

Garden bird feeding can attract high numbers of birds to a confined area, which enables disease to spread easily. This leaflet describes some of the commoner diseases, and how you can minimise the risk of an outbreak.

From time to time, sick or dead birds may appear in a garden. Unfortunately, nothing can be done to help them. No treatment can be administered to birds in the wild, because it is impossible to ensure adequate dose for the infected individuals and to prevent healthy birds picking up the medicine. Some drugs that will cure one species can be lethal to others. Once birds are visibly sick and can be caught, they are usually so sick that they cannot be treated successfully. You may wish to contact a local vet or RSPCA inspector, since the kindest thing may be to put these birds to sleep. While many vets are happy to treat wild birds without a charge, it is worth checking this before taking the bird to a vet.

Salmonella

Salmonellosis is a bacterial infection, which is present at a low level in wild bird populations. Salmonella outbreaks are regularly seen in wild birds in Britain during the winter months. Flocking ground feeders, such as greenfinches and house sparrows, are most commonly affected. There are no symptoms specific to salmonella, but infected birds will show general signs of ill-health. They are listless and lethargic, tend to stay close to feeders, fail to respond to danger and can be approached closely. Many have diarrhoea. Even though an infected bird tends to continue to eat almost to the end, it will become weak and emaciated.

Salmonella bacteria pass out of the body in the droppings, which spread the contamination if they mix with food taken by other birds. The risk of transmission is greatest where large numbers of birds gather at communal roosts or feeding sites, and poor hygiene at feeding stations can fuel a local outbreak. Outbreaks are best prevented by keeping all feeding areas and water containers clean and free from droppings. Some types of Salmonella are responsible for food poisoning in man. Therefore, it is very important to exercise good personal hygiene if handling sick or dead birds, and when cleaning the feeders and water containers. See below.

Trichomoniasis (canker)

Trichomonas gallinae is a protozoan parasite of the upper digestive tract. It typically affects doves and pigeons in the UK, but since summer 2005 it has also been seen in greenfinches and other garden birds. Any bird can catch the infection, but being bird specific, it does not pass on to mammals, including humans.

Trichomoniasis causes lesions in the throat of the infected bird, which makes it progressively harder for the bird to swallow its food, and eventually to breathe. The infected bird will die of starvation or possibly choking. In addition to showing signs of general illness such as lethargy and fluffed-up plumage, affected birds may drool saliva, regurgitate food, have difficulty swallowing or show laboured breathing. Finches frequently have matted wet plumage around the face and beak, and uneaten food in and around the beak. Sometimes it is possible to see swelling in the throat area of an infected bird, and it may stretch its neck in discomfort.

The infection is spread as birds feed one another with regurgitated food during the breeding season, and through food and drinking water contaminated with regurgitated saliva. Sick birds, unable to swallow, will spit out food particles, which then carry the infection. Saliva from a sick bird can also contaminate the bird bath. *Trichomonas* is vulnerable to desiccation and cannot survive for long periods outside the host. The higher the concentration of birds at a feeding station, the greater the chance of another bird picking up an infected food particle and exposing itself to the infection. If a number of birds show symptoms of trichomoniasis, it is recommended to stop putting out food (except in tit feeders) and leave bird baths dry for around two weeks, or until no further sick or dead birds are found in the garden. This will help to disperse the feeding birds and reduce the contact between sick and healthy individuals, thus slowing down or halting the outbreak.

Escherichia coli

Coliform infections occur regularly in wild birds, and can be either gastro-intestinal or respiratory in nature. While *E. coli* is a normal part of the gut flora in many birds, it can become pathogenic at times of stress. Symptoms include unwillingness to eat, loss of body

condition, and severe vomiting or diarrhoea. Outbreaks are best prevented by keeping all feeding areas and water containers clean and free from droppings.

Some other infections

Aspergillosis is a lung infection caused by the spores of a fungus called *Aspergillus fumigatus*. The concentrations of spores in mouldy food and nesting material can reach levels that may become dangerous to birds.

Avian pox virus can be respiratory, but is most often seen as a skin disease causing reddish growths around the face and legs of birds. These can be confused with ticks from a distance.

Avian tuberculosis is a bacterial infection, which can affect a wide range of bird species.

Gape worm is a tracheal parasite found in blackbirds and other earthworm eaters. It moves from an earthworm to a bird and back to an earthworm.

While the pox and tuberculosis are highly contagious among birds, aspergillosis and gape worm cannot be passed between birds, but each bird will have to be in direct contact with a source of the infection.

Hygiene precautions

Always exercise good hygiene around the feeders and water containers. Prevention is always better than a cure, and is the best thing you can do to help the birds. The following precautions may help to avoid outbreaks of disease at feeding stations in your garden. Most diseases are transmitted when contaminated droppings mix with food eaten by other birds. Since some of the diseases of wild birds, most notably salmonella and *E. coli*, can be passed onto people and pets, personal hygiene is important when cleaning and filling feeders, and when faced by a sick or a dead bird.

- Use a birdtable or hanging feeders. A ground-feeding tray is preferable to putting food directly on the ground, since it is easier to keep clean. Food on the ground should all be eaten before nightfall. Rats are attracted to leftover food and often carry diseases, which can affect birds or humans.

- Keep birdtables and surrounding areas clean and free from droppings or mouldy food, which can form reservoirs of infection by providing breeding grounds for parasites and bacteria. If large amounts of droppings have accumulated, they should be cleared and burnt and the ground cleansed with a disinfectant.
- Clean and wash the bird table and hanging feeders regularly with a disinfectant, and move feeding stations to a new area every month to prevent droppings accumulating underneath.
- Change water in any containers regularly and air-dry them before refilling. Droppings from bathing birds can accumulate in bird baths.
- Clean all feeders out of doors, and have separate utensils for the job. You should never clean the feeders with the rest of the washing up, or even in the same bowl or sink.
- When cleaning bird feeders, and if you must handle sick or dead birds, it is important to exercise great care and personal hygiene, since there is a small but real risk of transmissible infections from sick birds. Use protective gloves, and wash hands and forearms thoroughly, and any soiled clothing in the normal wash as soon as you have finished. Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth until you have been able to wash properly. Do not allow your pets play with or eat birds, especially if they are sick or dead.

The Garden Bird Health Initiative

The RSPB is a member of Garden Bird Health Initiative (GBHi), which was first established as a UFAW (Universities Federation for Animal Welfare) Working Group in 2003, and extended to a major research project in 2005. The GBHi is undertaking a major research project into and surveillance of garden bird health and disease outbreaks. It develops and publishes guidelines about how to best feed garden birds in order to maximize the benefits for their welfare and conservation, and minimise the risks from infections.

The GBHi has published a 32-page booklet titled *Feeding garden birds – best practice guidelines*. This is available from UFAW by phoning 01582 831818 or visiting their website www.ufaw.org.uk. It costs £4.99, and all the profits will go towards the research into garden bird diseases.

The RSPB

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INFORMATION

Disease among garden birds



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