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Dead birds in St. Louis collected, along with videos of their dying convulsions

By LINDA GITTLEMAN. The Morning Sun

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The bird studies in St. Louis have been completed, the tissues sent for analysis and videos of the robins dying in convulsive tremors have also been collected.

Dr. Matt Zwiernik, who along with volunteers collected the birds, said that brain and liver tissues from 25 birds have been sent to a wildlife pathologist for further analysis.

The birds’ convulsions, due to neurotoxicity from DDT, were able to be videotaped in part, because they did not die quickly.

Even so, a bird in distress will attract predators, such as cats, who will eat the birds, Zwiernik said. At least five birds weren’t collected because by the time the volunteers arrived, the cats had beat them to it, he said.

Of 19 nests that were monitored, 11 had failed. In a three or four block area on Watson and Bankson Streets, nest failure was 100 percent.

“Nests were built and eggs laid, and some of the eggs hatched,” Pine River Superfund Task Force Chair Jane Keon said. “But parents and fledglings died.”

Of 13 adult robins and three juvenile robins, 12 showed abnormal tissues in their brains and livers. Young starlings also died, Zwiernik said.

Two young bluebirds were also collected. They had been abandoned by both their parents, an unusual occurrence, he said.

Preliminary studies of the egg shell thickness showed the shells to be “ridiculously thin” Zwiernik said.

“Where else in the world are birds dying of DDT?” Keon asked Zwiernik.

He said he knows of no other place.

Had he ever seen anything like this before?

“Never,” Zwiernik said.

He stressed the point of the study was to establish the condition of the birds before the clean up of the plant site.

Another study would be completed after the cleanup.

In another issue at the meeting, Keon reported that five residential properties are scheduled to be cleaned up in the fall and 55 more properties should be cleaned in the spring. However, letters are being sent to 54 more homeowners seeking access to sampling. And sampling at still more homes is a possibility.

This fall, residents will see equipment at the plant site as studies begin to map the spots where all the debris from the plant is buried.

In still another matter, plans are underway for the ceremony for the removal of the tombstone, scheduled for
mid-October. A parade and a reception are some of the plans for the event. Linda Gittleman may be reached at 989-463-6071, lgittleman@michigannewspapers.com or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/lgittleman.