time it gets to my neck of the woods, it's fairly tame. I'd rather catch a small dose now and start building my immune systems response to it *before* some non-existent terrorist decides to let loose a batch of birds closer to [me]...

Digger rebutted:

[Quoting Phoenix]

"How is it that while generally moving up the Mississippi, the virus "jumped" over whole states, instead of spreading sequentially, but still always staying close to the river?"

Remember those stats were only tracking human cases, not other animals. When it needs both a) birds to spread widely, & b) mosquitoes to spread to humans, that requires the coincidence of 1) an infected bird landing & staying somewhere, long enough to infect other birds or skeeters, & 2) warm stagnant water to provide the skeeters. As you pointed out, some states have more of this than others.

[Quoting Phoenix]

"None of these facts are consistent with the way we've observed viral spread in a "natural event" scenario..."

Actually it's utterly characteristic of the way a nouveau disease that depends on seasonal vectors spreads in an environment where it's never been seen before. One outbreak at 1st, interrupted by the wrong seasons, & then its spread depends not just on environmental factors but where the vectors just happen to travel. Especially when one of the vectors is human & can travel anywhere by air. Remember the couple of big scares from other African tropical diseases when infected people flew to the E Coast?

[Quoting Phoenix]

"Sure, the Mississippi is a big fly-way, but there are plenty of other north-south flyways leading up from the Gulf into the continent -- yet no outbreak occurred along any of these other flyways."

See list of 138 known-infected birds at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile/birdspecies.htm> The only common

migratory bird I notice there is the Canadian Goose, which comes from too far N to catch it in Canada, & flies straight to warmer climates, stopping only on rural ponds too cold for mosquitoes on late-fall nights. All the other common migratory ducks 'n geese aren't on it. Those # in the zillions, so if they could catch the virus, presumably they would have by now, the 4th fall that it's been around.

But I think it was most likely an infected human going from the NE to Nawlins--lots more of those than birds making that trip at the right time.

[Quoting Phoenix]

"Yes, I know that the warmth-loving mosquitoes wouldn't have been active during this whole time, but there was still an entire summer in between New York and Louisiana -- where was the natural progression of the virus during the interim? Why can't we trace a "natural path of incidents over time" from the New York infection to the Louisiana outbreak?"

Magic silver bird in sky make big noise.

[Quoting Phoenix]

"How would the virus get from New York to Louisiana without infecting anything in-between? of course, one can come up with a couple of long-shot explanations that ease the mind because they say "non-intentional" - a shipment of mosquitoes/birds somehow arrived on a ship from Africa at the Port of New Orleans unnoticed, etc., etc."

Remember that the virus in humans usually produces only a low-grade fever, easily mistaken for flu. It's only fatal when it happens to infect the CNS lining, becoming encephalitis. So humans make great carriers, unlikely to be disabled by an active case of infection.

[Quoting Phoenix]

"Given the rapid, widespread infections from the Gulf to the Great Lakes, one would have logically expected the virus to continue to spread out from both sides of the Mississippi and flow across the whole country all the way to both coasts."

Not when spread & transmission to humans need both birds & mosquitoes. One glance at the map shows it grinding to a halt at the Rockies, where there are wide areas with few or no mosquitoes, from both sides.

[Quoting Phoenix]

"Instead it seems to actually *lose* its virulence as it spreads."

That explains the relatively low death rate among infected humans...& perhaps also why it hasn't spread to the whole country from the apparent 2 (NYC & New Orleans) initial sites.

[Quoting Phoenix]

"The bulk of the deaths tend to "cluster" in geographical clumps (again, close to the river) -- they are not spread out evenly across the infected populace."

Warm stagnant water again. But the infection #s per state in that whole region are roughly correlated with their absolute population #s.

[Quoting Phoenix]

Those long-shot explanations honestly are *not* the "most simple explanation that fits all the known facts". The simplest explanation that works with *all* the facts is that the virus was planted in New York two years ago and was planted again along the length of the Mississippi starting in Louisiana early this summer.

