

# **WILDLIFE HEALTH FACT SHEET**

## **SICK BIRDS AT YOUR FEEDING STATION**

Birds that feed in large groups - notably birds in the finch family such as Pine Siskins, goldfinches, and House Finches - are particularly susceptible to a number of diseases. Because individuals in these species tend to move around frequently, they increase the chance of infecting other birds. Also some infected birds do not die from disease, which increases the probability of transmission to other individuals.

Birds with **avian conjunctivitis** often have red, swollen, watery or crusted eyes; in extreme cases the eyes are so swollen or crusted over that the birds are virtually blind. Although infected birds have swollen eyes, the disease is primarily a respiratory infection. Birds with the disease have trouble feeding; you might see them remaining on the ground under the feeder, trying to find seeds.

The **avian pox virus** is quite common in House Finches. Infected birds may have warty lesions on the head, legs, feet, or any unfeathered area. The virus is transmitted by direct contact with infected birds, ingestion of food and water contaminated by sick birds or carcasses, or contact with contaminated surfaces such as bird feeders, birdbaths, and perches. Insects, especially mosquitoes, may also carry the disease from one bird to another. Avian pox can lead to difficulty seeing, breathing, feeding, or perching.

The **salmonella bacterium** is the same one associated with a common form of human food poisoning, salmonellosis. Infected birds appear tame and might sit quietly for days in a sheltered spot. Often their feathers are fluffed out, and you might see a bird hold its head under its wings. Within a few hours after the symptoms become severe, individual birds may fall over and die. Salmonella bacteria are shed in droppings, and can be spread bird-to-bird via direct contact or through ingestion of food or water contaminated with infected bird or mammalian fecal matter. Domestic cats killing and eating songbirds or humans cleaning contaminated areas can also become sick, so strict hygiene in these areas is important.

### **Tips for Preventing Disease Problems at Birdbaths**

Diseases can spread quickly and easily in an unattended birdbath.

- Change the water every few days to get rid of regurgitated seeds and other debris.
- Change water more frequently if many birds are using the bath (locating your birdbath near a faucet or hose will make refilling and cleaning easier).
- Scrub birdbaths a few times each month with a plastic brush to remove algae and bacteria (rinse and thoroughly dry the brush following each use). Never add chemicals to a birdbath for any reason.

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## **Tips for Preventing Disease Problems at Feeders**

Messy feeders and ground-feeding areas are particularly conducive to the spread of infection as well as the growth of molds that can cause birds to become ill. A variety of strategies will help prevent disease-producing organisms from occurring or spreading:

- Instead of having one large feeder or feeding station (that will attract many birds to the same spot), spread your feeders out to discourage crowding.
- Don't use wooden feeders. Soak dirty plastic or metal feeders in a bucket (not the sink) and a solution of 10% white vinegar and 90% clean water or 10 % bleach for about 10 minutes. Scrub and thoroughly rinse, and dry well before re-hanging. Repeat every couple of weeks.
- If you have feeders with rough surfaces or cracks that make them difficult to clean, consider using different feeders. Also, make sure your feeders allow rainwater to drain easily.
- If you have feeders with small holes to allow head entry and you are seeing pox infections, remove or clean these feeders frequently.
- Rake the area underneath your feeder to remove droppings and old moldy seed. Mount feeders above a surface such as concrete, which you can sweep and clean regularly.
- Do not give moldy or damp seed to your birds.
- If you see one or two diseased birds in your area, take your feeder down immediately and clean it.
- If you have more than three diseased birds in your area, encourage the birds to disperse for a while. Take your feeders down for a week or two, clean them well, and re-hang them. Repeat as necessary.

In addition:

- Prevent squirrels from accessing feeders and spreading seed on the ground.
- Cater to birds (jays, chickadees, nuthatches) that create less mess around feeders. Because they gather in large numbers and eat directly from the feeder (instead of flying away to eat elsewhere), birds of the finch family are particularly prone to sharing diseases.
- Offer shelled peanuts, hulled sunflower seeds, or suet to eliminate hulls that would be otherwise dropped on the ground (Note: shelled nuts go rancid quickly).
- Avoid mixed seed, especially mixes containing mostly milo or millet.
- Use small feeders that allow only one or two birds to feed at a time.