

Briefing: avian pox



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Dunnock with avian pox by Garden BirdWatcher Dave Wragg

We have received reports of skin lesions in Great Tits caused by avian pox infection, something that appears to be a recent phenomenon. This article gives you the low-down on what we know and what we still need to find out.

What is avian pox?

Avian pox infection is caused by a virus (avian poxvirus) which affects a wide variety of birds. Affected birds develop warty growths on the head (particularly around the eyes or beak), legs, wings or other body parts. These are usually grey, pinkish-red or yellow in colour.

Sporadic cases of avian poxvirus are well known, affecting individual birds of several species. In these birds, the skin growths are often relatively mild and may regress with time. Affected birds often appear to feed and move around normally.

Avian poxvirus is thought to be spread between birds in three main ways: 1) by biting insects, 2) by direct bird-to-bird contact and 3) by indirect contact via contaminated surfaces. The virus is relatively resistant and can persist on contaminated surfaces for long periods. The extent to which different bird species are susceptible to different strains of the virus is

unknown. Although the strains that infect our garden birds are probably specific to those species affected, the disease could potentially be infectious to poultry or cage birds.

What has changed recently?

The recent cases of infection in Great Tits are not typical of the type of avian pox we are used to seeing because the lesions are particularly severe; it is possible they are caused by a new strain of pox virus. It is relatively common for several Great Tits to be affected in one garden. In some cases the growths can become very large and may impede the ability of birds to see or feed.

What is being done?

The Garden Bird Health initiative (GBHi) has been collecting reports of avian pox infection in wild birds since 2005 and we perform post mortem examinations, when samples are available, to help us learn more about this disease.

With financial support from the Natural Environment Research Council, staff at the Institute of Zoology are collaborating with

scientists at the Edward Grey Institute, University of Oxford, who are looking in detail at birds with the infection in their study populations

How can you help?

Although the skin lesions of avian pox are characteristic, a diagnosis cannot be reached without further investigation as there are alternative explanations for skin lesions in wild birds. To help us learn more, we need you to look out for cases of suspected avian pox infection in your garden birds. If you see evidence of disease in your garden birds, or find a dead garden bird with suspected avian pox, please contact the Garden Bird Health *initiative*. Photographs of affected birds are also helpful. ■

GET INVOLVED:

Call GBHi on **0207 449 6685**
e-mail **gardenbird@zsl.org**

Factsheet: via www.bto.org/gbw

IOZ: <http://www.zsl.org/gbhi>

EGI: www.zoo.ox.ac.uk/egi

