



A FALTERING FINCH

He came in looking as if he had no eyes, a complete crust had formed over each eye until he could no longer see to eat or fly. Thankfully, his rescuers had seen him on their feeder and realized he didn't look quite right. When they were able to approach him without startling him, they decided to call us at Second Chance to ask about why a small bird might have no eyes but be fully grown and healthy looking otherwise. We quickly figured out we had another case of mycoplasma in a house finch and asked the citizens to bring him in as soon as possible.

Mycoplasma is a disease that has struck mainly the house finch family but can sometimes be found in other species. Similar to "pink eye" or conjunctivitis which attacks our human eyes, mycoplasma is a bacterial infection in the eyes and is highly contagious. Unfortunately, we can't keep house finches home from school to stop the spread of this infectious problem! Birds suffering from mycoplasma start out with their eyelids turning red and irritated, similar to ours. They soon have a build up of a crusty excretion around one or both eyes, none of which they can remove by cleaning themselves. Day after day their vision is more and more obstructed until the "crust" completely covers over the eye or eyes. They seem to handle the disappearing vision very calmly and thus escape notice by humans until they are almost or totally blind.

Thankfully, research has determined that a tetracycline based antibiotic diluted in water as the bird's only source of water for 21 days will not only fix the problem quite quickly, but also prevent the return of symptoms from the original infection. Unfortunately for us, it clears up the problem so quickly that we have almost three weeks of trying to prevent the finches from escaping and flying around the house every time we open their cage doors! This finch was no different.

After cleaning his eyes with saline so that he could see again, we noticed he was a little thin. This was likely due to his inability to see to find his food. We medicated him and placed him in a small cage with food and medicated water. After three or four days he suddenly darted out of his cage one morning during cleaning. From then on we could count on having a bird chase at least once if not twice each day. Clearly he was feeling just fine and did not understand why he had to stay locked up for his 21 day regimen of medication. Sadly, we don't speak house finch and could not explain.

Needless to say, the very minute his last day of medicine was over we rushed to let him fly free unfettered by doors and walls and people with nets. In the meantime, his citizen rescuers were encouraged to clean their bird feeders with white vinegar or a diluted Clorox bleach solution before filling it for the rest of the neighborhood. We must be vigilant to keep this highly contagious disease from spreading further. Keep your eye out for faltering finches at your birdfeeders and if you see a bird who looks as if he has no eyes, or just has red rimmed, irritated eyes, bring him in for treatment.

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