Avian pox: public help needed

The public are being asked to report sightings of garden birds riddled with lesions as scientists reveal that avian pox is spreading across the UK.

Avian pox has been recorded in bird species such as house sparrows and wood pigeons for a number of years, but its recent emergence in great tits is causing real concern as the birds develop more severe symptoms of the disease.

Scientists from the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) and the University of Oxford recorded the first occurrence of the disease in Oxford last year. Prior to this, affected birds had most often been sighted in Surrey, Kent and Sussex. The researchers are now calling on the public to report sightings of garden birds with symptoms of avian pox to the RSPB Wildlife Enquiries Unit to help the research team track the spread of the disease.

Avian poxvirus causes the disease avian pox which leads to warty, tumour-like growths on different parts of a bird’s body, particularly on the head around the eyes and beak. The disease can be relatively mild in some species, but great tits have been shown to suffer severe symptoms which can prevent them from feeding and may increase their susceptibility to predation.

Wildlife Vet Dr Becki Lawson from ZSL said: “We now believe avian pox has spread as far north as Staffordshire. Public reports of sick birds are essential in helping us to track the disease and determine the wider impact it is having on our garden birds.”

The virus is spread between birds by biting insects that carry the virus, direct contact with other birds and, indirect contact possibly through contaminated bird feeders. Avian poxvirus is not known to be infectious to humans or other mammals.

Professor Ben Sheldon of the Edward Grey Institute at the University of Oxford said: “We have been studying great tits at Wytham Woods near Oxford since 1947 - the longest running study of its kind in the world, so we were very concerned when we first detected this disease in 2010.
We're using our detailed observations to try to understand how this new form of pox affects survival and reproductive success."

Avian poxvirus was first recorded in great tits in Scandinavia in the 1970s and has recently been seen in Central Europe. Funded by NERC, the research team from ZSL and the University of Oxford are now undertaking molecular analysis of the virus to determine whether this new strain in Great Britain is the same as that seen on the continent.

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Notes for Editors

- Sightings of birds displaying symptoms of avian pox should be reported to the RSPB Wildlife Enquiries Unit on t: 01767 693690 or reported online via: http://www.rspb.org.uk/advice/helpingbirds/health/sickbirds/avianpox.aspx

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- **Avian pox** is caused by avian pox virus.

Affected birds develop warty or tumour-like growths, on the head (particularly next to the eye or beak), legs, wings, or other body parts. The growths are usually grey, pinkish, red or yellow in colour.

Whilst a range of species are known to be susceptible to avian pox infection (e.g. house sparrow, wood pigeon), the recent cases of infection in tits are not typical of the type of avian pox we are used to seeing because the lesions are particularly large. In most cases lesions are distributed on the head around the eyes and beak. The extent to which different bird species are susceptible to different avian pox virus strains is unknown.

Although large pox growths can be very characteristic, smaller or medium-sized growths can easily be confused with a number of other conditions, such as ticks. The disease can only be confirmed by further investigation, such as post mortem examination and subsequent laboratory tests.

Whilst supportive treatment can be attempted in captive birds, effective treatment of free-living birds under field conditions is not possible. Maintaining optimal hygiene at feeding stations can help to prevent outbreaks of disease.

For further information: http://www.ufaw.org.uk/gbhi.php

- 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. The Society runs ZSL London Zoo and ZSL Whipsnade Zoo, carries out scientific research at the Institute of Zoology and is actively involved in field conservation overseas. For further information please visit www.zsl.org

- **University of Oxford.** For further information on the Edward Grey Institute at the University of Oxford, please visit: http://www.zoo.ox.ac.uk/egi/

- **The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO)** undertakes the BTO Garden BirdWatch. For further information, please contact: Mike Toms, Head of Garden Ecology, t: 01842 750050, Email: mike.toms@bto.org,