

Fowl droppings linked to viruses

A professor of public hygiene at Tottori University, who has been examining migratory bird droppings for influenza viruses for 15 years, says his work may lead to the discovery of a new type of virus.

Koichi Otsuki's study has shown that water birds that migrate to the Sanin region where his school is located—the western part of the main Japanese island of Honshu on the Sea of Japan—contain an abundant supply of influenza viruses.

"Influenza viruses can be found in bird droppings not just in the Sanin region but anywhere else as long as they are the droppings of migratory birds," Otsuki said.

According to Kuniaki Nerome, an influenza expert at the National Institute of Health, water fowl normally have numerous viruses in their intestinal tracts. Wild ducks contain almost every known type of influenza viruses.

Since some influenza viruses transmit themselves directly from birds to mammals, it is possible for evolving viruses to acquire the property of transmitting themselves directly from birds to human beings, Nerome said.

From 1982 to 1984, Otsuki found large quantities of a virus in migratory bird droppings in Sanin. The same virus caused the Asian flu epidemic that started in 1957.

An influenza virus identical to the one responsible for the death of numerous North American seals in 1980 was detected simultaneously in bird droppings in the region.

And in 1983, Sanin bird droppings uncovered a pneumonia virus that killed a large number of minks on a Swedish island that year.