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Wildlife Rehabilitation Internship at Ohio Wildlife Center

Chase Reinert

Ohio Wesleyan University

Cassady Wolfinger

Ohio Wesleyan University

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Abstract

Ohio Wildlife Center treats approximately 8,000 sick, orphaned, or injured native Ohio wildlife every year. Throughout the spring semester, we completed a three-month internship to learn all aspects of wildlife rehabilitation. During our time at the Ohio Wildlife Center, we learned basic handling skills of a variety of species, including orphaned animals. Spring is the busiest time of year and most of our time was consumed with doing intake exams and tube feedings of infant animals. In addition to the wildlife hospital, the Ohio Wildlife Center has a pre-release facility located in Powell. Once a patient is deemed healthy enough to leave the medical supervision of the veterinary technicians at the hospital, they are typically sent to the pre-release facility (PRF). The facility has outdoor, open cages so that the wildlife patients can become acclimated to living outside before they are released into the wild. At PRF, we provided the patients with supervision, food, and personalized medical attention, so they would be fully healed and independent before release. During our time at the wildlife hospital, an avian influenza outbreak was prevalent across the United States. Our hospital had to adhere to certain protocols to prevent outbreaks of avian influenza. We were trained on how to examine and treat intake patients who were suspected of being carriers of this virus. We developed a variety of valuable skills on how to properly treat and rehabilitate many different species. Learning the inner workings of a wildlife center will be helpful during our future career paths in zoology.

Baby Season

During the springtime, many of the patients that come into the hospital are orphaned animals. Typically, these patients are brought in due to altercations with other animals (dogs, cats, etc.), abandonment by the parents, or human interactions (construction, tree cutting services, cars, etc.). If the orphans are too young to live on their own or if they are injured, the hospital usually takes care of them until they are healthy enough to be released. Since the springtime can bring numerous orphans to the hospital a day, the wildlife center specifically trains some volunteers to take care of these orphans at home. After the hospital staff intakes a group of orphans and deems them stable enough to not require medical attention, the orphans are offloaded to homecare volunteers, who feed and care for the babies until they are big enough to go to the pre-release facility. As interns, we were trained in orphan intake, which consisted of evaluating the body condition of the babies, preparing incubators and nests for the babies, mixing formula, tube feeding the babies, and preparing them for the homecare volunteers.



Figure 1: Orphaned/injured baby bunnies receiving around-the-clock care.
Chase is feeding a newly admitted baby bunny. Baby bunnies are often orphaned or injured when dogs/cats find the nest.



Figure 2: Numerous species of orphaned animals are admitted every spring.
Spring is the busiest time of the year when dozens of orphaned animals, like this raccoon and gosling, are admitted everyday.

Rehabilitation

For most of the internship, we were both placed as interns at the wildlife hospital. At the hospital we were exposed to many different rehabilitation and medical techniques. We were able to practice these husbandry techniques on many different species of animals. As interns, we were the “right hand men” to any of the attending vet techs. We regularly cleaned cages, prepared diets, administered medications, and hand fed patients at the hospital. We also gained experience handling and taking care of everything from the smallest reptiles to native raptors (birds of prey). Many useful and interesting experiences resulted from our internship, including experience feeding Big Brown Bats. Since bats are a rabies-vector species, few interns gain experience with these animals (and other rabies-vector species) due to the risk of exposure. In order to better prepare for our futures, we both decided to obtain the rabies vaccine, which allowed us to gain valuable experience that will put us above other graduates and applicants in our field of study. The vet techs and hospital staff also encouraged us to take an active and hands-on approach to our learning while at the hospital, giving us a more realistic view into the everyday life of wildlife rehabilitation.



Figure 3: Hand-feeding a Big Brown Bat in care at the hospital.
Cassady is hand-feeding a big brown bat mealworms. Bats in the hospital get hand fed once a day unless they are consistently eating on their own.

