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PART 2

Suffolk Vector Control worker Tom Conway uses pesticide to kill mosquito larvae at Timber Point Golf Course in Great River.

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How aggressively should LI control mosquitoes? Talk about it at newsday.com

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8 YEARS INTO WEST NILE

Mosquito Wars

• Counties refine spraying, testing
• Environmentalists worry about the fallout

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The buzz on LI

Debate over a remedy renews as annual swarm of worry over these flying insects hits its peak

BY JENNIFER SMITH
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Suffolk technicians sort mosquitoes by species.

How to protect yourself from mosquito bites

- The hours from dusk to dawn are peak biting times for a number of mosquito species.
- To prevent bites, wear protective clothing when outdoors for a long period of time or when mosquitoes are active.
- Consider using repellent, but do not overspray, as excessive exposure poses health risks, especially in children.
- Most mosquitoes do not transmit disease. If West Nile virus is found in your area, those at highest risk for the disease — adults 50 and over — should take extra care to use repellent and protective clothing at peak mosquito times or consider avoiding outdoor activities then.

How to treat mosquito bites

- Use hydrocortisone cream, calamine lotion or a baking soda paste to ease discomfort of an itch.
- A cold pack or plastic bag filled with crushed ice may help.
- A mosquito bite seems to be causing more serious signs and symptoms — such as fever, severe headache, body aches, nausea, vomiting, swollen glands, a rash, lethargy, confusion or sensitivity to light — contact your health care provider. These signs and symptoms may indicate West Nile fever or, rarely, encephalitis. Prompt diagnosis and treatment are important.

Sources: Suffolk County Vector Control, New York State Department of Health, Mayo Clinic

How to prevent mosquitoes from breeding near you

1. Place trash in a garbage can with a lid.
2. Turn unused wading pools over or store in a dry place.

Ditches. Dynamite. Oil hosed on marshes. Chemicals sprayed from helicopters.

Over Long Island's 80-year struggle with mosquitoes, the arsenal has certainly evolved. Together, Nassau and Suffolk are spending more than $6 million this year on aerial spraying, lab testing and constant monitoring of the ponds, swamps and wetlands where mosquitoes breed. Still, by this time every year, the blood-sucking insects are swarming from salt marshes and dive-bombing backyard barbecues.

Malaria no longer kills people here, and being outdoors on a summer evening is now at least conceivable — thanks to window screens, bug repellent and decades of government-led mosquito control.

But threats persist from West Nile virus and other rare but serious diseases that mosquitoes spread from wildlife to humans.

Detecting a danger

Last week, health officials announced that West Nile had been detected in mosquito pools in Nassau, Suffolk and Queens for the first time this year.

The virus has killed eight Long Islanders since it first appeared in 1999. "I'm alarmed," said Suffolk Health Commissioner Huma Chaudhry. The federal Centers for Disease Control reports a nearly fourfold increase nationwide in West Nile virus cases compared with this time last year. "If there's one thing that keeps me up at night it's looking at that data."

As West Nile season begins, local governments once again negotiate their annual balancing act: protecting residents from mosquito-borne illnesses while minimizing the inherent risks posed by the pesticides used to keep them in check.

They are also under pressure to keep mosquitoes from bombarding people at Long Island's outdoor attractions. Jones Beach, for example, is bordered by miles of mosquito-infested salt marshes. If Nassau didn't spray there, said Greg Terrillion, the county's mosquito control director, "You'd ask for a refund."

This year, however, mosquito control programs proceeded amid usual public attention. With concerns for wetlands health on the rise, the environmentalists challenging the use of chemicals to kill salt marsh mosquitoes not generally linked to West Nile, Suffolk this year passed a new mosquito control plan aimed at reducing chemical spraying. Approval came only after loud and lengthy debate.

Helping or harming?

The disagreements were highlighted this spring as the state environmental agency, the Town of East Hampton and an East End legislator each took issue with Suffolk's continued use over tidal marshes of methoprene, a chemical that some fear may harm lobsters and other invertebrates.

