

# Bird-watching

By [CARY LEIDER VOGGRIN - THE GAZETTE](#)

At county fairs and bird fancier shows, Dr. Kristy Pabilonia is known as the “chicken woman” — the one who swabs bird throats and anuses to test for avian flu and other poultry diseases.

It might not sound glamorous, but these days, being a poultry doc who makes house calls is important business.

Pabilonia coordinates the state’s avian disease surveillance program, created in spring 2004 to focus primarily on the health of backyard flocks across Colorado.

Her job takes her to barns and farms across the state, where she educates poultry owners and conducts miniphysicals on birds, taking swab samples to a veterinary lab at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, where they are scrutinized.

Since the program’s inception, nearly 1,000 birds in Colorado — mostly chickens and turkeys — have been tested for avian influenza, she said.

“We have not detected any avian flu in any sample — not even other, less-dangerous strains,” said Pabilonia, an avian disease diagnostic veterinarian who graduated from Doherty High School in Colorado Springs.

There are multiple strains of the avian influenza virus, some more dangerous than others. The one scientists and the medical community are watching, the deadly H5N1 strain that has infiltrated flocks in Asia, has not been detected in the United States.

Part of Pabilonia’s mission through the program — a cooperative effort among the CSU Veterinary Diagnostic Lab, the Colorado Department of Agriculture and the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment — is to attempt to reach all of the state’s backyard flock owners. It’s unknown how many exist, although it’s certainly in the hundreds.

To date, the nearly 1,000 birds tested have come from more than 150 locations in Colorado, Pabilonia said. She is working through 4H channels, bird clubs, veterinarians and the state Department of Agriculture to get the word out about the program.

In addition to evaluating bird health, one of her most important roles is teaching “biosecurity” — the big word these days in the poultry industry.

She recommends flock owners not share equipment, advises birds be kept in fenced areas and stresses learning to recognize symptoms of disease.

“I talk to them about quarantining new birds that come into their flock,” she said. “If they buy a bird at the state fair, put it in a separate area for a couple of weeks.”

And although she loves birds (“I’m a fowl person,” she said), she owns none herself. To do so would be risking the health of the flocks she visits.

Monica Henderson, El Paso County’s poultry superintendent for 4H, said her family takes such disease-prevention precautions to heart.

Her sons raise about 50 turkeys, chickens, geese, ducks and other birds at their home outside Calhan and also participate in bird shows.

“We’ve always tried to maintain our flock in a secure environment,” Henderson said. “You try to keep it sterilized. We try to keep wild birds away from our birds. Most of our birds are in enclosures where they’re topped so wild birds can’t land and cohabitate.”

Another bird owner in El Paso County said poultry diseases are a “constant” concern.

As for avian flu, “there’s concern to keep our eyes open and watchful,” said Helen Rogers, whose daughter and two sons raise chickens, ducks and geese on 5 acres in Falcon.

Some of the birds are beloved pets, and her kids would be devastated if disease destroyed their flock, she said. Just last year, the family attended a bird show at which Pabilonia spoke about bird health.

The U.S. government also is targeting backyard flock owners, having launched its own campaign in 2004 called “Biosecurity for the Birds.”

"AI (Avian Influenza) spreads quickly by bird-to-bird contact," reads one tip sheet from the campaign, organized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. "Viruses can be carried by manure, equipment, vehicles, egg flats, crates, clothing, shows and people who have come into contact with the virus."

Many commercial poultry farms and egg producers across the country — those that raise thousands of birds — are also hyper-vigilant about bird flu.

Many, in fact, are locked down, refusing entry to anyone but workers. Some require employees to shower before entering and when clocking out. Tires on vehicles are disinfected. Flocks never go outdoors to prevent mingling with wild and migrating birds.

The United States is the largest producer of poultry meat and the second-largest egg producer, according to the USDA. Total production in 2003 was valued at \$23.3 billion.

"It's to their benefit to run a biosecure facility," said Pabilonia.

Pabilonia said she loves her job. She started out wanting to work with horses but got interested in diseases in poultry.

"I grew to love birds very quickly," she said.

When she tells people she's a veterinarian, she's usually asked if she gets to play with cute puppies all the time.

"No," she tells them, "I swab bird butts."

The answer often elicits a strange look.

"But more and more people are understanding the importance of it," she said.

CONTACT THE WRITER: 636-0236 or

cary@gazette.com

ON THE INTERNET

- For information on backyard biosecurity: [www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/birdbiosecurity/](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/birdbiosecurity/)

- Colorado State University Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratories: [www.dlab.colostate.edu/](http://www.dlab.colostate.edu/). To contact Dr. Kristy Pabilonia, call (970) 297-1281