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by Ralph Cooper, D.V.M.

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CANARY POX

It seems that canary pox has come along to displace Newcastle Disease and psittacosis from the center of attention among local breeders. There is no doubt that it can cause a disaster among infected flocks, but there are some positive measures which can be taken to minimize its impact. Because it is always helpful to understand the true nature of a disease in order that rational and effective measures may be taken to prevent its spread and minimize the losses, I would like to discuss the disease in some detail.

Canary pox, which was called avian diphtheria in some of the old books on bird diseases, is caused by a virus. The pox group of viruses includes individual strains which are usually adapted to only a single species such as chickens, turkeys, pigeons, canaries, and parrots. Thus it is that the pox of chickens doesn't infect canaries, that of canaries doesn't infect parrots, that of parrots doesn't infect turkeys, etc. This generality doesn't apply to all of the known strains and there are well documented instances where a single strain of canary pox virus will infect chickens and pigeons and will also kill sparrows. The practical consequence of this situation is that if you keep canaries and cockatiels in the same flight, and if the canaries come down with the disease, the cockatiels probably won't become infected. The pox virus varies in its effects on canaries from very mild to lethal. Most reports have emphasized the very high mortality which was suffered, ranging upwards to one hundred percent.

The virus may be introduced into your flock by way of an apparently healthy but infected new bird or by infected mosquitoes. It may also be carried in by visitors or by you on your clothes or your person. If you religiously observe a thirty day quarantine period for all new birds, this is one of the diseases which will be avoided. If your friend invites you to have a look at his canaries which are dying from a strange disease, perhaps canary pox, you should not go near your own

birds until you have showered, changed to clean clothes, and cleaned your shoes. The pox virus is very hardy and may last more than a year at normal temperatures.

Mosquitoes are very effective carriers of the virus and readily spread it from an infected bird to a clean bird. If your canaries are in an outdoor aviary, you would be well advised to screen the flight and perhaps hang a Shell Pest Strip inside.

If your birds become infected, the disease will usually manifest itself in two different ways. In the most obvious case, sores or scabs will appear on the featherless areas such as the eyelids, corners of the mouth, legs, and feet. If the virus happens to be a mild one, the bird will be sick for a time and then recover. It may lose a toe, but otherwise will totally recover. More commonly however, the bird's condition will worsen and it will die, in spite of anything you can do for it.

The other common form involves the internal mucous membranes of the mouth and upper respiratory system. This is the so called wet pox and is usually more deadly than the external skin form of dry pox. The lesions may appear as white or yellow cheesy linings in the mouth or they may be seen as a plug which obstructs the opening of the windpipe. Any single outbreak may involve one or the other or a mixture of both. Death may even occur in the absence of any visible lesions. The pox virus alone is quite capable of causing death. If it should be joined by other infectious agents, or if the bird's environment is not supportive, the combined effect will be to hasten death in the individual and to cause a higher flock mortality.

When the disease is diagnosed in your flock, there are a number of steps which should be taken to minimize losses. The environment of the birds should be modified so as to assure their comfort. Mosquitoes must be excluded if rapid spread is to be avoided. Any sick birds should be removed and well isolated from the apparently well birds. To the extent that it is feasible, the birds should be segreg-

gated into small isolated groups. All precautions should be taken to avoid the physical transfer of the virus from cage to cage. The birds should have ready access to good feed and clean water. It would be helpful to add a complete vitamin preparation to the feed or water. If bacterial agents are found to be a complicating factor, appropriate antibiotics may reduce the total losses. Skin lesions may be treated once or twice each day with applications of 2% tincture of iodine, a 1% to 3% solution of mercurochrome in 70% alcohol with a trace of acetone, or other suitable antimicrobials. Unfortunately, even if all of these supportive measures are taken, losses may still be excessive and may approach 100%.

When the outbreak has run its course, say in three weeks or so, the decision needs to be made as to whether to keep the survivors or to destroy them as a potential hazard to newly acquired birds. Many species of birds have been demonstrated to be inapparent carriers of the virus after recovery. Thus far, this has not

been shown to be the case with canaries, in fact the contrary has been the case. In the face of conflicting evidence, each case must be decided on its own merits. Certainly it is true that the recovered bird is immune to further infection and as such represents a potentially valuable member of the breeding flock. This fact introduces the question of preventing the disease by vaccination. Vaccination is widely used by chicken and pigeon raisers to reduce the losses due to pox. There are a number of reports of the effectiveness of specially prepared vaccines against canary pox. Unfortunately, none are currently available in the United States. More than a year ago, during another upsurge in the number of canary pox infections, I tried to encourage a local vaccine producer to investigate the potential market for a canary pox vaccine. After he had discussed the situation with several local breeders, he decided that the market wasn't sufficiently attractive to justify the research and development time and money which would be required.

There is one other vaccine producer in Davis, California, who should be approached by interested breeders before the idea is abandoned. I will be happy to put any interested breeder or group representative in touch with him.

At least one veterinarian in Southern California is vaccinating birds with a pigeon pox vaccine. Unfortunately, he has only been able to vaccinate birds in flocks which have already been infected. Ideally, any vaccine should be given several weeks before the birds might be expected to be exposed. I could find no references in the literature as to the effectiveness of pigeon pox vaccine against canary pox. In fact, to date the results have been to the contrary. I have just today offered to supply some canary pox virus to the veterinarian who will use it to test the effectiveness of the pigeon pox vaccine on some canaries in his care. If it is found to be effective, its value to the canary breeders would be substantial. It deserves this kind of test of its efficiency.

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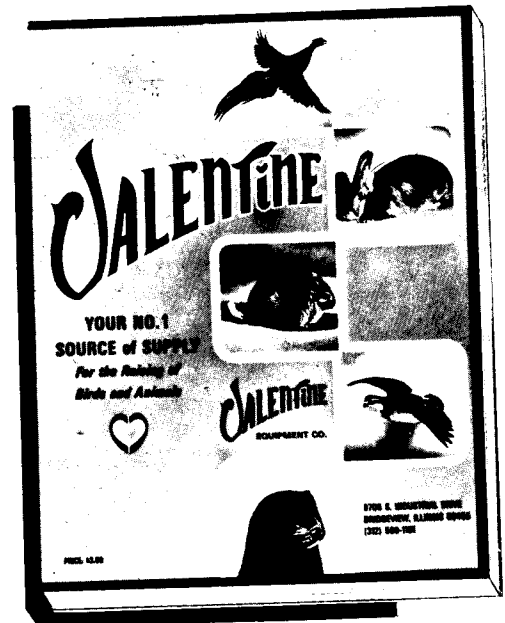
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