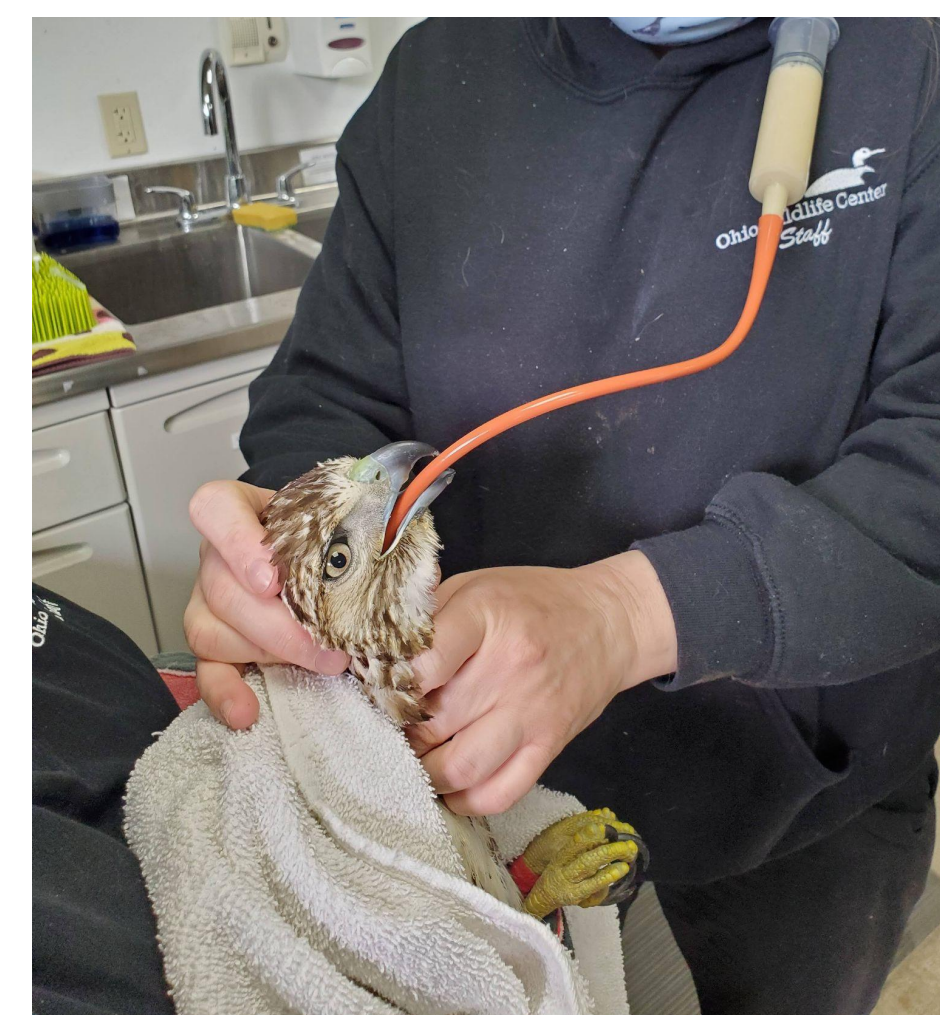


Figure 4: Proper handling and gavage feeding of a Red-Tailed Hawk.
Raptors, like this Red-Tailed Hawk, have sharp talons so proper handling is essential. Some animals are too weak when they are admitted to the hospital that they require gavage (tube) feeding.

References and Acknowledgements

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¹National Wildlife Health Center. (2022, April 13). Distribution of highly pathogenic avian influenza H5 and H5N1 in North America, 2021/2022.

<https://www.usgs.gov/media/images/distribution-highly-pathogenic-avian-influenza-h5-and-h5n1-north-america-20212022>

Pre-Release Facility

For one four hour shift a week, we cared for the animals at the pre-release facility. The pre-release facility allows patients to prepare for release in a more natural, hands-off area. Many of the enclosures are built to provide a certain level of protection from the elements, but still encourage the animals to be independent. In an effort to encourage a certain level of fear of humans, we only clean the cages and give the animals food once a day. During this time, the animals are also assessed on their ability to survive in the wild. For raptors, we live prey test them before release to ensure their ability to hunt. Other animals are tested on their ability to forage with the use of dig boxes and other natural branches/bushes. Squirrels have to pass “nut school,” where we test their ability to crack and open native nuts. The goal of the pre-release facility is to provide a safe, natural environment to acclimate back to their native environment, which is especially important when it is very cold! No matter the weather, we trudged through the mud to care for the animals!



Figure 5: Pre-Release Facility provides a more natural environment for patients.
Chase is hand-feeding a fledgling house sparrow that is learning how to be independent. The squirrel is acclimating to living outside before being released.

Avian Influenza

Throughout our internship, an avian influenza outbreak spread across the United States. Usually, the outbreaks mostly affect commercial poultry, but this year there have been an alarming number of cases in wild birds. Since it is migration season, many birds are spreading the virus from state to state. Waterfowl (ducks, geese, etc.), sea birds (gulls, herrons, etc.), and raptors (hawks, owls, vultures, etc.) are more prone to infection. Songbirds are currently considered lower risk of becoming infected, but there is no data. To mitigate the possibility of avian influenza entering our facility, disinfectant foot baths were placed outside of all bird rooms to prevent the spread from one area to another. In addition, all susceptible birds received an examination for signs of the virus (nasal discharge, sneezing, etc.) before entering the building. At this time, the risk of the virus to humans is extremely low.

