

The go-slow disease – Malaria parasites

(Hannes Grove – www.grovelofts.co.za)

Red blood cells are vertebrate's principal means of delivering oxygen to muscle tissue. If this ability is hampered, there is a shortage of oxygen which in turn means under-performance. In pigeon racing this means you are “off the pace” by a few minutes. The pigeons look well but the performance is sub-standard.

Malaria does exactly that – the parasite attacks red blood cells and destroys them. This means less oxygen gets to the muscle tissue and thus your pigeon cannot perform to it's ability.

Many fanciers are unaware of the most common type of malaria found in pigeons. Interestingly enough the common culprit in racing pigeons is not the same one that is such a huge problem for humans.

Two types

There are two main types of malaria parasites – Plasmodium and Haemoproteus (pseudo-malaria).

The life threatening type of malaria is the one caused by the Plasmodium protozoa. It's not commonly found in racing pigeons though.

Pigeon fanciers' malaria problem is normally caused by the Haemoproteus protozoa. I will focus on this one for the sake of the article.

How it works

The protozoa enters your pigeon's bloodstream via a carrier like the pigeon fly (jockey) or mosquito. Once in the bloodstream they will move to tissue and start multiplying (usually in organs like the liver). After this they will move back into the bloodstream again and start attacking the red blood cells. As they continue on their path of destruction, the host will start suffering from anemia – a shortage of red blood cells to carry oxygen. This is when the performance of the team drops.

How do I diagnose an infection?

Malaria is easily diagnosed by taking a blood smear, and checking it using a microscope. Avian vets can do this check for you in a few minutes. It's a cheap test to do and can save you a lot of disappointment.

Prevention

Preventing malaria is easier said than done. Our pigeons are basketed with other pigeons on a weekly basis. The “jockeys” can freely move between pigeons in the panniers.

Ensure your birds are the least favourite host to visit! Spray them with avian spray containing Permethrin. Dose them with avian back drops that contains Ivermectin.

If you ever see a “jockey” on your pigeons – spray every pigeon in your yard with Permethrin spray. Do not forget about the stock loft!

As a safety measure always get your stock and racing pigeons tested at least once a year to ensure the flock is clean of malaria. This disease is not easily eliminated once you have it in your loft.

Cure

Positive diagnosis of Pseudo malaria requires a full treatment with a Chloroquin based drug. The parasites are clever though – they hide away in the liver tissue and other organs where the drug cannot easily reach them. Some sources suggest to follow up the Chloroquin treatment with Primaquin.

It is however thought that once you have contracted malaria in your loft, you will never get rid of it completely. That is why many fanciers frequently do a preventative treatment to keep the number of parasites in the bloodstream down.

Please note that malaria treatment are heavy on the liver of the pigeons. Administer liver stimulants to protect the liver.

Tip

When your pigeons struggles to find the route home when tossing them and also circles very low – get them tested for malaria!