

NORTHERN FOWL MITES AND COMMERCIAL BROILERS

Dr. Lindsay Kehler

Recently, we have begun to see Northern Fowl Mites parasitizing commercial broiler chickens. These parasites have not commonly been reported as an issue for broilers in the past.

Northern Fowl Mites are a general parasite of birds, being found on domestic fowl, sparrows, swallows and many other avian species. They are more commonly a problem for longer-lived birds such as layers, breeders, range turkeys and pheasants. These mites are known to flourish in cool weather. In general, they live on the skin of birds and feed on blood causing anemia, itching, irritation, reduced feed intake, weight loss and reduced egg production.

The cases of Northern Fowl Mite parasitism recently seen in broilers have not resulted in anemia; however, they have shown to cause inflammation and irritation of the skin, and in some cases, a secondary bacterial infection of the skin. Although the impact of mites on commercial broiler chickens is largely unknown, it would not be a stretch to suggest that the presence of these mites may increase stress levels, possibly reduce feed intake and therefore negatively impact feed conversion and performance.

Susceptibility of birds seems to vary. Some birds in the flock can have a heavy infestation while mites may not be found on other birds. In broilers, the proximal thigh area seems to be where the largest numbers of mites can be found. The mites seen on broilers appear sand-coloured and are very small, almost discernible without magnification. It may look like there is a large amount of dirt on the bird.

The reason for the sudden occurrence of mite parasitism in broilers and the source of the mites is still unknown; however, they may be introduced to a poultry facility from:

- The presence of wild birds in, or around the buildings
- Rodents carrying the parasite from one flock to another or one barn to another
- Mechanical vectors (people, equipment, bedding, etc)

Consequently, good biosecurity practices are essential for control. All life stages occur on the bird, but mites can survive for a few weeks off of the bird so they have the potential to be present cycle after cycle. If mites are found to be present in the barn, cleaning and disinfecting, along with the use of an appropriate insecticide, is important during down time.

Northern Fowl mites are capable of crawling onto humans who come into contact with them and may even bite humans causing irritation and small red bumps on the skin. However, they are not capable of living on humans and are more of a nuisance than a human health concern.