"I don't want to see lobsters with one claw down the road and say, whoops, we made a mistake," said East Hampton supervisor William McGintee.

And the debate has also echoed this summer: Just last month, Legis. Jay Schneiderman (R-Montauk) proposed a bill that would restrict the use of methoprene on Suffolk's 17,000 acres of tidal wetlands.

With a vigorous discussion that drew in health officials, environmentalists and vector control authorities, that bill was tabled, all but ending its chances for a vote this year.

All the while, Suffolk and Nassau's foot soldiers in the public works and health departments readied their equipment and strategies for the annual May to October campaign. By now, the vector control workers are well dug in on the front lines of the mosquito wars.

With the size of a football field in residential Levittown: A Nassau mosquito inspector scoops a dipper to check for Culex pipiens, the house mosquito most commonly associated with West Nile virus. Stormwater dumped by recent rains has formed the perfect larval nursery.

- Heckscher State Park in East Islip: Vector-control workers pour gallons of bacterial and chemical agents into a tank bolted to a waiting helicopter before it roars off toward marshes where workers have found mosquito larvae.
- A cramped county laboratory in Yaphank: Entomologists use tweezers to sort different mosquito species into piles. Caught in surveillance traps, insects are destined for Albany, where the state tests for disease.

Despite the uproar over Suffolk's new plan, this season's mosquito programs in both Long Island counties continue pretty much as they have for more than a decade.

Counties' shared burden

With more people and many thousands more acres of wetlands to cover, Suffolk has a much bigger operation than Nassau, but the counties share a basic approach to their task. They monitor adult mosquitoes for evidence of disease and try to kill wriggling water-bound larvae before they move into their flying, biting stage.

Mosquito-breeding pools in catch basins, salt marshes and freshwater bogs are dosed with Bti, a bacterial agent that destroys the guts of early-stage larvae.

Late-stage larvae are targeted with methoprene, an insect growth hormone mimicker that limits future development. Nas-
as battlefield

Sau and a number of other mosquito control agencies in the Northeast use methoprene on larvae that survived earlier applications of Bti.

New York City does not spray it over ponds, lakes and wetlands, citing the chemical’s “potential to affect non-target invertebrates” as laid out in the city’s West Nile virus plan.

Last year the state Department of Environmental Conservation revised its policy regarding methoprene on the DEC’s 2,330 acres in Suffolk. It told the county that the chemical could only be used when disease is present or if two or more applications of Bti have failed to reduce mosquito larvae.

Nassau County, which has not asked for permission to spray methoprene on DEC wetlands, would also fall under the same restrictions, according to DEC regional permit administrator John Puvaci.

More recently, the town of East Hampton passed a symbolic resolution opposing the use of methoprene on town lands.

Nassau County, which has not asked for permission to spray methoprene on DEC wetlands, would also fall under the

Clean and refill bird baths at least once a week.

Clean gutters regularly.

Inspect flower pot drip trays for developing mosquito larvae.

Maintain swimming pool chlorination. Flush pool covers with chlorine.

Take old tires to an automotive shop for proper disposal.

program, and Debbie Long of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service survey the open marsh of Wertheim National Wildlife Refuge by the Carmans River.

Battlegrounds

Wetland areas where Nassau and Suffolk counties do aerial spraying to target mosquito larvae.

SOURCES: NASSAU AND SUFFOLK COUNTIES

What we’re evaluating now is if there are further steps we can take to reduce environmental damage while protecting human health.”

Still, last week Suffolk officials continued to defend the county’s position on methoprene. They called it a safe and vital tool. They said that limiting its use would cause a spike in adult mosquitoes and trigger increased need for spraying adulticides. These products, with trade names such as “Scourge” and “Anvil,” can also kill a range of insects and cause dizziness and tremors in humans exposed to levels far higher than are sprayed from country trucks.

