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Introduction

Syngamus trachea is the cause of the respiratory disease 'gapes' and is commonly seen in pheasants but can be seen in other poultry, such as free range chickens and turkeys. The worm lives in the bird's trachea, bronchi and bronchioles and it is the irritation that induces gaping and the term 'gapes'.

The parasite

S. trachea are commonly known as 'red' worms because of their colour, or 'forked' worms because the male and female are often in copulatory lock and appear as a 'Y'. They appear as a 'Y' because the male is significantly shorter than the female (2-6 vs. 5-20mm long).

Transmission can be direct, via the eating of embryonated eggs or infective larvae, or indirect by eating earthworms or other invertebrates containing *S. trachea* larvae.

Eggs pass up the trachea and then pass down the digestive tract to be finally voided in the faeces. Eggs hatch in one or two weeks and the resulting larvae can live in the soil for some time where they can infect earthworms.

When consumed by the bird the larvae penetrate the wall of the oesophagus or crop and migrate to the lungs. Sometimes they penetrate the duodenum and then they migrate to the lungs via the blood stream.

The adult stage develops in a further five days and eggs are produced within two weeks.

Pathogenicity

Young birds are the most severely affected by this worm and rapidly growing worms can block the trachea and cause death by suffocation. The tracheas of infected birds become irritated and inflamed. Lesions are typically only found in the tracheas of guinea fowls and pheasants and can be described as inflammatory nodules.

Treatment

In feed thiabendazole is usually an effective treatment but other wormers such as mebendazole, cambendazole and levamisole have been used with success.

One of the problems is that this worm can contribute to 'poultry sick' ground and sometimes it is best to treat and move birds to clean ground. Obviously, this is not always possible.