Trichomoniasis Outbreak Not a Concern for Humans

Fort Huachuca recently received a message from the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD) and Arizona Department of Public Health (ADPH) regarding a plague in the bird community in selected areas of Arizona in 2003. There is an outbreak of Trichomoniasis in western Arizona that affects the bird community.

The Preventive Medicine Environmental Health section of the Raymond W. Bliss Army Health Center is concerned with this latest news because it can be mistaken for the West Nile Virus. Generally, we monitor the presence of WNV in the area through the mosquito population as well as the dead birds the beginning of summer until around October every year. An increase number of dead birds found in the area can send a wrong signal to the community.

What is Trichomoniasis?

Trichomoniasis is an infection cause by a protozoan ***Trichomonas gallinae*** – a single-celled animal – that generally poses little threat until temperatures exceed 75 ^{0}F and evening lows are above 50. It can infect pigeons, doves, turkeys, chicken, quail, hawks, eagles, falcons, cannaries, keets, parrots, sparrows, swallow, goldfinches, and cardinals. Birds may become infected by ingesting the parasite in contaminated water. An infected bird may have a loss of appetite, vomiting, ruffled feathers, diarrhea, dysphagia (difficulty in swallowing), dyspnea (difficulty in breathing), weight loss, and increased thirst. Young birds are most frequently infected and can die from the parasite. Some birds may be carriers and show no sign of the disease.

Can this protozoan affect humans?

There are only 3 strains of trichomonas that are known to affect humans. These are the *Trichomonas tenax* (mouth to mouth), *T. huminis* (liver), and *T. vaginalis* (through intercourse).

What to do if you see a sick bird?

If you find a diseased bird, it's best to report it to the installation's wildlife biologist at 533-7083 or to the state or local wildlife agency if you live off base. If you are advised to take the bird in for an examination, try to catch the bird by throwing a light towel over it and placing it in a box with airholes. If you find a dead bird, place it in a double plastic bag and into the garbage (wear gloves).

How can we prevent Trichomoniasis outbreak from our bird population?

1. Minimize the risk of infecting other birds by cleaning your feeder area thoroughly. Infected birds can contaminate water containers (bird baths) with their oral secretions, which may expose many other birds to the disease.
2. If you see several diseased birds, take down all your feeders for at least a week to give the birds a chance to disperse.
3. Keep the feeders down until you no longer see diseased individuals. And remember that prevention is the key to avoiding the spread of disease.
4. Anyone feeling the need to feed birds, you should put out only a small amount of food out at a time.
5. Regularly clean your feeders even when there are no signs of disease and prevent overcrowding by adding more feeders or setting up different types of feeders that allow only a few birds to visit at one time.

Cutting off an easy food supply is healthy for the bird population. Allowing the birds to forage is a best course of action because it forces birds to distribute throughout the habitat during the nesting season. This actually reduces stress of trying to defend a feeding territory with all the other birds in the area that are using the bird feeder. In addition, leaving a feeder and birdbath empty doesn't mean birds won't frequent homes. Birds can be attracted to property if owners take the time to do landscaping with native vegetation.

While feeders and birdbaths are not the only methods for this protozoan to spread in the bird community, Game and Fish Department biologists, believe these simple precautions can help prevent a similar outbreak in 2004.

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