



*House Finch at  
Springfield, IL. 27  
April 1993. Photo by  
Dennis Oehmke.*

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## House Finch Disease Rises in Illinois: Birders Can Help Cornell Lab Track the Disease

From November 1994 through March 1995, Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Project FeederWatch participants have reported an increase in the numbers of House Finches at Illinois feeders that have contracted a respiratory disease caused by the bacterium, *Mycoplasma gallisepticum*, which usually infects poultry (Dhondt 1995). Some 1,500 participants are monitoring the disease which is spreading among House Finches in eastern North America. Since 1994, birders have noticed House Finches with red, swollen, crusty eyes. The disease typically infects chickens and poses no risk to humans, but it can be fatal to House Finches. Birds' eyes swell to the point that they can not see. They then have a difficult time finding food and may starve.

Cornell Lab is tracking the disease through its House Finch Disease Survey. Volunteer participants record the amount of House Finches in their

backyards and at feeders, and the amount which exhibit signs of the disease. From November 1994 to March 1995, the number of participants who reported sick finches at feeders has doubled. Other birds do not seem to be affected and House Finch populations appear to be holding steady (Dhondt 1995). "Most diseases in wild animals go through periods of increase and decrease without causing permanent changes in populations," said George Kollias, Professor of Wildlife Medicine at Cornell University. How this House Finch disease is spread, "whether species other than House Finches in the wild may be affected, and whether infected birds can recover and survive is not yet known," said Kollias.

Long-term data will be the best measurements of the impacts of this disease. Long-term data could also be used to determine what to do if a threatened or endangered species

contracts a potentially fatal disease (Dhondt 1995).

Cornell Lab wants all data whether or not you see diseased birds. "If participants who don't see sick birds stop sending in their forms while participants who see sick House Finches continue to submit data, the data set will show an apparent increase in the disease - but it won't be a real increase," said Andre A. Dhondt, Director of Bird Population Studies at Cornell Lab (1995).

Call 1-800-843-BIRD for specific information on how to report data, and how you can help track the disease.

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### Literature Cited

Dhondt, A. 1995. Documenting a Disease. *Birdscope* 9:4-5.