An Epizootic of Combined *Clostridium perfringens*, *Eimeria* Spp. and *Capillaria* Spp. Enteritis and *Histomonas* Spp. Hepatitis with *Escherichia coli* Septicemia in Bobwhite Quails (*Colinus virginianus*)

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**Abstract:** Four young Bobwhite quails (*Colinus virginianus*) were submitted to the Veterinary Diagnostic and Investigational Laboratory of The University of Georgia for necropsy. The quails were from a flock which had a history of anorexia, weakness, diarrhea, dehydration, weight loss and acute death. The total number of mortalities within two weeks was 80 out of approximately 900 birds. Multi focal sub-serosal intestinal ulcerations with subsequent perforation and peritonitis and Multi focal necrotizing hepatitis were noted on gross examination. Microscopic examination of the small and large intestine revealed severe necroulcerative and heterophilic enterocolitis and typhilitis with bacterial colonization and intralesional *Capillaria* spp. Fecal examination revealed moderate amounts of *Capillaria* spp. and few *Eimeria* spp. *Clostridium perfringens* was isolated from the intestine. In addition, there was Multi focal necrogranulomatous hepatitis with intralesional protozoal trophozoites consistent with *Histomonas* spp. morphology. *Escherichia coli* was isolated from specimens of liver, spleen and intestine.

**Key words:** Bobwhite quails, *Capillaria*, *C. perfringens*, *Eimeria*, *Histomonas*, *E. coli*

**Introduction**

Clostridial enteritis is a relatively common disease in avian species. *Clostridium perfringens* is a large Gram-negative, spore-forming, anaerobic bacterium that causes necrotic enteritis in chickens and turkeys (Broussard *et al.*, 1986; Droual *et al.*, 1994). In quails, outbreaks of the highly contagious ulcerative enteritis caused by *Clostridium colinum* have been described (Berkhoff and Kanitz, 1976). Fecal-oral infection usually occurs in clostridial enteritis. Intestinal coccidiosis (*Eimeria* spp.) is a common protozoal disease in various avian species and *Eimeria* spp. are highly host specific (Jordan, 1990). Various species of *Eimeria* have been isolated from quails (Duszynski and Gutierrez, 1981). Coccidia produce lesions in the intestinal tract by destruction of epithelial and submucosal cells in which they develop and multiply (Jordan, 1990). Oocysts are easily transported to poultry farms by boots, shoes, clothing, and vehicle wheels. Also, people are important vectors of the coccidia (Jordan, 1990). *Capillaria* spp. are nematodes that parasitize the intestinal mucosa in many avian species. These thin and long nematodes are not host specific and may have a direct or indirect life cycle. They usually live in the small intestinal mucosa and some in the esophagus, crop, and cecum (Jordan, 1990). *Capillaria* spp. infection is infrequently found in Bobwhite quails (Davidson *et al.*, 1991). *Histomonas meleagridis* is a protozoan parasite that has been reported in turkeys, chickens, peafowl, partridges and grouse (Lund and Chute, 1972; Jordan, 1990). Pheasants and quails are considered to be vectors of *H. meleagridis* and relatively resistant to infection (Lund and Chute, 1972; Zeakes *et al.*, 1981). However, a natural outbreak of atypical histomoniasis has been reported in quails (Dhillon *et al.*, 1980). Septicemic colibacillosis caused by *Escherichia coli* is an infectious avian disease that has been commonly reported in chicken, turkeys, ducks, and quails (da Silva *et al.*, 1989). *E. coli* is linked to a wide range of clinical diseases, such as septicemia, polyserositis, coligranuloma, enteritis, yolk sac infection, airsacculitis, peritonitis, cellulites and ophthalmitis (Dho-Moulin and Fairbrother, 1999). Diseases associated with *E. coli* cause great economic losses in avian industries. The purpose of this paper is to describe a combined *C. perfringens*, *Capillaria* spp., and *Eimeria* spp. enteritis, and *Histomonas* spp. hepatitis with *E. coli* septicemia in a flock of Bobwhite quails (*Colinus virginianus*).

