

Subject: DEC INVESTIGATES DEATH OF LAKE ONTARIO WATER BIRDS

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**DEC INVESTIGATES DEATH OF LAKE ONTARIO WATER BIRDS
Gulls, Grebes and Loons Discovered To Date
Public Advised To Use Caution in Handling Fish and Game**

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) today announced that the agency is investigating the cause of the deaths of numerous water birds found along the shores of eastern Lake Ontario since Saturday, October 21, 2006. DEC advised the public to take precautions in handling birds and other wildlife from these areas until the investigation is completed.

Gulls, grebes, and loons collected by DEC Bureau of Wildlife staff from Sodus Bay to Deer Creek Marsh are being examined by DEC's Wildlife Pathology Unit. Tests for Type E Botulism will be conducted, along with other clinical analyses.

An outbreak of Type E Botulism first appeared in southern Lake Huron in 1998 and spread to Lake Erie in 1999. During 2000, Type E Botulism affected fish and birds in the New York waters of Lake Erie. Thousands of waterbirds, including grebes, loons, gulls, and certain waterfowl, were found washed up on the shoreline. DEC subsequently confirmed Type E Botulism in several species of fish and waterfowl from Lake Erie. Outbreaks have occurred on Lake Erie every year since then, usually during late summer to early winter.

DEC is continuing to gather sick and dead birds and fish to check for botulism or other diseases. As part of an annual monitoring program documenting wildlife impacts from the disease, sweeps of specific stretches of the Great Lakes shorelines occur each fall during peak migration periods. Dead birds and other wildlife are recorded and, when feasible, collected for necropsy and clinical testing.

Type E Botulism was first documented in birds near Lake Ontario in 2002, but the mortality this year is the largest so far. In July 2002 and August 2005, several gulls were tested from the eastern basin of Lake Ontario and many of those tested positive. There have been no reports of any human illnesses associated with these outbreaks. Type E Botulism is a specific strain of botulism most commonly affecting fish-eating birds. The associated neurotoxin produced by actively growing bacterium (*Clostridium botulinum*) causes paralysis in the affected birds and often results in drowning. The ingestion of the toxin produced by the botulism bacterium can be harmful to humans who eat contaminated birds or fish. To date, Type E Botulism has not been found in any fish from Lake Ontario or the St. Lawrence River.

Hunters and anglers are advised not to harvest waterfowl or fish that appear sick or are acting abnormally. Waterbirds impacted by botulism toxin cannot fly and their legs become paralyzed. They often propel themselves across the water and mudflats with their wings. A sick fish typically will have a hard time remaining upright, will be swimming on its side or belly up, or

sometimes floundering on the surface trying to swim down, among other potential signs of sickness.

Cooking may not destroy the botulism toxin. DEC reminds hunters and anglers to take the following precautions for preparing all fish and waterfowl:

Harvest only fish and waterfowl that act and look healthy;

Wear rubber or plastic protective gloves while filleting, field dressing, skinning or butchering birds, fish or wildlife. Remove and discard intestines soon after harvest and avoid direct contact with intestinal contents;

Wash hands, utensils and work surfaces before and after handling any raw food, including fish and game meat;

Keep fish and game cool (either with ice or refrigerated below 45 degrees Fahrenheit/7 degrees Celsius) until filleted or butchered, and then refrigerate or freeze; and

Cook fish and other seafood to an internal temperature (in the thickest part) of 140 degrees Fahrenheit (60 degrees Celsius). Cook game birds to an internal temperature of 165 degrees Fahrenheit (74 degrees Celsius).

If you must handle dead or dying fish or birds, use rubber or plastic protective gloves or a plastic bag. Any discovery of dead or distressed fish or wildlife, such as water birds showing a condition known as "limberneck" that results from paralysis of the neck muscles, should be reported to DEC's Division of Fish and Wildlife offices in Buffalo at (716) 851-7010, Allegany at (716) 372-0645, Avon at (585) 226-2466, Syracuse at (315) 426-7400, Cortland at (607) 753-3095, Watertown at (315) 785-2261 or Cape Vincent at (315) 654-2147.