

Trichomonosis – an emerging threat to garden finches?

Trichomonas gallinae is the name of a protozoan organism that inhabits the upper digestive tract (oral cavity, oesophagus and crop) of several types of birds including pigeons and doves, birds of prey and budgerigars. Infection can result in ulceration and a build up of cheese-like inflammatory debris in affected areas, sometimes resulting in the death of the bird. In pigeons and doves the disease (trichomonosis) is often called “canker” and in birds of prey the traditional name of the disease is “frounce”. Birds pass the infection to each other when feeding their young and during courtship feeding, and birds of prey may acquire the infection if they eat infected pigeons/doves. Food and water may also become contaminated by discharges from infected birds, potentially spreading disease to other birds, but the organisms don’t survive for long periods outside the birds and are very susceptible to the effects of drying.

Until recently, although commonly seen in other types of birds, *Trichomonas* infection of wild finches was not considered to be a problem in the UK - SAC Veterinary Services (SAC VS) had been investigating deaths in garden birds since 1994, including the examination of over 300 greenfinches and chaffinches, without ever diagnosing the condition in wild finches. However in April 2005 SAC VS diagnosed trichomonosis in a chaffinch found dead in a garden in Ayrshire – the first confirmed case in the UK. More cases, in greenfinches and chaffinches from different sites, were diagnosed by SAC VS in July and August 2005, and correspondence in the Veterinary Record revealed that similar deaths were occurring in other parts of the United Kingdom. Since then there have been numerous reports of deaths in finches, and to a lesser extent other garden birds, from trichomonosis, and what started as a sporadic cause of mortality in garden finches may be developing into something of greater significance. A seasonal pattern seems to be emerging, with most reported cases in Scotland in 2006 and 2007 occurring in the months

July to December (see Figure 1). This is in sharp contrast to another disease of garden birds, salmonellosis, which is seen most commonly in the months November to March.

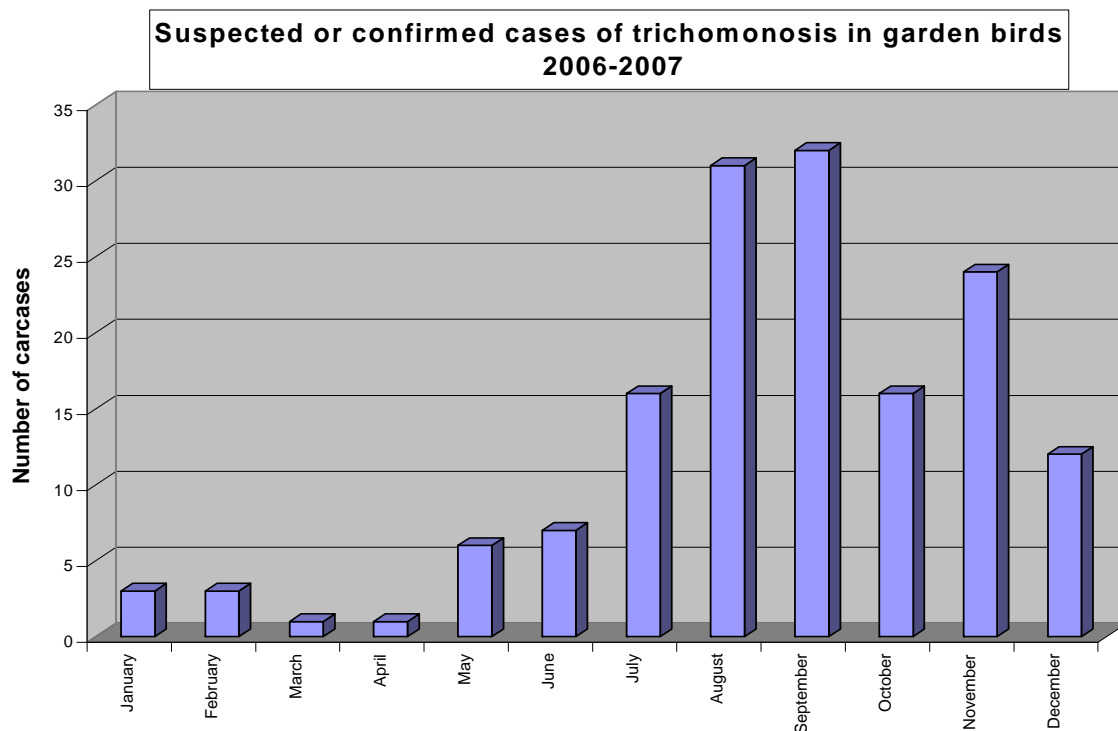


Figure 1. Trichomonosis in garden birds in Scotland 2006-2007 (70 sites)

Most cases are seen in greenfinches and chaffinches, with only small numbers in other birds such as goldfinches, dunnocks, bullfinches and house sparrows. If seen alive, affected birds look lethargic, are fluffed up and are reluctant or unable to fly. They may show laboured breathing, or have difficulty in swallowing. Food debris may be seen sticking to the beak, and the feathers of the head and neck may be wet. Affected birds may appear to be very hungry and reluctant to leave the bird feeding areas, but are unable to swallow much of the food they pick up. Eventually, sometimes after several days, the birds die. Although medicines are available for the treatment of trichomonosis in captive birds, effective and targeted dosing of free-living birds under field conditions is not a practical option.

General control measures

- Use several feeding sites, to reduce bird numbers at any one site. Move the feeding sites regularly, to reduce any build-up of debris and infectious agents around the feeders. Don't use all the feeding sites all of the time – rest periods will help to reduce levels of contamination.
- Clean and disinfect feeders and feeding stations regularly. Rinse the feeders and allow them to dry before using them again.
- Consider leaving birdbaths or drinkers empty for a short period. Otherwise be particularly vigilant to provide clean drinking water on a daily basis.
- Consider significantly reducing or stopping feeding for two weeks. This will encourage the birds to disperse and reduce the chance of new birds becoming infected at the feeding station. Feeding can then be gradually re-introduced, monitoring for further signs of ill health.
- Always wash and dry your hands thoroughly after cleaning bird feeders or handling sick or dead birds.

SAC VS is a founder member of the Garden Bird Health *initiative*, a consortium set up in 2005 to investigate deaths in garden birds. If you wish to report dead or sick garden birds, please phone the GBHi Helpline at 0207 449 6685. If large numbers of birds (ten or more) have been found dead in the same location in a short period of time, the Avian Influenza Helpline (08459 335577) should first be contacted. Where appropriate, arrangements can then be made to have post mortem examinations carried out to determine the cause of death of the birds.