

# Current impacts of avian flu on the pet bird trade

By CRISTIANA SENNI

Getting to grips with the potential threat of avian flu has been a very gradual and at times difficult process for many aviculturists and pet owners. The onset of the first outbreaks in Asia, at the end of 2003, went virtually unnoticed in the rest of the world. As avian flu kept spreading in Asia and then in Europe it increasingly attracted the attention of the media worldwide with its toll of human and avian lives.

It was largely considered a disease affecting only wild birds and poultry, until, at the end of October 2005, it was announced that an H5 highly pathogenic flu virus was isolated in a dead parrot in a UK private quarantine.

The implications of that single incident had huge consequences on the European bird trade. In a matter of days all commercial imports of birds in Europe were stopped, and shortly after, the European Commission banned birds at markets, shows and fairs, unless a special authorization licence is granted.

Many aviculturists and pet owners have become increasingly concerned, and their questions on avian flu and on the risks that it may represent for their birds are starting to appear on many bird forums and e-mail lists.

The reactions to this potential threat vary greatly, due to the fact that a number of media reports don't promote a clear understanding of the risks as avian flu approaches Western Europe. There are those who fear that their household pet birds

could suddenly start to transmit the disease, or a few pet stores have rapidly given away their birds, meanwhile a minority of staunch sceptics refuses to believe that avian flu could ever represent a risk at all. But in most cases, there remains a hunger for more information and advice on how to best protect ourselves, our families, and our pets from the potential risk of transmission.

The effects of all these events on the trade were quite sudden. The flow of imported birds, both wild-caught and captive-bred, came to an immediate stop. Many bird fairs have still been authorized, but in some cases the sales have been restricted or not allowed. In reading several forums of bird breeders, it is quite evident that the general mood among them is not very positive. While a minority express some anger at the EU decision to ban imports, many are mostly concerned about the increasing difficulties in selling their birds. Compared to last year, the public visiting bird fairs was noticeably reduced, and many pet stores are not willing to buy birds as their clients no longer view them as desirable pets.

Although many of the fears concerning avian flu and domestic captive-bred pet birds are not currently justified, the conflicting information on many aspects of this disease has created some understandable confusion. That confusion will likely result in a substantial reduction of birds in trade for the months - or maybe years - to come.

## What to do about the flu part two...

By JAMIE GILARDI

**As anyone who has read a newspaper in the last few months can attest, the flu stories from around the world have been flying in fast and furious. In the August *PsittaScene* we attempted to provide basic background about H5N1 avian influenza, and we made some predictions about the arrival of this virus in Europe. Luckily for most Europeans, although the virus has indeed arrived, it has barely made appearances along the eastern border of the EU. With any luck and substantial precautionary action from all Europeans, it may not penetrate further into the heart of Europe this winter. With the added help of the Commission halting all wild birds imports to the EU, future introductions like the flu-positive birds in Essex (UK) in October and the infected eagles in Brussels last year, will now largely be a thing of the past.**

As the flu moved westward across Asia this summer and into autumn, the virus has been evolving rapidly. Although it is still quite lethal to poultry and waterbirds, it does not appear to be able to jump to humans as has been seen in southeast Asian strains. This could change rapidly at any time, but this trend is indeed encouraging.

It remains unclear if migratory birds have ever played a role in moving this flu from one place to another, although there is a tendency in some circles to assume this is the case. To date, there has been very little

sampling of healthy wild birds in active outbreak areas, so it is still impossible to know the degree to which these wild bird populations become infected and transmit the virus from place to place. A new study found that tree sparrows in an outbreak area in China were infected with a strain of H5N1, although they were apparently showing no symptoms. Reports of similarly asymptomatic wild birds in Russia and from domestic ducks are equally worrisome. Now that the fall migration is largely over, it's clear that the

flu has not yet been carried to all the various countries and continents where Asian waterfowl winter, and if this observation holds up over time, it certainly weakens the suspicions about migratory birds playing a central role in the movement of the disease.

We had hoped by now to have solid and useful information for pet owners about the availability of flu tests and vaccines, but this seemingly simple process has proven far more challenging than we could have imagined. It appears that the available and legal options are highly variable from country to country, and we encourage you to contact your local veterinarian for up to date information on what they can offer. Simple flu test kits may soon be on the market, and we'll be sure to provide news on these kits as they become available. In the mean time, pet bird owners in Western Europe should remain informed about flu in their area, practice sound biosecurity and sanitation around their birds and aviaries. Remember to isolate your captive birds from wild birds and bring them inside or provide covers over the aviary whenever possible. Avoid bringing in new birds to your flock and refrain from travelling with your birds away from home, especially out of the country. 