

Red Mite: an enemy best avoided!

Without any doubt, one of the most traumatic experiences my father have had in budgerigars was a few years ago when we discovered that our aviary had red mite. Anyone who has visited our aviary will know that we try to maintain a very high standard of hygiene. The aviary is steam cleaned twice per year and all apparatus is thoroughly disinfected on a regular basis. However, one hot summer's day, while my father was sunning himself in Cyprus, I opened a nest box and noticed something was not quite right.

The chicks were not looking as healthy as they should have and the mother seemed to be very irritable. We use a box in a box nest box design and I noticed that the inside of the nest box was smeared with red dots. I suddenly realized, we had red mite!

I acted as quickly as I could, disinfecting the cage that I spotted the first case and the whole birdroom thereafter. I took down as many nest boxes as possible and continued to disinfect everything in sight with our trusty vircon-s. Unfortunately, the problem just got worse.

Every time disinfectant was applied, day in day out, more red mite came to the surface. On my father's return from holiday, the aviary was virtually emptied and steam cleaned... twice! However, despite our best efforts, the red mite still remained in place albeit at reduced numbers from the first few days of the outbreak.

My father did eventually find a cure. He spoke with his friends in the poultry industry and was told about a disinfectant that the free range egg producers were using in the nest boxes to keep red mite under control. This product was commonly sprayed inside the hen's laying boxes on a daily basis and apparently posed no threat to the health of the birds. Without further delay, my father sprayed the whole aviary with the product. Thankfully, he stayed in the aviary for an hour doing other jobs when right before his eyes, birds started dropping off the perch and taking what appeared to be fits. By the time my father had ran into the house to alert me, at least 20 birds were dead and I would say another 40 or so were taking fits. My initial thoughts were that obviously something was reacting with the chemical and causing the birds terminal distress. Therefore, I considered when a reaction goes badly wrong in a laboratory, a sprinkler system is on standby to neutralise an unanticipated reaction. We grabbed the spray canisters and immediately started spraying everything in sight with tap water. By sheer luck, birds that were lying on their backs taking violent fits were now calm and more importantly...alive (albeit a bit wet!). We lost 30 or so birds that day, mainly those in the breeding cages and given that they were pairs which we had kept breeding late into the year because they were doing

so well, you can appreciate that they were some of the most important in our aviary. The only conclusion that would seem to make sense was that something in the disinfectant had reacted with the broken seal of the melamine plastic sheets that we use to make our breeding cages and flight perch panels. Where the perch is drilled into the plastic, the reaction could have drawn from the broken seal because we noticed that all of the birds affected had been sat on perches towards the back of the cage or on the perch flight panels.

It goes without saying that my father and I never want to repeat the experience of red mite again. Therefore, we have adapted our aviary hygiene routine to do our very best to make sure that red mite will never strike again. The old saying that prevention is better than cure is certainly true when it comes to this pest.

Taking stock of what happened, before the red mite struck, there were a lot of moths in our aviary. We suspect that the moths brought in the first red mite which eventually led to the pandemic we had. Therefore, we went in search of the Vaypona strips that we used to use in order to make moths in the birdroom a thing of the past. Unfortunately, thanks to European regulations, Vaypona strips had been banned. Thankfully, one of our local agricultural suppliers introduced us to Rentokill strips. These are very similar if not identical to the old Vaypona strips but obviously do not contain the chemical banned by Europe. We use 30 of these strips in our aviary and replace them every three months. In order to keep track of this timescale, we write the date of introduction of each strip. Since this procedure was adopted, my father and I cannot recall a single moth finding its way into our aviary.

The pandemic taught us that red mite thrived in nooks and crannies where they could not be got at. Therefore, we made various alterations throughout the aviary to do away with as many enclosed spaces as possible. For example, the main block of breeding cages was boxed in from the floor to the bottom of the set of cages as well as blocked off from the top of the cages to the ceiling. These were removed and the main block of cages is now supported on brackets with the air free to circulate thus removing perfect hiding places and breeding ground for red mite.

The nest box where the initial infestation all started provided perfect breeding ground for the mite. They could feed off the chicks and breed relatively unnoticed. In order to prevent this from happening again, we introduced a red mite powder, which is placed in the nest box and mixed in with the sawdust. This is replaced after each round and provides another barrier to fend off the potentially disastrous mite.

If you have never had red mite, I sincerely hope that it remains that way. However, if you have been unfortunate enough to experience the trauma of this infestation, all of the above will sound very familiar....like a horrible nightmare that you can not forget about. Taking account of the threat posed by red mite, I would encourage all fanciers to adopt as many preventative measures as possible against this truly horrible creature.

