

Songbirds singing a toxic tune ; Study blames coal-fired power plants for high levels of mercury:[All Editions]

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**Abstract (Summary)**

The biologist, David C. Evers, who also is executive director of the Biodiversity Research Institute, a nonprofit ecological organization in Gorham, Maine, said his preliminary findings challenged existing perceptions about how far mercury travels. Also challenged is how it interacts with the environment and how it affects various forms of wildlife -- all with worrisome implications for people.

Catherine H. Bowes, Northeast mercury program manager for the National Wildlife Federation, called the results of the songbird study "eye opening" and said they helped expand understanding of mercury contamination.

Evers is one of the first scientists to test for wildlife mercury contamination beyond fish. He began his work in this area in 1998 and found that common loons, which eat fish, had highly elevated levels of mercury that made them lethargic and caused their reproductive rates to drop.

**Full Text** (455 words)

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A biologist studying wild songbirds in New York state has found that all 178 woodland birds he tested last year had unusually high levels of mercury in their blood and feathers, a sign that the toxic chemical has spread farther in the environment than previously thought.

The biologist, David C. Evers, who also is executive director of the Biodiversity Research Institute, a nonprofit ecological organization in Gorham, Maine, said his preliminary findings challenged existing perceptions about how far mercury travels. Also challenged is how it interacts with the environment and how it affects various forms of wildlife -- all with worrisome implications for people.

While mercury often has been found in lakes and streams and in fish, Evers' work documents the unexpected presence of the chemical in birds that do not live on water and never eat fish.

"Impacts on biological diversity usually show impacts on human health," Evers said. "If these birds are having trouble, that should be a very good indicator of a risk to our own well-being and health as well."

Catherine H. Bowes, Northeast mercury program manager for the National Wildlife Federation, called the results of the songbird study "eye opening" and said they helped expand understanding of mercury contamination.

"It makes a compelling case for reducing mercury pollution from local sources, as New York is doing," Bowes said.

In May, Gov. George E. Pataki proposed cutting mercury emissions from New York power plants in half by 2010, setting standards that would be substantially more stringent than new federal regulations on mercury.

State environmental officials are drawing up regulations, and then will take public comments before adopting them.

But Evers is one of the first scientists to test for wildlife mercury contamination beyond fish. He began his work in this area in 1998 and found that common loons, which eat fish, had highly elevated levels of mercury that made them lethargic and caused their reproductive rates to drop.

He then decided to study songbirds, which never eat fish. In particular, he wanted to study the wood thrush, a small bird with a distinctive song that was once common throughout the Northeast. The population of wood thrushes has declined 45 percent in recent decades.

It was once thought that destruction of the bird's forest habitat was responsible for the decline. But Evers now suspects that mercury contamination is a factor, along with the wide-ranging negative effects of acid rain on the forests.

Much of the mercury that is causing problems in New York comes from coal-burning power plants in the Midwest. Smokestack emissions from those plants tend to drift eastward.

The airborne mercury eventually falls to earth, settling in lakes and streams where it is transformed into methyl mercury, which is toxic.

#### **Indexing (document details)**

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