“We know that adulticides do impact non-target organisms and they’re much more harmful ecologically and more harmful to humans,” said Carrie Meek Gallagher, Suffolk’s commissioner for environment and energy.

The state health department’s West Nile guidelines say “Mosquito adulticides should be considered the least desirable method of control and only used when current isolations of virus and / or evidence of disease has

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The buzz on LI as mosquito battlefield

been established.”

Both Long Island counties have a different philosophy. They also use adulticides for so-called “quality-of-life” spraying — to combat infestations of biting mosquitoes. Nassau has not done so yet this year, said Terrillion. Suffolk has sprayed adulticides a number of times in communities such as Shirley and Davis Park, which typically see large numbers of salt marsh mosquitoes in summer months.

Even if many in the public demand nuisance spraying, others increasingly have asked authori-
ties whether the insects could be controlled without chemicals.

One such core is now being tested on the high marsh at Wer-
theim National Wildlife Refuge in Shirley.

There, Suffolk County has collab-
orated with the federal Fish and Wildlife Service on a pilot project to replace chemical spraying with ponds filled with fish that eat mosquito larvae. The technique has been tried out and honed at a handful of Suf-
folk sites in the past decade.

Dominick Ninivaggi, the highly visible head of Suffolk’s mosquito control program for 13 years, strode across the test site last week, mud sucking at his boots. He pointed to a stretch of water filled with dart-
ing killifish: “This was one of the ponds we constructed.”

This 40-acre stretch of tidal wetland was once state-of-the-art for mosquito control. It was scored with ditches that stretched west to the Carmans River every 150 feet to drain off water where mosquitoes might breed. In 2005, public works ma-
chines reshaped it, scooping out ponds where invasive phrag-
mites once stood and smoothing dredged soil to form a mud plain.

Now, waist-high stands of spartina and tufts of bright green marsh grass have taken root. It’s a contrast with the adja-
cent unmodified area, where in-
vasive phragmites plants grow as tall as late-summer corn.

Ninivaggi notes the reculp-
tured marsh has less phragmites and that his workers have report-
ed fewer mosquito larvae during surveillance checks.

Others say it’s too soon to tell.

Susan C. Adamowicz, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife biologist tracking the project, said it appeared to be doing well, but she has not anal-
alyzed the preliminary data. “It could take 20 years before you can say you’ve got a handle on what’s happening here,” she said.

Still, such projects are an im-
portant component of Suffolk’s new plan. But some environ-
mental advocates and state offi-
cials remain concerned that overenthusiastic manipulation could further damage marshes already under siege from coastal development and the miles of mosquito ditches dug in the past century. In a nod to their concerns, the county’s plan in-
cludes a committee to review all new potential marsh-restora-
tion projects to ensure they would not harm the marsh.

The DEC eventually granted
permits for the Wertheim project. Still, the agency re-
mains leery of tinkering with wetlands in light of deteriorat-
ing marsh vegetation in the western Great South Bay and North Shore, Paupec said.

Skeptics of the county’s mos-
quitos policies point out that the aggressive biters that live in those marshes are a natural part of Long Island’s fragile shoreline ecosystem. “Salt marsh mosqui-
toes have always been here,” Pa-
vacic said. And salt marsh mos-
quitos, said Peconic Baykeeper Kevin McAllister, are far less likely to spread West Nile and other diseases than the house-
hold mosquitoes that breed near homes in clogged gutters and old tires.

Spraying on Fire Island, other areas

Suffolk health employees will ground-spray pesticide today to control adult mosquitoes on Fire Island and in East Patchogue, Bellport, Brookhaven hamlet and North Shirley.

All streets in Davis Park and Point O’Woods on Fire Island are scheduled for spraying from 6:30 to 10:30 p.m.

The four other communities are scheduled for spraying from 7:30 to 11:30 p.m.

Officials said residents, especially children and pregnant women, should avoid exposure and stay indoors whenever spraying takes place and up to 30 minutes after spraying.

— ZACHARY R. DOWDY

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