

## Dealing with common poultry parasites

Source: Jacquie Jacob and Tony Pescatore, UK extension poultry specialists

A variety of parasites attack poultry by either sucking blood or feeding on their skin, and feathers. Knowing what pests may be bugging your flock will help you figure out how to deal with the problem. Continuous external parasites are ones that spend their entire adult life on their host. Temporary parasites feed on, but do not live on, their host.

### Some continuous external parasites include:

**Northern fowl mite:** The most common external parasite in chickens, turkeys, game birds, pigeons etc., northern fowl mites are commonly spread through bird contact. Signs of infestation depend on severity. Heavy infestation can cause anemia. Chickens may lose weight and exhibit decreased feed intake and egg production and a lower carcass quality. Look for dark patches on the feathers and on the skin around the vent area. They are fast movers and leave behind a lot of fecal material. They are usually more of a problem in cooler months. “No Mite Strips” are an effective way to control this mite in your flock. Some powdered insecticides also work, but you need to read the labels very carefully. Organic producers may want to use something like diatomaceous earth as a natural insect preventative. The lifecycle of these mites is five to seven days, so growers will need to be vigilant in repeating treatments to prevent a large infestation.

**Sticktight fleas:** Although they are called fleas, they are stationary compared to other fleas. They burrow; females attach to the skin around the face and wattles to lay eggs. Sticktight flea larvae develop in the soil around chicken cages, and a few weeks later, adult fleas emerge to continue their lifecycle. If you raise chickens in wire cages three or more feet above the ground, you won’t usually have a large sticktight flea infestation. You can use Sevin dust on the fleas and on the litter. An alternative treatment method is to coat the adult fleas with petroleum jelly.

**Scaly leg mites:** These mites burrow into and live under the scales of the feet, lifting the scales and deforming the feet. Chickens in wire cages three feet or more above the ground don’t usually have problems with these mites. Prevention is easier than treatment, so you should inspect new birds before adding them to your flock. These mites are frequently picked up at poultry shows, so you should treat all chickens upon returning from a show. You can treat scaly leg mites by dipping chickens’ legs in linseed oil or petroleum jelly at 7-day intervals for three weeks. Never use fuel oil, kerosene, motor oil or other liquid petroleum products on chickens. Even after mites are dead, the swollen and deformed look may remain.

**Chicken lice:** Lice feed on blood and other fluids, and they cause birds to become restless. That feeling adversely affects feed intake, digestion, growth and egg production. Young birds have a tougher time with lice. Lice tend to be more abundant in unclean, overcrowded conditions. Pesticides used for Northern fowl mites will usually control lice. Temporary parasites can also be annoying and hard to control. A number of blood-sucking external parasites feed on chickens, but they don’t actually take up permanent residence. After feeding, they usually leave the host and hide in the floor and walls of the housing near the host. The most common are:

**Fowl ticks:** These soft ticks are also known as blue bugs. They are very different from ticks found on dogs and cats. Fowl ticks are reddish brown to dark brown, and they have wrinkled skin. Female fowl ticks lay several batches of eggs, usually 30 to 100 eggs per batch, sometimes 700 to 800 eggs in her lifetime. They need a blood meal to produce each batch. If conditions are right, ticks grow from egg to adult in about 30 days. Adults are extremely resistant to starvation and can live more than a year without a blood meal.

**Chicken mites:** Also known as red mites or roost mites, they are often confused with the Northern fowl mite, but these mites do not spend their entire life on their host. Chicken mites are pretty small, but you can see them, and they are typically visible in large numbers.

**Bed bugs:** Typically found in large numbers, adults are reddish brown and can completely engorge on hosts in about 5 to 10 minutes. All of these temporary parasites cause similar damage. You will probably see birds with bloody lesions of various sizes. Changes in poultry housing have almost eliminated these three main temporary parasites from commercial flocks. However, they do sometimes appear in small flocks of chickens, other poultry, or exotic birds such as parakeets and cockatiels. Because they are so rare now, it may be difficult to find pesticides labeled specifically for treating them. There are a few things you can do to minimize them. You need to eliminate cracks and crevices where these pests shelter. Prevent wild birds and rodents from entering with screens or other barriers. Treatment should include a thorough cleaning and sanitizing of the poultry house. You can detect any parasites by examining your flock on a regular basis. Early detection really helps control any problems that may occur.

To learn more about poultry parasites, contact the Leslie County Cooperative Extension Service or Ray Wilson at 672-2154.