"There is a map (look for map # 2) from the CDC that shows this progression. Check it out

at:
<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile/surv&control.htm> "

I already studied that one last nite. Doesn't contradict anything I've been arguing.

Let's give the last word to Phoenix:

Digger,

Oh, I see, you feel that terrorists threatening a US city with a nuke is "not a paranoid-conspiracy thriller", but is a much more believable "mainstream threat" [the plot of the current season of the TV show "24" - Editor] -- but that the comparatively simple, low-tech concept that a couple of

guys could go up the Mississippi in a boat, releasing birds infected with an easy-to-obtain virus *is* a paranoid-conspiracy theory...

Hey, I didn't say it was bin Laden or Al Qaeda or specify anyone else. For all I know, it could be a few home-grown nutballs, just like in the sniper shootings. I don't claim to know anything about the perpetrators or their motives -- I only say that if one looks for the simplest explanation that covers *all* the facts and events that there obviously have to be perpetrators.

You see, I didn't go looking for a terrorist explanation. Like you and the others, at first I believed it was a "natural" event. It was only as I watched the data come in and started correlating it that the unanswered questions led me to consider other possibilities. Unlike you, I didn't look to fit the facts into what I wanted to believe. I just let the facts lead me to the simplest, most likely explanation.

You say "By Occam's Razor, when there's a necessary & sufficient explanation, there's no need to invoke any further cause."

That's exactly right -- and the conclusion I reached is far simpler than your convoluted "it could be natural if we assume such and so, and then this and that happened". That's a much more complex attempt to explain some (not all) of the facts than my simple and direct conclusion. Yours is a "conspiracy theory" in its own right -- a stretch to convince that "it was all just a natural event" by someone determined to interpret and twist the data to fit what they want to believe for peace of mind's sake. What's actually happening here is that you and the others are promoting a "non-paranoid" conspiracy theory -- one that seeks to ignore the obvious answer and which will console you. Go for it. It's [about] time the non-paranoids had a theory they can call their own.

Me, I examined all facts and drew my own conclusion from them and then when the subject came up proceeded to present them

here for informational purposes. I'm not looking to try convince anyone.

Then Charles joined the discussion, addressing his comment to Phoenix,

Just one problem with your theory, bro -- I believe I've read that West Nile Disease is a damned feeble disease in humans, mostly causing nothing worse than flu-like symptoms (it is only fatal to a small percentage of humans; now, if we were CROWS it would make a damned good terrorist weapon, as it kills almost 100% of corvids). West Nile Disease is thus a damned ineffective terrorist weapon. If I were a terrorist I'd prefer things like smallpox, Black Plague, Ebola, or perhaps something disfiguring like elephantiasis. I would not waste my time with something mostly not much worse than measles. No matter HOW crazy, somebody's going to want something that has an EFFECT.

[FOOTNOTE: From the CDC website:

Q. What proportion of people with severe illness due to West Nile virus die?

A. Among those with severe illness due to West Nile virus, case-fatality rates range from 3% to 15% and are highest among the elderly. Less than 1% of persons infected with West Nile virus will develop severe illness.]

That caused me to "buzz in" with:

What if this were a "test"? Has anyone considered the possibility that Phoenix is right about WNV being an intentional release, but that it was an agency of our government that did it? Before you start screaming about it being a "crazy conspiracy theory" consider that the FBI and the CIA, among others, have admitted to engaging in open air testing of bio-agents to test the effects and effectiveness of possible enemy bio-agents and our counter-terrorism preparedness and tactics. The FBI released a variety of flu strains in a number of major cities in the 1950s (and later). Perhaps they, or someone like them, were testing what would happen if a slow moving boat were to move up the Mississippi releasing something really nasty. Think about it, this reconciles

Sparrow's observations, with the weaknesses that Charles pointed out. I'm not saying "Yea" or "Nay," just pointing out a possibility.

And that's where the conversation ended. So, Dear Reader, what do you think?

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Artwork by Jim Schumacher**

