

# Starling droppings could be making West Center kids sick

■ Four children living around W. Center with similar symptoms

By Will Brumleve

Venece Parrish thought her son had the flu or some other common bronchial infection when he became ill last Tuesday.

But after nearly a week of breathing a particular heavy odor of starling droppings outside her home at 251 W. Center St. and then learning that her daughter, as well as at least two other children in her neighborhood had also fallen ill with similar respiratory problems, Parrish began to think the sickness was due to something else.

After a trip to the doctor, Parrish discovered her children could very well be suffering from the fungal

infection histoplasmosis, caused by the fungus *Histoplasma capsulatum*, which thrives in soil enriched with bird droppings.

Although Parrish's children have not yet been definitively diagnosed with the disease, the possibility was enough for Parrish and several other residents attending Monday's Paxton City Council meeting to urge the city to work even harder at cleaning up the bird droppings problem that has been plaguing the 200 and 300 blocks of West Center Street this fall.

"There's no easy answer to it," Parrish said. "We can't destroy the birds. We can't destroy the trees. But my feeling is that when we're talking about someone's children getting sick and there are thousands of these birds, I don't sympathize with that."

**Disease is potentially deadly**  
According to the Directors of Health Promotion and Education Web site ([www.asidhphpe.org/infect/histo.html](http://www.asidhphpe.org/infect/histo.html)) histoplasmosis is spread through the air when soil containing the fungus is disturbed, releasing spores. It is not contagious.

The disease usually affects the lungs and causes a short-term, treatable lung infection, but if it begins to affect other parts of the body, it worsens into a more serious form called disseminated histoplasmosis, the disease can be fatal.

Symptoms of the acute disease usually appear within five to 18 days after exposure, the site said, but most infected persons display no symptoms. Symptoms can vary widely depending on the form of the disease. The acute form causes tiredness, fever, chills, chest pains and a dry cough. A chronic infection is similar

to tuberculosis and is most common in persons already afflicted with lung disease, often progressing over months or even years.

Those particularly at high-risk for contracting the disease are persons with chronic lung disease, infants, young children and persons with weakened immune systems.

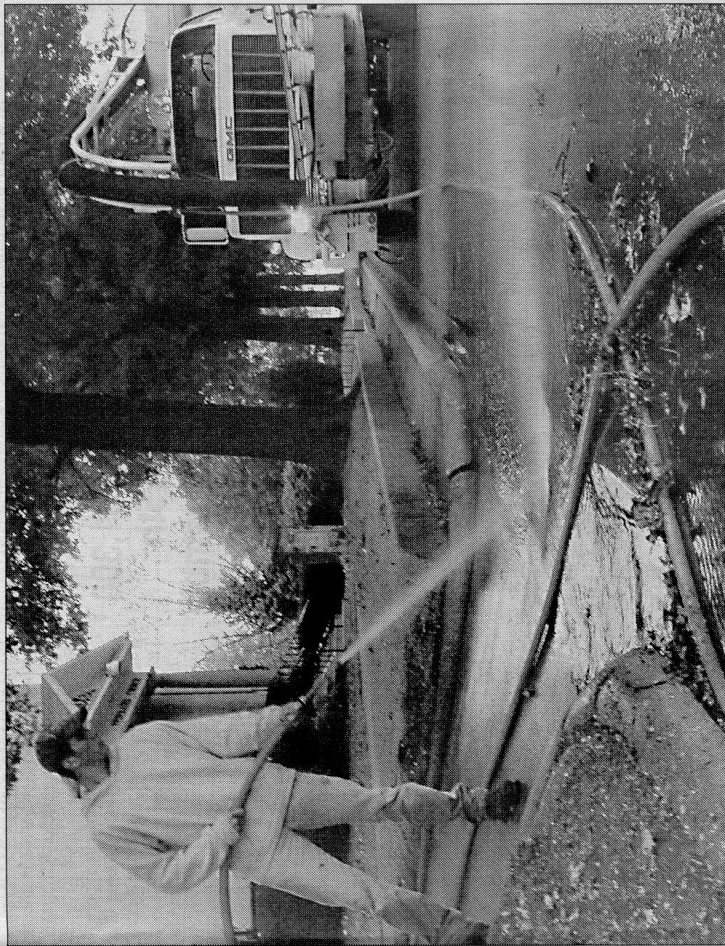
Parrish said her children are being given medication for a bronchial infection although they are showing signs of the acute form of histoplasmosis. She said her doctor wants to first check with a specialist before making a positive diagnosis. Parrish said her children would probably have to undergo "a very severe amount of testing" to determine if they actually have the fungal infection.

