International Poultry Production

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Introduction

The northern fowl mite (Ornithonyssus sylviarum) is an important mite in table egg layers, breeders, outdoor turkeys and pheasants. This mite feeds on blood and can cause anaemia, scratching, itching and depressed egg production (usually no more than a 15% drop).

The infection

Typically, infestation starts in the vent region and proceeds to the tail, back and legs in females. In males the mites are more randomly scattered around the bird's body. The most obvious sign of infestation in hens is a darkening of feathers and scab formation in the vent region.

This mite flourishes in colder climates and often becomes established in large numbers after the birds have become sexually mature. Older birds appear to develop a resistance to mite infestation.

The life cycle

Egg › larva › two nymphal stages › adult.

This can be completed within one week and the whole cycle occurs on the host. Mites can survive for several weeks off the host and, in the case of caged layers, can move along the cage wires to infest birds in other cages. Rodents and wild birds can play a role in the spread of this parasitic mite.

Management and control

Effective chemical control necessitates direct application of the acaricide (a substance which kills mites) to the vent region of birds. It also needs to penetrate their feathers so the acaricide gets to the skin. Needless to say, this is often easier said than done!

It is usually the younger birds that carry the largest populations and need treating. Often, older birds do not carry a heavy enough infestation per se to justify treatment, but treatment of such birds might be necessary as part of the control strategy on multi-age farms.

Equipment on a farm can carry mites so each house should have its own equipment so that it does not have to move between poultry houses. Staff should move from mite free areas to infested areas and not vice versa.