Trichomoniasis in Budgerigars

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Last Updated Thursday, 14 February 2008

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By Sally O’Dwyer In my experience with Budgerigars (Parakeets), I have occasionally had to go toe-to-toe with the nasty disease Trichomoniasis. Actually, Trichomoniasis is the most common protozoal disease in all of aviculture. The bad news is that this disease is somewhat species specific, and it is a significant problem in Budgerigars. The good news is that it is easily treated. Avian Trichomoniasis is caused by a microscopic parasite, Trichomonas gallinae, a single-celled protozoan. This parasite has a whip-like tail and fin on its back, which allows it swim in a circular motion. Upon entering the Budgie through the mouth, the parasite buries itself into the lining of the esophagus-- anywhere from the back of the tongue down through the crop almost to the gizzard. Yellowish lesions (ulcers or cankers) appear where the parasite has buried itself in the esophageal lining. The Trichomonads multiply rapidly by simple division and as a result, the lesions grow in size and number. As the disease progresses, the lesions develop into large, firm masses that can cause nasty blockages. If left untreated, the disease can be fatal. Trichomoniasis is also known as “Canker”, “Frounce” or “Diptheria”. This disease is not just a problem among Budgerigars, but also in pigeons, doves, quail, falcons, hawks, turkeys, chickens, various finches, the Java sparrow, and even canaries. In the wild, Trichomoniasis is endemic among doves and pigeons. Birds of prey are thought to contract the disease by eating infected doves and pigeons. According to Michigan’s Department of Natural Resources, in the wild there are strains of Trichomoniasis which do not cause disease as well as highly virulent strains that circulate in flocks causing disease and death. The severity of the disease depends on the susceptibility of the bird and the virulence of the strain. Transmission of Trichomoniasis probably occurs between birds by direct beak to beak contact. Indirect transmission via drinking water probably also occurs. The most tell-tale sign that you have a budgie afflicted with Trichomoniasis is the bird will vomit and sneeze. When vomiting, the bird looks like it is regurgitating food as if it were preparing to feed a mate or chick. If you walk in your aviary and hear sneezing, beware!! Track down that sneeze and watch that bird. Budgies with Trichomoniasis will often look dirty above their cere, where they have flicked mucous while sneezing or vomiting. The vomit may be a mucusy liquid of whole seed. If you suspect a bird of having Trichomoniasis, isolate it in a separate cage. Place paper (white works best) in the tray below. After several hours, check the paper and you will be able to see what the bird has been vomiting. Vomit might also be on the walls of your aviary. You will probably also notice your bird rubbing its face on the perches. As the disease progresses, the bird will sit listlessly, puffed-up on the perch. The bird is beginning to starve and will become extremely emaciated. This happens because the esophagus is blocked and the bird cannot get food down. Sometimes birds will just sit in the food bowl, hungry, but unable to eat. Birds can also suffocate if the lesions cause a blockage of the trachea. There are number of medications used to treat Trichomoniasis. These include Dimetridazole, Metronidazole, Ronidazole, and Carnidazole. They are all effective against the parasite and can be purchased from Foy’s Pigeon Supply, (877) 355-7727. As long as the bird can still drink, the drug can be administered through drinking water. These drugs are water soluble and water stable. Directions usually are to treat for 5 to 7 days. Usually, affected birds will respond quickly—but don’t forget to finish the prescription. Also, make sure that during the treatment, all water sources are medicated. You do need to watch your birds to make sure that they do not quit drinking while you are medicating them. The medications taste bitter and the birds do not like them. I have found that birds that are severely affected by the disease may need to be tube fed the medicine mixed with a bit water. Some of these drugs are rather toxic, so be careful not to overdose your birds. Symptoms of overdose are loss of balance and death. Recovery from mild attacks of Trichomoniasis produces immunity to more virulent strains. Resistance to the drugs named above is common, and you may wish to rotate the type of medication you use to treat Trichomoniasis. I personally switch between Ronidazole 10% and Metronidazole, and this has worked well for me. Ronidazole is reportedly the safest to use on budgies and can be used any stage of the breeding cycle. There are some companies that sell Ronidazole 6% (one product is called Ronivet), but I have not found the 6% to be strong enough against these pesky parasites and have ended up having to re-treat the birds. The most important point to note is that if one of your birds shows symptoms of Trichomoniasis, you must assume that the rest of your birds have been infected and treat the ENTIRE flock. All of your birds must be treated at the same time. Many of your birds may harbor the parasite but not show symptoms. To prevent an outbreak of Trichamoniasis in your aviary, quarantine all new birds. Many, if not most, Budgies have been exposed at one time or another to the disease. For the most part, they will not show any symptoms. However, if they become stressed, for example by a move to your aviary, their natural immunity will be lowered, possibly allowing the disease to surface and the bird to become infectious. You may wish to treat all incoming birds with one of the medications mentioned above. Because Trichanomads are persistent, treatment needs to be part of your aviary management plan. Many budgie breeders treat their flock at least twice a year to prevent outbreaks. It is probably a wise idea to treat birds before the breeding season. Foy’s Pigeon Supply recommends that breeders disinfect drinking water with Nolvasan or Oxine for a week to prevent another outbreak after treating birds for the disease. They also recommend following all treatments with a Probotic. Trichanomads are very sensitive to drying, so let bowls and equipment dry well after cleaning. Regularly disinfect food and water sources with 10% bleach solution, and make sure that wild birds cannot infect your birds. Practice good hygiene, particularly with water bowls and wet food, which can harbor the parasite. To keep your birds happy and free of Trichamoniasis, avoid overcrowding and other types of stress to your birds.