

Avian flu haunts Europe (An update at February 20th 2006)

The recent rapid spread of Avian flu in Western Europe in waterfowl was probably caused by birds moving in response to severe weather in the Black Sea region (possibly Ukraine), where the disease has been present since last October.

Another, less likely, possibility is that the virus is much more widespread than previously thought and swans are simply acting as 'indicators'. Because of their size and colour, they are easily spotted and sick or dead individuals are more likely to be reported to the authorities than other species.

It is now clear that wild birds can spread the disease across international boundaries. The immediate risk to the UK depends on the prevailing weather in central and eastern Europe and how far the disease has spread so far.

Mute swans in the UK are not migratory, but there is a possibility that further severe weather could cause some birds to continue their westward movement to our shores. If conditions ease, birds will retreat to where they have come from. Spring migration is almost upon us, and our wintering ducks and geese (the waterfowl which appear to be the most likely carriers of H5N1) will move north and east away from the UK.

The risk that wild birds could carry the virus to the UK in the medium term is difficult to quantify. However, the continued geographic spread of the virus, particularly the outbreak in the Baltic, must mean that the risk of birds returning to the UK with the virus next autumn is higher than it has been to date.

There is now a small risk from birds arriving this Spring from Africa – we do have some waterfowl that overfly Nigeria where cases have been reported, but very small numbers – Garganey (60 pairs), black headed gull, whimbrel, common sandpiper, black tailed godwit. The 100,000s passerines/songbirds arriving via N Africa are unlikely to carry the virus or survive long enough to spread it (research has shown seven days from infection to death in small birds).

It is reckoned that the virus viable in faeces for at least 7 days. If avian flu arrived in UK (through wild birds or trade) there is a risk that birds such as starlings would carry it from holding to holding on feet.

There is now growing justification for a programme of preventive vaccination in commercial poultry. The technical feasibility of this approach must be re-examined urgently to ensure vaccination could be applied practically and that it poses no risk of masking symptoms.

This is obviously a fast-moving and fluid issue. For further updates visit the EFRC website – www.efrc.com or www.organicresearchcentre.com

