

Looking after the birds in your garden



Greenfinch: John Harding

Wild birds are susceptible to a range of different diseases, which may be transmitted when birds congregate at feeders.

Awareness of disease

Diseases can be seen in birds both in natural habitats and in gardens. Infectious and non-infectious diseases can cause birds to die, and can be a welfare concern for affected birds. Sometimes deaths caused by disease may lead to wider population declines, and some infections of wild birds can also affect human and domestic animal health.

It is important to be able to recognise the signs of disease in wild birds, and adopt sensible hygiene measures at garden feeders, in order to reduce the risk of diseases being transmitted between individual birds and between different species.

Species that wouldn't normally meet in close proximity may congregate at garden feeders, or birds may gather at higher densities than seen in other habitats, both of which may increase the risk of disease transmission.



Collared Doves: Jill Pakenham

Prevention is better than cure

There are, unfortunately, many factors that make it difficult or impossible to treat disease in wild birds. It is much better to take action to help prevent disease transmission.

The most likely places for disease to spread in gardens are garden feeders and bird baths, which sick birds may contaminate with infectious material, such as saliva or droppings.

Here are some simple tips to reduce the risk of disease in your garden birds:

- Use several feeding stations to reduce the number of birds in any one place.
- Rotate the use of feeding stations so they're not all in constant use; rest periods can help reduce the accumulation of potentially infectious material under feeders.
- Avoid placing feeders under garden features where birds perch or roost; this will prevent contamination with droppings.
- Regularly clean and disinfect bird baths, feeders, feeding stations and hard surfaces under feeders with a suitable disinfectant. Rinse all surfaces with clean water and air-dry before using.
- Do not allow seed to accumulate, for example on the ground below feeders, and particularly on surfaces that are damp and/or contaminated with droppings.
- Provide a variety of good-quality fresh foods, and avoid over-filling feeders, to ensure they are emptied every few days. This will help to prevent old food building up.
- Provide clean drinking water on a daily basis.

Clean your feeders outside and maintain careful personal hygiene, including wearing gloves and making sure that brushes and buckets are not used for other purposes, as some diseases can affect human and domestic animal health.

Disease and hygiene at bird feeders

Some diseases that affect garden birds



House Sparrow: John Harding

Salmonellosis: This is caused by particular strains of *Salmonella* bacteria. It most often affects sociable, seed-eating garden birds such as Greenfinches and House Sparrows. Infected birds tend to show non-specific signs of ill-health, such as lethargy and fluffed-up plumage, and the disease can be fatal. *Salmonella* bacteria can persist in the environment for weeks or months. Infection is most likely to spread via infected bird droppings contaminating food or water sources.

Avian pox: This is caused by avian poxvirus. Historically this disease has most often affected Dunnocks, House Sparrows and Woodpigeons. Since 2006, however, birds in the tit family, in particular Great Tits, have also been affected. The most common signs of disease are warty or tumour-like skin growths. In many species these are relatively mild, but in tits the growths can become very large and impede the ability of birds to see, feed or move around. Birds can recover, but the condition affects survival by making them more susceptible to predation and other infections. Avian pox can be spread either by biting insects, direct bird-to-bird contact or indirect contact via contaminated surfaces such as feeding stations.



Great Tit with avian pox: Hazel Rothwell



Sick Greenfinch: Donna Gordon Stacey

Trichomonosis: This is caused by a parasite that typically causes disease at the back of the throat and in the gullet. Historically known to affect pigeons and doves, now the most commonly affected species are Greenfinches and Chaffinches. Infected birds show signs of general illness (such as lethargy and fluffed-up plumage). They may also drool, regurgitate food, and have difficulty breathing or swallowing, and the disease is often fatal. It is most likely to spread via food or water contaminated with infected saliva, or by birds feeding one another with regurgitated food.

Other diseases

There are a number of other diseases that affect garden birds. These include:

Leg abnormalities in finches can be caused by Chaffinch papillomavirus or by mites that can cause skin disease known as cnemidocoptosis. Mostly seen in Chaffinches, both diseases cause scaly growths on the foot, toes or up the leg.

Escherichia albertii is most commonly observed in sociable seed-eating birds such as finches. The infection typically affects the digestive tract. Infected birds tend to show non-specific signs of ill health such as lethargy and fluffed-up plumage.

Greenfinch numbers have fallen dramatically due to finch trichomonosis.



Greenfinches: Jill Pakenham

What is Garden BirdWatch?

You can record the birds and other wildlife in your garden with Garden BirdWatch, contributing to BTO research. Join our community and share your interest in garden wildlife. Garden BirdWatch is organised by the BTO.

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Disease and hygiene at bird feeders

What to do if you see a sick bird

Finding a sick or dead bird in your garden can be distressing. Here is some information about what to do if you see signs of disease.

Should I stop feeding?

If you see birds of any species that you suspect may be affected by disease in your garden, particularly if you see multiple sick or dead birds, we recommend that you temporarily stop feeding for at least two weeks in order to encourage birds to disperse, thereby reducing the chance of birds infecting each other at your feeding stations.

Only reintroduce feeding as long as you are no longer seeing birds with signs of disease, and closely watch for any further signs. If you see further signs of disease, once again stop feeding. We also recommend leaving bird baths empty until no further sick or dead birds are seen.

Can a diseased bird be treated?

Treatment is rarely an appropriate option. If you find a sick or injured bird that is capable of avoiding threats (such as domestic animals), it may be in the bird's best interests to be left in the wild.

However, if you become concerned about the welfare of an affected wild bird, we recommend contacting a local vet, or the RSPCA (England and Wales) or Scottish SPCA (Scotland) for advice. Please bear in mind that wild birds have unique requirements for survival after treatment and are relatively intolerant of prolonged captivity.



Chaffinch with leg abnormality: Luke Delve

Garden Wildlife Health (GWH)

Please report sickness or death in garden wildlife (birds, amphibians, reptiles or Hedgehogs) to the Garden Wildlife Health project so wildlife vets can help reach a diagnosis, where possible. Every report contributes to a national database of wildlife disease incidents, and every sample submitted is examined and then archived into one of the largest wildlife tissue banks in the world. These invaluable resources provide a solid grounding to study and safeguard the health of British garden wildlife.



Common Frogs: John Harding

Visit the website to report sightings of sick or dead wildlife, and to learn more about conditions affecting garden wildlife, and what steps you can take to reduce the risk of disease in your garden.

www.gardenwildlifehealth.org



Garden Wildlife Health (GWH) is a collaborative project between the Zoological Society of London (ZSL), the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), Froglife and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), and aims to monitor the health of, and identify disease threats to, British wildlife.



Great Tits: Jill Pakenham

British Great Tits are affected by a strain of avian pox that causes particularly severe skin lesions.

About the BTO

The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) is a charity with a vision of a world inspired by birds and informed by science. It harnesses the skills and passion of birdwatchers to advance our understanding of ornithology and produce impartial science, communicated so it can be of benefit to everyone.

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A BTO Garden BirdWatch guide

DISEASE AND HYGIENE AT BIRD FEEDERS



www.bto.org/gbw