



UNIVERSITIES FEDERATION FOR ANIMAL WELFARE

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Media Release

From the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW)

14th September, 2006

For Immediate Release:

Finch fatalities

Scientists from the Garden Bird Health *initiative* (GBH) have found an unusual increase in the number of finch fatalities reported to the project over the last two months. Post mortem investigation has identified a parasitic infection, called trichomoniasis, as the cause of death. This infection of British finches was first described in 2005. The emerging epidemic is reported in this week's *Veterinary Record* (September 9th, 2006. p367).

The Garden Bird Health *initiative* includes a collaborative research project, co-ordinated by the Institute of Zoology (ZSL) and involving the Scottish Agricultural College, Liverpool University, the Wildlife Veterinary Investigation Centre, the British Trust for Ornithology, the RSPB and UFAW. The *initiative* aims to promote the conservation and welfare benefits of supplementary feeding of garden birds. The project records, monitors and investigates garden bird diseases. The project has recorded a dramatic increase in finch mortality in the last two months. The species most commonly affected are the greenfinch (*Carduelis chloris*) and chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*), although the house sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) and other finch species are also susceptible, and reports have come from across Britain.

Becki Lawson, a wildlife veterinarian from the Institute of Zoology, Zoological Society of London, is the coordinator of the project and emphasised the need to investigate the epidemic. "The dramatic increase in the number of garden bird mortality incidents reported by members of the public is deeply concerning," she commented. "It is essential that further research is now undertaken so that we can gain a better understanding of the reasons for the disease emergence, and to assess the parasite's impact on our bird populations".

Dr James Kirkwood of the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW) added, "Good feeding practice is recommended at all times and, since one of the ways this parasite is likely to be transmitted is by sick and healthy birds drinking from the same water, provision of clean drinking water is likely to be particularly important".

In those gardens where disease problems are occurring and large numbers of garden birds are affected, we would recommend that food and water sources are removed as a temporary measure only to discourage any further congregation of birds that may facilitate the parasite transmission. Good hygiene measures, such as cleaning bird feeders and water baths, should be followed as a matter of routine.

Further information about the disease, the Garden Bird Health *initiative* and sources of information on best practice for feeding garden birds can be found at <http://www.ufaw.org.uk/gbhi.php> .

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SCIENCE IN THE SERVICE OF ANIMAL WELFARE

Chief Executive and Scientific Director: James K Kirkwood BVSc PhD CBiol FIBiol MRCVS

Secretary: Donald C Davidson

Registered Charity No. 207996 (Registered in England) and Company Limited by Guarantee No. 579991



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UFAW:

The Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW) is an internationally recognised, independent scientific and educational animal welfare charity. It works to improve knowledge and understanding of animals' needs in order to achieve high standards of welfare for farm, companion, research, captive wild animals and those with which we interact in the wild.

UFAW improves animal welfare worldwide through its programme of awards, grants and scholarships; by educational initiatives, especially at university and college level; by providing information in books, videos, reports and in its scientific journal *Animal Welfare*; by providing expert advice to governments and others, including for legislation and 'best practice' guidelines and codes; and by working with animal keepers, scientists, vets, lawyers and all those who care about animals.

This work relies on the support of members, subscribers and donors.

The Zoological Society of London (ZSL):

Founded in 1826, the **Zoological Society of London (ZSL)** is an international scientific, conservation and educational charity: our key role is the conservation of animals and their habitats. ZSL runs London Zoo and Whipsnade Wild Animal Park, carries out scientific research in the Institute of Zoology and is actively involved in field conservation in other countries worldwide. www.zsl.org

The Garden Bird Health *initiative* (GBH):

The Garden Bird Health *initiative* was formed through a UFAW project in 2005 by a group of veterinary, ornithological and bird care organisations (see list below):

Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW)
British Trust for Ornithology (BTO)
CJ WildBird Foods Ltd.
Defra Animal Welfare
Cranswick Pet Products
Gardman Ltd.
Institute of Zoology, Zoological Society of London (ZSL)
Jacobi Jayne and Co
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)
Scottish Agricultural College (SAC)
University of Liverpool Veterinary School, Department of Veterinary Pathology
University of Sheffield
Wildlife Veterinary Investigation Centre (WVIC)

A major part of this *initiative* is a collaborative 3-year research project involving many of the organisations above. Funding for this research has been generously provided by:

CJ WildBird Foods Ltd.
Gardman Ltd.
Cranswick Pet Products
BirdCare Standards Association
British Veterinary Association: Animal Welfare Foundation
RSPB
UFAW

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The disease:

There has been a large increase in the number of finch fatalities reported during and following the recent spell of hot weather in July 2006.

Post mortem investigation on the finches has identified necrotic oesophagitis and ingluvitis caused by a single cell parasite called *Trichomonas*, which typically affects pigeons and doves in the UK. The parasite was first seen to cause disease in finches in 2005 and is considered to be an emerging infectious disease of British birds.

Transmission of the infection is most likely to be by birds feeding one another with regurgitated food during the breeding season; through food or drinking water contaminated with saliva; or, possibly, from droppings of an infected bird.

The parasite does not affect humans or other mammals such as dogs or cats, although it does have the potential to affect captive birds. However, good hygiene precautions, such as avoiding direct handling of sick or dead birds, are recommended as a routine measure.

Further information about good practice when feeding garden birds and minimising the chance of disease transmission can be found at: <http://www.ufaw.org.uk/gbhi.php>, or requested by ringing 01582 831818

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