

Addressing the welfare risks of supplementary feeding for British garden birds – the Garden Bird Health *initiative*



Background

The Garden Bird Health *initiative* (GBHi) launched in spring 2005 and completed its second year at the end of April 2007. A progress report was presented at the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW) Workshop on Feeding garden birds: research needs, disease surveillance, and best practice guidelines, held at the British Veterinary Association on 7th June 2007.

Opportunistic submissions

The RSPB Wildlife Enquiries Unit collates all reports of garden bird mortality, which it receives opportunistically from members of the public, where the history suggests that infectious disease may be involved. In 2006, a total of 1,311 garden bird mortality incidents was recorded which represents an increase of at least five-fold when compared with the annual totals in each of the preceding years (2001–2005). The dramatic increase in the number of reports was due to the trichomoniasis epidemic in finches that occurred in summer/ autumn 2006.

Systematic submissions ~ BTO/ CJ Garden Birdwatch (GBW) network

The Systematic Surveillance Scheme has enjoyed another successful year, with 929 observers having contributed records of feeding and hygiene practice from one or more quarters. The computer-readable forms introduced in the last quarter of 2006 have been well received by participants and have also simplified data entry. Preliminary analyses has been performed to ensure that data collected (food type and volume, feeder type and number, cleaning practice) will be appropriate to examine risk factors for disease occurrence, enabling us to identify anthropogenic factors that may be mitigated in the future.

Participants have found some 2,584 dead birds over the six quarters for which complete data is available which equates to 36.8 per week in 2006. These birds come from at least 51 different species, with returns dominated by Greenfinch, Chaffinch, Blackbird, House Sparrow and Collared Dove which, collectively, account for 62% of the birds found.

Post mortem examinations (PME)

A total of 594 post mortem examinations were performed during the second year of the GBHi with 45% from systematic scheme submissions. As with year one, greenfinches, chaffinches and house sparrows were the most frequently submitted species in rank order with a total of 347, 191 and 93 birds examined over the course of the project for each species respectively. Effective national surveillance was achieved with submissions for post mortem examination from across Britain mirroring the distribution of common garden bird species.

Infectious disease

Trichomonas gallinae is a protozoan parasite known to cause disease in pigeons and doves on a regular basis in the UK each year. Following the discovery of unusual mortality affecting finch species in 2005 due to trichomoniasis, a national epidemic of disease affecting finches occurred in the late summer/ early autumn months of 2006. Studies are currently underway using a variety of morphological and molecular techniques to investigate the origin of this trichomonad parasite in finches. Analyses of long term population monitoring, in combination with post mortem data and avian mortality reports, are underway to evaluate evidence for disease impacting British greenfinches at the population level.

Salmonellosis was diagnosed as a cause of death in a total of 156 cases from 112 sites across Britain between April 2005 and April 2006 and from a total of 75 cases from 64 sites across Britain between April 2006 and April 2007. A typical seasonal peak was observed with cases occurring

principally during the winter months. Whilst the number of salmonellosis incidents investigated in Scotland was similar in both years of the project, surveillance identified approximately half the number of incidents across England and Wales in the winter of 2006/7.

A number of other infectious diseases were diagnosed in small numbers of cases (e.g. yersiniosis, avipox virus, *Suttonella ornithocola* infection).

GBHi publications (Scientific literature)

- Lawson, B., Cunningham, A.A., Chantrey, J., Hughes, L., Kirkwood, J., PA. Pennycott, T.W. & Simpson, V. (2006) Epidemic finch mortality. *Veterinary Record* 159, 367.
- Simpson, V. Molenaar, F. (2006) Increase in trichomonosis in finches. *Veterinary Record* 159, 606.
- Evans, A., Campbell, L. (2007) Trichomoniasis – a significant threat to British birds? *British Birds* 100, 177-8.

Information resources (General public) and media profile

During year two, copies of the GBHi leaflet and Best practice guidelines have continued to be distributed by the organisations involved in the project, following public enquiries, by the funding organisations, and to interesting parties attending ornithological fairs. A PDF of the GBHi leaflet has been included on the BVA: AWF website in the resources section.

The UFAW website (<http://www.ufaw.org.uk/gbhi.htm>) hosts information on the project, a PDF of the GBHi leaflet and regular updates of GBHi avian influenza statements. Disease fact sheets on trichomoniasis and salmonellosis are available and have been widely publicised. Following the occurrence of epidemic disease due to trichomoniasis in summer/ autumn 2005, Defra publicised details of the GBHi on their website (See <http://www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/diseases/vetsurveillance/species/wildlife/gardenbirds.htm>) and forwarded members of the public observing problems with finch mortality to our fact sheet for information on prevention and control of disease.

The following articles were written for the public that included tips on how to feed garden birds based on advice from the GBHi best practice guidelines and summary details of the project.

- UFAW News-Sheet, Spring 2007. Garden Bird Health Initiative tackles disease outbreak
- Bird Table magazine, Issue 48 - Winter 2006. Article on the Garden Bird Health initiative
- Bird Table magazine, Issue 49 - Spring 2007. Article on winter decline of garden birds, with special mention of the Garden Bird Health initiative and the Trichomonas outbreak in Greenfinches.

A GBHi Press Release entitled “Finch fatalities” was circulated in September 2006 to increase public understanding of the trichomoniasis epidemic and provide advice on disease prevention and control. High media profile followed with articles in the national press and interviews in both national and regional radio news programmes.

Presentations

A number of invited presentations were given to raise the profile of the GBHi over its second year (May 2006 to April 2007). Funding sources were acknowledged.

- British Veterinary Poultry Association Summer meeting - July 2006 - Garden Bird Health initiative overview
- Birdcare Standards Association meeting - September 2006 - Garden Bird Health initiative overview
- British Wildlife Rehabilitation Council Symposium - October 2006 - Garden Bird Health initiative overview
- Euroscicon presentation Avian Disease, Diagnosis and Treatment - November 2006 - Salmonellosis in garden birds – a review
- British Ornithologist's Union annual conference - November 2006 - Garden Bird Health initiative overview

- Research seminar at RSPB, Sandy - November 2006 - Garden Bird Health initiative overview
- Glasgow University Veterinary Zoological Society 13th Annual Wildlife Symposium on “Emerging and Zoonotic Diseases in Wildlife” - February 2007 - Garden Bird Health initiative overview
- Royal Veterinary College Elective ‘Zoo & Wildlife’ and ‘Avian’ Elective Veterinary Students – May 2007 - Garden birds and the vet in practice

For further information on the GBHi or for general queries on feeding garden birds and garden bird health; please contact Becki Lawson MRCVS, project co-ordinator for the GBHi (Institute of Zoology T: 0207 449 6685 becki.lawson@ioz.ac.uk) or consult <http://www.ufaw.org.uk/gbhi.php>