

# THE WILDLIFE VETERINARY INVESTIGATION CENTRE

## CHRISTMAS NEWSLETTER 2008

### ANOTHER DIFFICULT YEAR

In mid 2007, following Government imposed cuts to their budget, the Environment Agency ceased to fund our research on otters. Then, in April this year we were advised that there was no longer any financial support for examining birds under the Garden Bird Health initiative (GBHi). The net result is we are no longer able to employ an assistant veterinary surgeon. This, together with serious family health problems, has meant that the work of the WVIC has had to be restricted. Nevertheless, 134 specimens were examined, including:

Finches and sparrows	14
Bats	30
Red squirrels	25
Otters	5

Unusual specimens included a marsh harrier from Yorkshire and 2 water voles from Somerset.

### GARDEN BIRD DEATHS

Trichomoniasis is a parasitic disease normally associated with pigeons and, less frequently, birds of prey. In 2005 it started to affect finches and sparrows and over the last three years has become a major cause of mortality. The microscopic parasites invade the lining to the mouth and crop where they cause severe ulceration. Affected birds continue to try to eat but cannot swallow. They sit fluffed up around feeding stations until they die or are killed by a predator. All members of the finch family are affected but greenfinches have been worst hit. Outbreaks seem to be closely linked to **summer** feeding of sunflower and niger. Very few finches were submitted in 2008 but trichomoniasis was diagnosed in 4 of 5 greenfinches, 2 of 3 chaffinches and 1 of 3 bullfinches. A post mortem examination is essential to differentiate trichomoniasis from other diseases, e.g. salmonellosis.

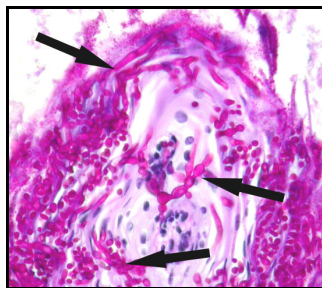
### RAPTORS

Lesions of trichomoniasis were seen in an emaciated male sparrowhawk and in

an 18 month old peregrine from the Isles of Scilly. Both cases were probably due to them eating infected prey. A marsh harrier bred in Norfolk was found grounded in Yorkshire. It had a broken wing and had to be euthanased as the prognosis was hopeless. PM examination showed no evidence that it had been shot but the cause of the fracture was not established.

### RED SQUIRRELS

The UK red squirrel population is in serious decline but, apart from poxvirus carried by grey squirrels, we know little about the diseases that affect them. This year, tissue samples and bodies of 25 squirrels from the Isle of Wight, Jersey and the Scottish Highlands have been examined. Traumatic injuries, mostly due to road traffic and cat and dog bites, were common but candidiasis or 'thrush' caused the death of a juvenile from Dundee.



View down microscope of *Candida* yeast (arrows) invading the surface of the tongue of young red squirrel

Investigations into deaths due to skin disease on the IoW and Jersey are currently underway.

### BATS

The majority of bats, as usual, were pipistrelles (24) with small numbers of lesser horseshoe (2), Natterer's (2), whiskered (1) but only one brown long eared. Sue and Chris Harlow, who have a bat hospital at Threemilestone, submitted most of them. They are a pleasure to work with, delivering most specimens freshly dead or dying and always with exemplary paperwork. Approximately half the bats had been mauled by cats but many of these were

in very poor condition, presumably because of the appalling weather this summer. Blunt trauma, possibly due to collision with vehicles, was also a common cause of death. Although there was little evidence of disease, there were several very interesting cases, including two with previously undescribed bacterial diseases: further research on these is ongoing. However, this is not being helped by a decision by the Veterinary Laboratories Agency to refuse to examine any samples taken from bats.

### PROMOTION

Due to family health problems, Vic was unable to attend any conferences this year, although in January he did attend Cambridge University to give a lecture and train veterinary students in post mortem technique. In February the WVIC hosted a Cornwall Otter Group event organised by Kate Stokes. In the same month we had an undergraduate from Liverpool Vet School come to learn about bile flukes and in July a post graduate veterinarian spent two weeks at the WVIC gaining experience in pathology. Vic has also been busy writing, producing a section for a new book on wildlife diseases and several scientific papers, including ones on wildlife as reservoirs of disease in humans, bile fluke pathology and candidiasis in a red squirrel.

### STAFFING

We said farewell to Alex Howie when she left to take up a permanent job this summer. Imogen Ahern continues to give us a hand in emergencies.

- and 'THANK YOU' to everyone who helps the Wildlife VIC, whether it is sending us wildlife casualties, making a donation or providing a service.



HAPPY CHRISTMAS!