



Media Release



From the Garden Bird Health *initiative*

EMBARGOED until 10.00pm (British Summer Time) Wednesday 18th August 2010

Parasite threatens many of Britain's best-loved birds

Greenfinch populations in central England dropped by a third within a year of the emergence of a new disease, reports a newly published study.

Scientists from the Garden Bird Health *initiative* (GBHi) discovered that trichomonosis, an emerging infectious disease of garden birds led to dramatic declines in greenfinch populations across much of England. The findings of their study are described in a paper published in the journal PLoS ONE this week.

The study also revealed that chaffinch populations fell by up to 20%. Most birds died in the summer and autumn months, and outbreaks of the disease have continued to occur each year since its emergence in 2005.

Dr Rob Robinson, a Principal Ecologist at the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) joint lead author, commented "*These findings demonstrate that virulent infectious diseases can cause sharp population declines in common wild birds in just a short period of time*".

In order to determine the scale of the disease outbreak, the study used data drawn from public observation and a volunteer survey. Further data were collected through post mortem examination of hundreds of birds, which were collected from gardens across the country.

Becki Lawson, a wildlife veterinarian from the Zoological Society of London and joint lead author, said "*This citizen science project highlights the valuable role that volunteers can play in helping us learn more about wildlife diseases, even by just watching birds in their gardens for a couple of hours each week*".

Trichomonosis is well known in doves and pigeons but appears to have jumped the species barrier in 2005. The current effects of the disease in greenfinches and chaffinches highlight the highly unpredictable impact of parasites able to move between different species.

(More...)

SCIENCE IN THE SERVICE OF ANIMAL WELFARE

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Secretary: Donald C Davidson

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



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James Kirkwood, Chief Executive of the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare and founder of the Garden Bird Health *initiative* said “*Health surveillance of British wildlife species is crucial for us to recognise new and emerging disease threats that not only adversely affect the welfare of individual animals, but have the potential to impact entire populations.*”

The GBHi team is now investigating possible factors underlying the emergence of this disease in garden birds and its continued impact on our garden birds.

Members of the public can assist this ongoing project by reporting cases of disease or mortality in their garden birds –

<http://www.rspb.org.uk/advice/helpingbirds/health/sickbirds/greenfinches.asp>

-ENDS-

For free high-quality images for use alongside this press release, contact images@bto.org

NOTES FOR EDITORS –

Trichomonosis

Trichomonas gallinae, the cause of the disease, is a protozoan parasite (not a virus). *Trichomonas gallinae* is well known as a cause of disease in pigeons and doves, and birds of prey that feed on them. In 2005, trichomonosis was first recognised as a cause of disease in British finches. The greenfinch (*Carduelis chloris*) has been most frequently affected; the chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*) is the second most frequently affected species, although a range of garden birds have been found to be susceptible to the parasite.

Trichomonas is vulnerable to desiccation and cannot survive for long periods outside the host. Transmission of infection is most likely to be through birds feeding one another with regurgitated food during the breeding season; or through food or drinking water contaminated with saliva.

Trichomonosis outbreaks are most severe and frequent in the period of August to October. Sick birds are obvious, as they have a tendency to stay close to feeders and water sources, and often die there. Lack of birds in the garden without the presence of sick or dead birds does not indicate a disease outbreak, but is most likely caused by the seasonal changes in birds' behaviour in late summer and autumn.

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Garden Bird Health *initiative*

The GBHi was established in 2003 to develop and publish guidelines about how best to feed garden birds in order to maximise the benefits for their conservation and welfare and to undertake a major garden bird health surveillance and research project. The surveillance and research project is a joint initiative of the British Trust for Ornithology, Zoological Society of London, RSPB, Universities Federation for Animal Welfare, Scottish Agricultural College, University of Liverpool, and the Wildlife Veterinary Investigation Centre, with other collaborating organisations. The GBHi uses volunteers to record disease incidents from the general public and the BTO Garden BirdWatch scheme, enabling us to track the impacts of this emerging disease on garden bird populations.

A disease fact sheet on trichomonosis is available on the GBHi website – <http://www.ufaw.org.uk/gbhi.php>

This work was funded by the Birdcare Standards Association (<http://www.birdcare.org.uk>), the British Veterinary Association Animal Welfare Foundation (<http://www.bva-awf.org.uk>), CJ Wildbird Foods (<http://www.birdfood.co.uk/>), Cranswick Pet Products (<http://www.cranswickpetproducts.co.uk/>), Gardman Ltd (<http://www.gardman.co.uk/>), Tom Chambers (<http://www.tomchambers.co.uk/index.html>) the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons Trust Small Grants Programme Reference 000443 (<http://www.rcvs.org.uk/RCVSTrust>), the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (<http://www.rspb.org.uk/>), the John and Pamela Salter Trust (R16982), the British Trust for Ornithology (www.bto.org) and the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (<http://www.ufaw.org.uk>).

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