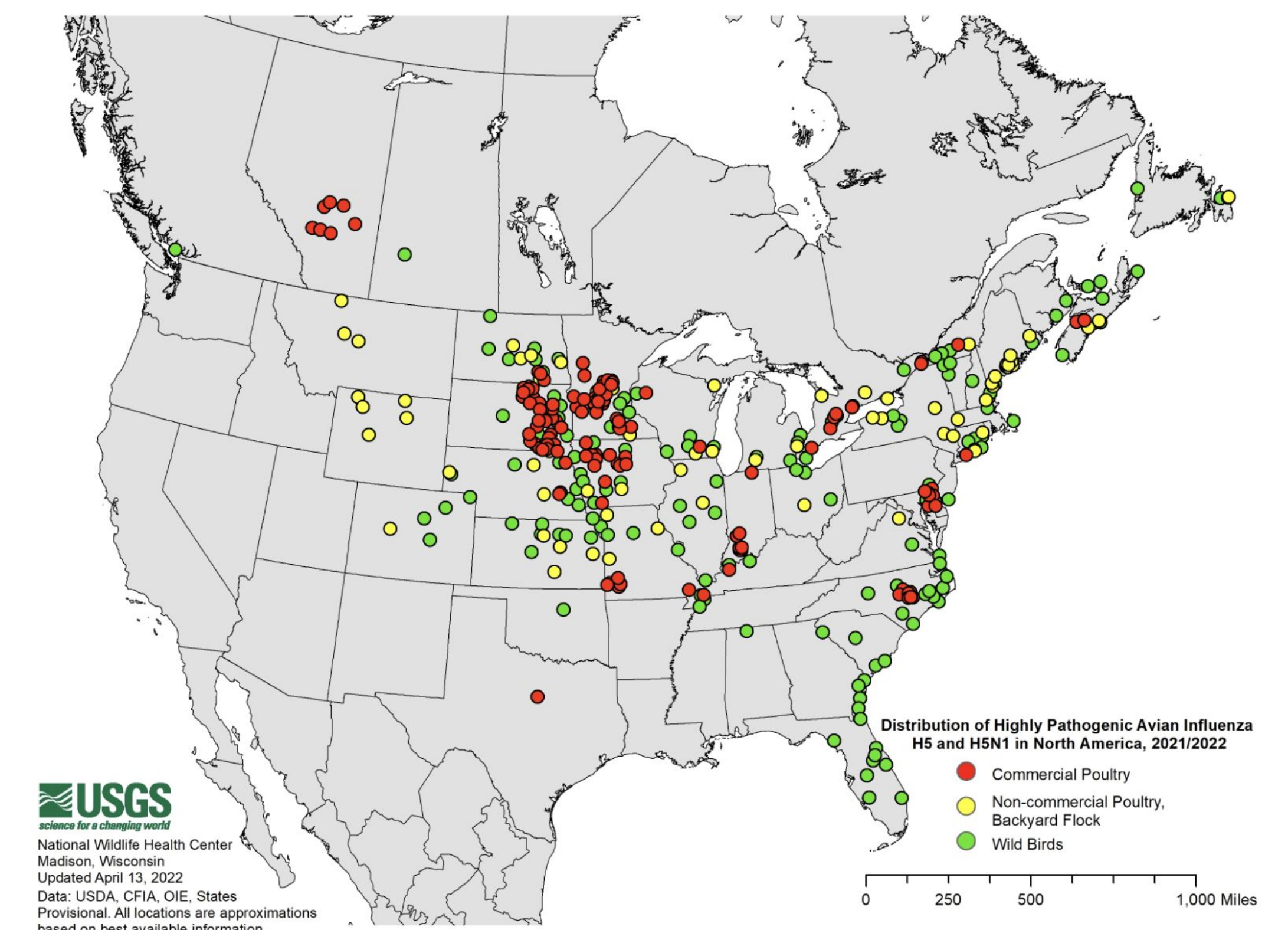


Figure 6: Distribution of Avian Influenza Cases in North America 2021-2022
Cases of avian influenza (H5N1) have been reported in wild birds, commercial poultry, and other poultry.¹