

Rare Cats in Turkey Take Cover as Bird Flu Spreads

Threat is minimal, but conservationists cautious.

Turkish Van cats, a rare breed known for loving water, are being guarded carefully in their native Turkey as bird flu spreads there, the Agence France Presse reports.

Bird flu is not known to be communicable to cats, but the Van Cat House in the eastern province where the breed originated is being cautious anyway. The conservation center is now closed to visitors and its 100 cats are being kept indoors, the news service said.

The breed, distinguishable by its white coloring with auburn patches, is protected by the Turkish government.

Van cats are an endemic species and part of our natural heritage, but their existence has come to the point of extinction through urbanization and improper breeding, center director Zahit Tevfik Agaoglu said.

The eastern region of Turkey has been hit hard by bird flu. Four teenagers from Dogubayazit, just north of Van, have died from the virus, according to the World Health Organization. Bird flu spreads through contact with infected birds or their feces.

On Jan 18., the World Health Organization said that the outbreak is now abating, though it expects to see more human cases in the immediate future.

Some breeders have imported Turkish Vans to Europe and the United States. The cats are sometimes confused with the similar Turkish Angoras, which are completely white and have different-colored eyes.

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