



HOUSE FINCHES AND MYCOPLASMOSIS, A STUDY OF SUCCESS!

by Brittany Davis, Staff

This past fall we received 25 House Finches (*Carpodacus mexicanus*), with 22 of them showing symptoms of sinusitis and conjunctivitis. What could be causing these outbreaks of finchy Pink-Eye? Mycoplasmosis, or to be more specific, *Mycoplasma gallisepticum*, which is a parasitic bacteria that feeds off the mucal membranes of the birds' eyes and nasal cavities.

Gross, right? In domestic and game fowl, this bacterium causes chronic respiratory disease (CRD) but in the House Finch, the eyes redden, swell, and then begin to weep. The eye's discharge dries around the eye, eventually building up so that the bird can no longer open its eye(s), which is not helpful in locating food and avoiding predators. Most of the House Finches that come to our Center have been found at the bird feeders of concerned citizens.

After the initial patient exam is through and our rehabbers have assessed the severity of the Mycoplasmosis, the birds get their eye(s) flushed with warm saline and any and all discharge is cleaned off. A steroidal antibiotic ointment is spread in and around the eye(s) to help fight infection, and decrease the swelling and redness. If the bird's eyes are so swollen that s/he still cannot see, fluids are given subcutaneously (under the skin) and a medication log for a tetracycline antibiotic is written. If, after the eyes are cleaned, the House Finch can see, it will immediately bite the rehabber with its strong, sharp beak, usually on the cuticle.

Once the exam is over and the treatments have been given, we place our House Finches in a medium-sized cage set up with perches, all the foods they could ever desire, and our magical medicated water. Actually not magical, but just water mixed with a tylosin antibiotic, it is available for them to drink and bathe in for 21 days. As we have found House Finches to be mostly non-confrontational, we can even place them in groups of three or four in larger cages, which helps to limit the area of Mycoplasmosis in our Center.

Being the successful bacterium that it is, Mycoplasmosis is spread through contact, both direct and indirect. This means that if an infected House Finch comes to your feeder, it can infect other birds by touching them (direct) or by touching the bird feeder which is then touched by other birds (indirect). Because this strain of Mycoplasmosis does well in warm and wet months, it is most prevalent in the spring and fall. This is also when the birds are most active, either gathering food for their demanding babies or gathering food to increase their winter fat supply. Both activities greatly increase their probability of contracting the bacterium.

From mid-September 2006 until the end of the year, SCWC received 22 House Finches with Mycoplasmosis. Of those, 15 (68%) made it through the process of medication and rehabilitation and were successfully released back into the wild. Because much of this treatment is "hands off," the birds are less stressed than they would be if we had to personally medicate them daily. Less stressed birds equal birds who heal quicker because they are not immunosuppressed. Plus sharing your cage with a compatriot and all the fruit and seeds you can eat helps.

Want to help lessen the chances of Pink-Eye at your birdfeeders? Wash your bird feeders and baths with a diluted bleach solution (about two tablespoons of bleach per gallon of warm water) once a month during the year and once a week during times of heavy activity. Give us a call if you have any questions.

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