

Garden Bird Health *initiative* - Trichomonosis

Agent:

Trichomonas gallinae is a single cell parasite that can cause a disease known as trichomonosis in British birds.

Species affected:

Trichomonosis typically affects pigeons and doves in the UK. It can also affect birds of prey that feed on pigeons and doves that are sick with the condition. The common name for the disease in pigeons and doves is “canker” and in birds of prey the disease is known as “frounce”.

Disease caused by a Trichomonad parasite was first seen in British finch species in summer 2005*. An epidemic of disease caused by this parasite occurred in both 2006 and 2007, peaking in the late summer/ autumn months, affecting birds over a wide geographical area across Britain**. Whilst greenfinches and chaffinches are the species that have been most frequently affected, other garden bird species, including house sparrows, are susceptible to the condition.

Mortality due to trichomonosis continues to be detected at a low level in 2008, but it is possible that we may see a further rise in disease outbreaks over the coming months following the seasonal pattern of previous years.

Pathology:

Trichomonas typically causes disease at the back of the throat and in the gullet.

Clinical signs:

In addition to showing signs of general illness, for example lethargy and fluffed-up plumage, affected birds may drool saliva, regurgitate food, have difficulty in swallowing or show laboured breathing. Finches are frequently seen to have matted wet plumage around the face and beak. In some cases, swelling of the neck may be visible from a distance. The disease may progress over several days or even weeks, consequently affected birds are often emaciated.

Disease spread:

Trichomonas is vulnerable to desiccation and cannot survive for long periods outside the host. Transmission of infection between birds is most likely to be by birds feeding one another with regurgitated food during the breeding season; through food or drinking water contaminated with recently regurgitated saliva, or possibly, from droppings of an infected bird.

Risk to human and domestic animal health:

Trichomonas gallinae is a parasite of birds and does not pose a health threat to humans or mammals such as dogs and cats. The parasite has the potential to affect captive poultry and pet birds.

However, garden birds in the UK may carry other diseases that can affect humans and pets, for example *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter* and *E.coli* bacteria. The GBHi recommends following sensible hygiene precautions as a routine measure when feeding garden birds and handling bird feeders and tables. Following these rules will help avoid the risk of any infection transmitting to people and help safeguard the birds in your garden against disease (See *Below*).

- Clean and disinfect feeders/ feeding sites regularly. Suitable disinfectants that can be used include a weak solution of domestic bleach (5% sodium hypochlorite) and other

specially-designed commercial products (See *Further information*). Always rinse thoroughly and air-dry feeders before re-use.

- Brushes and cleaning equipment for bird feeders, tables and baths should not be used for other purposes and should not be brought into the house, but be kept and used outside and away from food preparation areas.
- Wear rubber gloves when cleaning feeders and thoroughly wash hands and forearms afterwards with soap and water, especially before eating or drinking. Avoid handling sick or dead birds directly.

Diagnosis: Diagnosis of trichomonosis in wild birds relies on post mortem examination. The signs of the disease at post mortem are fairly characteristic, and a variety of tests can be used to confirm presence of the parasite.

If you wish to report finding dead **garden birds**, or signs of disease in **garden birds**, please call the **Garden Bird Health initiative** on **0207 449 6685**.

Control:

Whilst medicines are available for treatment of trichomonosis in captive birds, effective and targeted dosing of free-living birds under field conditions is not possible.

Where a problem with trichomonosis exists, general measures for control of disease in wild bird populations should be taken:

- Ensure optimal hygiene at garden bird feeding stations, including disinfection (See *Further information*)
- Consider leaving bird baths empty until no deaths occur. Otherwise, be particularly vigilant to provide clean drinking water on a daily basis. Empty and dry the bird bath on a daily basis (drying kills the trichomonas organism).
- Feeding stations encourage birds to congregate, sometimes in large densities, thereby increasing the potential for disease to spread between individuals when outbreaks occur. Where large numbers of birds are sick or dying, consider significantly reducing or stopping feeding for a short period (around 2 weeks). The reason for this is to encourage birds to disperse, thereby minimising the chances of new birds becoming affected at the feeding station. Gradually reintroduce feeding, whilst continuing to monitor for further signs of ill health (See *Further information*).

Prevention:

Following best practice for feeding garden birds is recommended to help control and prevent transmission of disease at feeding stations all year round. (See *Further information*)

- Routine good table hygiene.
- Provision of clean and fresh drinking water on a daily basis.
- Provision of fresh food from accredited sources.
- Rotate positions of feeders in the garden to avoid build up of contamination in any one area and pay particular attention to clearing food remains that fall beneath onto the ground.

Further information:

Best feeding practices should be followed at all times to help ensure that the birds visiting your garden remain healthy. More information can be found in the GBHi booklet "Feeding Garden Birds – Best Practice Guidelines" and in the accompanying GBHi leaflet. Details of how to obtain these publications are available on the GBHi page of the UFAW website www.ufaw.org.uk. Tel: 01582 831818

* Pennycott, T.W., Lawson, B., Cunningham, A.A., Simpson, V., Chantrey, J. (2005) Necrotic ingluvitis in wild finches *Vet. Record* 157, 360,

* Holmes, P., Duff, P. (2005) Inguvitis and oesophagitis in wild finches *Veterinary Record* 157, 455,

**Lawson, B., Cunningham, A., Chantrey, J., Hughes, L., Kirkwood, J., Pennycott, T., Simpson, V. (2006) Epidemic finch mortality *Vet Record* 159, 367