

Garden Bird Health *initiative* - Salmonellosis

Agent

Many species of *Salmonella* bacteria exist, some of which can be carried by, or cause ill health in, wild birds. Strains of the bacterium, *Salmonella typhimurium*, typically cause disease known as salmonellosis in British garden birds.

Species affected

Salmonellosis tends to affect gregarious seed-eating garden birds, with the greenfinch and house sparrow being most frequently affected in Britain. However, a range of garden bird species is susceptible to the disease, including other finch species e.g. chaffinch, siskin, goldfinch.

Salmonellosis has been reported as a sporadic cause of disease outbreaks in garden birds since the 1950s. These disease outbreaks tend to occur during the winter months, peaking between November and February, however exceptions to this seasonal pattern may occur.

Pathology

Salmonella typically causes disease in the gullet. Generalised infection affecting internal organs, including the spleen and liver, commonly occurs.

Clinical signs

Birds affected by salmonellosis tend to show non-specific signs of ill health, for example lethargy and fluffed-up plumage. Wild birds suffering from a variety of conditions can exhibit similar signs of disease and there are no characteristic signs of *Salmonella* infection that allow it to be identified in the wild without further examination. Affected birds are frequently observed to remain around feeding stations and continue with attempts to feed until the terminal stages of the disease. The disease may progress over several days or even weeks, consequently affected birds are often emaciated.

Disease spread

Salmonella bacteria are relatively hardy and can persist in the environment for some time. The likely reservoir of the infection is thought to be the wild birds themselves. The main route of spread is likely to occur when infected bird droppings contaminate food or water sources.

Risk to human and domestic animal health

The strains of *Salmonella typhimurium* that affect wild birds have the potential to affect humans and domestic animals (e.g. cats that predate sick birds). Garden birds in the UK may carry *Salmonella* bacteria and other diseases that can affect humans and pets, for example *Campylobacter* and *E.coli* bacteria.

The GBHi recommends following sensible hygiene precautions as a routine measure when feeding garden birds and handling bird feeders and tables. Following these rules will help avoid the risk of any infection transmitting to people and help safeguard the birds in your garden against disease (See *Below*).

- Clean and disinfect feeders/ feeding sites regularly. Suitable disinfectants that can be used include a weak solution of domestic bleach (5% sodium hypochlorite) and other

specially-designed commercial products (See *Further information*). Always rinse thoroughly and air-dry feeders before re-use.

- Brushes and cleaning equipment for bird feeders, tables and baths should not be used for other purposes and should not be brought into the house, but be kept and used outside and away from food preparation areas
- Wear rubber gloves when cleaning feeders and thoroughly wash hands and forearms afterwards with soap and water, especially before eating or drinking. Avoid handling sick or dead birds directly.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis of salmonellosis in garden birds relies on post mortem examination. The signs of the disease at post mortem are fairly characteristic and tests can be used to confirm presence of the infection.

If you wish to report finding dead **garden birds**, or signs of disease in garden birds, please call the **Garden Bird Health initiative** on **0207 449 6685**.

Control

Whilst medicines are available for treatment of *Salmonella* infection in captive birds, effective and targeted dosing of free-living birds under field conditions is not possible.

Where a problem with salmonellosis exists, general measures for control of disease in wild bird populations should be taken:

- Since the infection is spread when infected droppings contaminate food or water sources, ensure optimal hygiene at garden bird feeding stations, including disinfection (See *Further information*)
- Ensure that where water is provided for garden birds it is fresh and clean on a daily basis
- Feeding stations encourage birds to congregate, sometimes in large densities, thereby increasing the potential for disease to spread between individuals when outbreaks occur. If birds in your garden are sick or dying, consider significantly reducing the amount you feed, or stop feeding for a period (if you have observed many ill or dead birds, we recommend you stop feeding for up to two months). The reason for this is to encourage birds to disperse, thereby minimising the chances of new birds becoming infected at the feeding station. Gradually reintroduce feeding, whilst continuing to monitor for further signs of ill health (See *Further information*).

Prevention

Following best practice for feeding garden birds is recommended to help control and prevent transmission of disease at feeding stations all year round (see *Further information*):

- Routine good table hygiene. Clean away uneaten food and droppings before putting out fresh food and disinfect feeders/ feeding sites on a regular basis.
- Provision of clean and fresh drinking water on a daily basis
- Provision of fresh food from accredited sources
- Rotate positions of feeders in the garden to avoid build up of contamination in any one area and pay particular attention to clearing food remains that fall onto the ground

Further information

Best feeding practices should be followed at all times to help ensure that the birds visiting your garden remain healthy. More information can be found in the GBH*i* booklet "Feeding Garden Birds – Best Practice Guidelines" and in the accompanying GBH*i* leaflet. Details of how to obtain these publications are available on the GBH*i* page of the UFAW website www.ufaw.org.uk; or telephone UFAW on 01582 831818.