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Lyme Disease-bearing ticks can fly in on birds

Ask Dr. Watts - Dr. Michael Watts/Vet Care, clevengerscorner.com

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Everyone knows that ticks have the potential for carrying some pretty serious diseases to our pets. What you may not know is that these bloodthirsty parasites may be arriving in your backyard after traveling by air!

Robins and many other songbirds are often the heralds of springtime and warmer weather just around the corner. Unfortunately, a new report is stating these welcome spring visitors are quite possibly spreading a serious disease of humans and pets ... Lyme Disease.

Ticks are the primary vector for spreading Lyme Disease to people, dogs, and horses. Most ticks acquire the disease-causing bacteria by feeding on infected rodents. Deer also play an important role as expanding populations import large numbers of ticks into new areas of the country.

But now, researchers at Yale have found that robins, blue jays and other common birds are also reservoirs of this illness. Furthermore, the nymph and larval stages of the tick life cycle can be carried by the birds across distances and into the yards where pets and people often roam. What this means is that the heralded robin of spring could be leaving their parasite passengers and Lyme Disease in your backyard.

Human cases of Lyme Disease have more than doubled in the last two decades and pet cases, especially among dogs, appear to be more common as well. Dr. Michael Dryden, a well-known flea and tick expert, has stated that one reason could be a rise in tick populations due to more suitable habitats.

Veterinarians are well equipped to discover and treat this disease. An in-clinic test kit is available that finds antibodies to several tick-borne diseases, including Lyme Disease. Animals with positive results are usually started on a course of antibiotics depending on the presence or severity of clinical signs.

Pet owners have several different options to help prevent tick exposure. One of the most economical and satisfying ways to keep pets safe from ticks is to spend a little time each day brushing and grooming your pet. Experts agree that the Lyme bacteria needs about 18-24 hours in order to transmit to your pet, so a little daily pampering with brush and comb could find ticks before they can cause disease!

However, regular grooming is not enough. Many pet owners mistakenly believe that since they do not see any ticks, their dogs are not being exposed. However, even in people, 40 percent of patients diagnosed with Lyme disease do not realize they ever had a tick on their own body.

These ticks are so tiny, that the vast majority of pet owners will never see them. Believe me when I tell you that they are biting your dog.

I commonly see fluffy little house dogs that test positive for Lyme.

Together with regularly checking for ticks, properly used veterinary-quality tick control is your pet's best defense. Products like Frontline spot-on and Preventic collars give excellent disease prevention by killing ticks before the bacteria can be transmitted.

You should always follow your veterinarian's advice for these products as some of them, especially those sold over the counter, can be harmful to cats.

Vaccines to prevent Lyme Disease from occurring in dogs are also available. Recombinant vaccines, like Recombitek, are genetically engineered wonders of modern science. They contain only a single protein, almost eliminating adverse reactions.

When the tick begins to feed, the dog's vaccine antibodies against lock the bacteria inside the tick, preventing transmission. In other words, we now have a safe, effective Lyme vaccine that works inside the tick, not the dog.

Even though ticks might be flying into your yard, the protection for your pets doesn't have to be "fly by night." Working with your veterinarian, you can find the safest and most effective plan for keeping your pets tick free.

Thank you to Veterinary News Network for contributing material for this week's column. Readers can learn more about Lyme Disease and the ticks that carry this illness by visiting lymeprevention.com.

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