

# Prevention better than cure for tick diseases

**T**ICKS can cause disease and suffering in animals and humans, and are now being discovered in areas that have previously been tick-free.

## Tick-borne diseases up North? What's next, a plague of locusts?

Well, probably not locusts, no. You see the reason that we've started to see tick problems in areas that were traditionally tick-free is that old demon, the weather.

Ticks like warm, wet conditions to complete their lifecycle and, the current cold-snap aside, that's what we've been getting. Last year's wet summer will particularly have favoured tick survival.

## So what is the lifecycle of ticks?

Well, it's quite a long one, actually, for such a small parasite. A tick takes three years to mature from an egg to an adult and goes through larva and nymph stages along the way. At each stage, it needs a blood meal from an animal or bird to develop into the next stage. The final host has to

## VETERINARY ADVICE

**Richard Matthews**, of Castle Veterinary Surgeons, Barnard Castle, takes a look at how to manage tick-borne diseases

be a relatively large one, such as a sheep, deer or human.

While not attached to an animal, the tick lives in vegetation and needs a constant humidity of 85 per cent in order to survive and temperatures above seven degrees centigrade in order to be active. Hence, it is favoured by warm wet weather.

## So they suck blood, and don't they carry disease as well?

Yes they do. While the blood lost to tick bites may be minimal in large animals such as sheep and cattle, it's the diseases that can be transmitted by the bite that are most damaging. There are 21 species of tick in the UK, but it's the common sheep tick (*Ixodes ricinus*) that carries disease.

## So what are these diseases?

The main ones are louping ill, Babesiosis, tick-borne fever and Lyme disease. Let's look at them in turn:

● Louping ill is a viral disease that affects the brain and causes lack of coordination, convulsions, paralysis and death. It is primarily a disease of sheep but can affect other mammals, including man. There is a vaccine available against louping ill and the normal practice is to vaccinate replacement ewe lambs before they are returned to the hill.

● Babesiosis is a disease of cattle caused by a protozoan parasite. It is normally only a problem in adult cattle that are moved to tick-infected areas from tick-free ones.

Affected animals develop a high fever and characteristic blood-red urine, hence the disease's other name –



"red water fever". Affected cattle need prompt veterinary attention.

● Tick-borne fever is a bacterial disease of sheep and cattle that can cause abortion and, although mild on its own, because it has a profound immuno-suppressive effect, it can predispose animals to other diseases.

The most common of these is tick pyaemia in lambs where multiple abscesses form in joints, resulting in severe lameness and even paralysis. There is no vaccine, and prevention of tick bites, by pour-ons or sheep dips, is the best defence.

● Lyme disease is a bacterial disease spread by ticks that can affect humans as well as dogs and horses. The symptoms are flu-like with joint pain and occasionally neurological signs as well.

If a red patch forms at the site of a tick bite then Lyme disease should be suspected and medical attention sought. If treated promptly, then there is every chance that an uneventful recovery will be made.

Prevention is better than cure so avoiding being bitten in the first place by wearing clothing that will limit tick access to skin, and prompt removal of any ticks that do

bite using a specific tick-removing device will reduce the chance of contracting Lyme disease.

## These diseases all sound very nasty, how do I prevent them in my stock?

The best prevention is avoiding the tick bites in the first place, by using anti-tick pour-ons and sheep dips. If appropriate, then draining land and reducing vegetation cover will make the environment less suitable for tick survival.

The animals most at risk are those that have been brought from tick-free areas to infected areas because, having not been exposed to these diseases before, will have no immunity to them.

## So is it locusts next?

No, not a plague of locusts – but frogs, now there's a possibility.

## Meeting and farm walk on controlling Johne's Disease

FARMERS are invited to a farm meeting in Cumbria about controlling Johne's Disease.

Researchers from the Scottish government-funded Paraban project will explain how they are using input from farmers to identify the best control methods.

The meeting and farm walk at Chalk Lodge, Dalston, has been organised by the local Paragon Vet Group and is on Tuesday, April 9.

Johne's Disease, an infec-

tious, wasting condition in cattle, is an increasing threat to herd health and productivity right across Cumbria.

It is vital farmers and herd managers fully understand how they can test, control and manage the disease.

The Paraban project has been examining practical strategies for tackling the disease on-farm for three years, and DairyCo is funding monitoring on the Cumbrian farm linked to the project.

It has also provided funding

for two other farms in England and one in Wales to be involved.

The morning will involve a general discussion, an overview of the management of the farm, the management of Johne's Disease, blood and faecal testing, post-mortem analysis and environmental measurement. A farm walk will follow a light lunch.

To book a place, call Laura Teasdale on 07990-778149 or by emailing [laura.teasdale@dairyco.ahdb.org.uk](mailto:laura.teasdale@dairyco.ahdb.org.uk).

## Pelvis size crucial to calving

THE Alnthumbria Veterinary group has measured the pelvic area of potential heifer replacements on clients' farms.

The biggest contributing factor to calving problems is the size of calf followed by the size of the pelvic opening of the heifer.

Using easy-calving bulls with high accuracy for low birth weights helps, and eliminating heifers with small pelvic areas, pre-breeding.

A Rice pelvimeter is inserted to take vertical and horizontal measurements and the pelvic area calculated.

On one farm with 13 to 16-month-old Angus and Hereford cattle, two – including one of the biggest heifers – had significantly smaller pelvic areas and went for fattening.

Other farms had about ten per cent with small pelvic areas.

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