"He would not give a definite, 'yes,' or 'no' for this being tied together," Parrish said. "But in a week or two, if they're not getting better, then we're going to do a more aggressive approach. At that point, (the doctor) may be able to make a conclusion."

**City must do more, Parrish says**  
Parrish requested Monday that the city's police department and streets and alleys department do more to battle the bird droppings problem.

Since the starlings found a home in Paxton a few weeks ago, street department employees have been busy pruning trees to make roosting sites less attractive and using a pressure sprayer to clear city streets and sidewalks of the bird mess.

The police department, meanwhile, has been shooting "shellcrackers" into trees to scare the birds off. The shellcracker shells with a small powder charge send a firecracker-type projec-



Cale Kuester, a City of Paxton street department employee, sprays a starling feces-covered sidewalk in the 300 block of West Center Street Tuesday morning. Flocks of starlings have left some city streets caked with their droppings this fall, and

despite efforts to rid the city of the birds, the starlings aren't leaving. And now they are suspected of causing a fungal infection in four children who live around West Center Street, one of the more concentrated areas of bird droppings.

## Community Fund goal set at \$30,000

United Community Fund of Paxton and Vicinity has set a \$30,000 fundraising goal for the 2004-5 drive.

Area residents have received information in the mail regarding the member agencies donate their time to Services, Share and Care Center, SHOW BUS, and Telecare. Overhead costs of this fundraising drive are kept to a minimum and

tile into the air that explodes above the trees. The shellcrackers do not harm the birds.

None of the tactics have worked, Police Chief Ken Mutchmore said Monday. Instead, the starlings have simply moved from one tree to another, and often fly back to where they were before.

"We're really between a rock and a hard place," Mutchmore said. (Continued on page 4)

### Rain possible for tonight

Tonight — Showers likely, mainly before midnight. Chance of rain is 60 percent. Cloudy, the low around 50. Northeast wind between 10 and 15 mph.

Wednesday — Mostly cloudy and a 30 percent chance of rain all day. The high near 60. North-northwest wind between 5 and 10 mph. The low near 44. North-northwest wind between 10 and 15 mph at night. Extended forecast page 2.

# Starlings

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hard place here," Mutchmore said.

The city has also looked into other methods of battling the birds, Mutchmore said, noting, for instance, that he recently researched the Internet and found alternative tactics including metallic strips that flutter in the wind, balloons that look like an owl's eye that hang in trees and specialized audio tapes, all designed to deter the birds from roosting.

However, some of those methods didn't seem cost effective, Mutchmore said.

Killing the birds, Mayor James Kingston said, might solve the problem, but that could also cause lawsuits from residents as well as enrage animal rights activists — problems the city doesn't want to bring onto itself.

Parrish asked if residents could shoot fireworks on their own to get rid of the birds. Mutchmore said fireworks are illegal in Illinois.

So in the meantime, the city plans to continue to spray sidewalks and shoot the shellcrackers into the trees.

Regardless of whether that works, Mutchmore said the onset of winter

weather should soon cause the birds to migrate south.

Last year, the starling droppings problem wasn't nearly as severe, Parrish said.

"It wasn't near as bad last year," Parrish said. "It seems it's been getting progressively worse."

## Proposed TIF to be discussed in Gibson City

GIBSON CITY — A meeting of the economic and industrial development committee of the Gibson City Council is scheduled at 7 p.m. Oct. 18 in the council chambers.

The meeting is to discuss a proposed tax increment financing development of about 88 residential lots north of 19th Street.

Public comment is being encouraged.