**Materials and Methods**

**Case history:** On May 15 2003, four dead young Bobwhite quails (*Colinus virginianus*) were submitted to the Veterinary Diagnostic and Investigational Laboratory, The University of Georgia, Tifton, Georgia for necropsy. The owner stated that the birds were weak, anorexic, had diarrhea, weight loss and had died within 1 day of showing clinical signs. The mortality began on May 1. The total mortalities within two weeks were 80 out of...
All the birds submitted were in very poor body condition. A moderate amount of fecal material was pasted to the feathers surrounding the vent. Multifocal ulcerative lesions were observed in all birds. Some birds had subsequent perforation of these ulcers and peritonitis was noted on gross examination (Fig. 1). The spleens were moderately enlarged (Fig. 1). The small and large intestinal lumen contained foul-smelling material and was lined by a tan, friable diphtheritic membrane. The livers were moderately enlarged, friable, and pale tan. Multifocally scattered throughout the livers were round to irregular, circumscribed, flat to sunken white-tan foci ranging in size from 0.5 to 2 cm (Fig. 3). There were no other significant lesions. Histologically, the intestines had marked diffuse ulceration and extensive loss of mucosal lining epithelium and lamina propria with replacement by large amounts of eosinophilic cellular and karyorrhectic debris, extravasated erythrocytes (hemorrhage), edema fluid and fibrin exudation. There were large numbers of degenerate heterophils, scattered multinucleated giant cells, lymphocytes and macrophages admixed with the fibrinonecrotic debris, forming a diphtheritic membrane (Fig. 2). Multifocally within the necrotic cecal lamina propria and the submucosa, there were many protozoal trophozoites consistent with the morphology of Histomonas spp. Multiple sections of nematodes (Capillaria spp.) were present within the lumen (Fig. 2). Direct fecal examination and fecal flotation demonstrated moderate amounts of Capillaria spp. and few Eimeria spp.

The liver had multifocal to coalescing areas of necrosis and inflammation with loss of hepatocytes. In these areas there were abundant cellular and karyorrhectic debris, large infiltrates of macrophages and lymphocytes, and scattered foreign body-type multinucleated giant cells, and heterophils (Fig. 4). Multifocally there were many round, eosinophilic to amphophilic protozoal trophozoites that are often surrounded by a clear zone consistent with the morphology of Histomonas spp. (Fig. 4). These organisms were periodic-acid-Schiff-positive and were present singly or in clusters (Fig. 5). The kidneys had minimal multifocal tubular dilation and degeneration. No other significant lesions were noted. E. coli was isolated from specimens of liver, spleen, and intestine. Clostridium perfringens was isolated from the intestine. Direct fecal examination and fecal flotation revealed a light load of Eimeria spp. and moderate load of Capillaria spp. Modified acid fast stain for Cryptosporidium was negative. Fecal material examined by negative-stain electron microscopy was negative for viruses.

**Discussion**

Gross and histological lesions of enteritis and hepatitis explain the severe emaciation, dehydration and weight loss in these birds. Clostridial enteritis is a common problem in avian species (Ficken and Wage, 1997). Both Clostridium perfringens and Clostridium colinum have been documented as causes of avian ulcerative

**Results**

All the birds submitted were in very poor body condition with very prominent keel and breast musculature was severely atrophied. They were severely dehydrated and emaciated. A moderate amount of fecal material was pasted to the feathers surrounding the vent. Multifocal sub-serosal intestinal ulcerations were observed in all birds. Some birds had subsequent perforation of these ulcerations and peritonitis was noticed on gross examination (Fig. 1). The spleens were moderately enlarged (Fig. 1). The small and large intestinal lumen contained foul-smelling material and was lined by a tan, friable diphtheritic membrane. The livers were moderately enlarged, friable, and pale tan. Multifocally scattered throughout the livers were round to irregular, circumscribed, flat to sunken white-tan foci ranging in size from 0.5 to 2 cm (Fig. 3). There were no other significant lesions. Histologically, the intestines had marked diffuse ulceration and extensive loss of mucosal lining epithelium and lamina propria with replacement by large amounts of eosinophilic cellular and karyorrhectic debris, extravasated erythrocytes (hemorrhage), edema fluid and fibrin exudation. There were large numbers of degenerate heterophils, scattered multinucleated giant cells, lymphocytes and macrophages admixed with the fibrinonecrotic debris, forming a diphtheritic membrane (Fig. 2). Multifocally within the necrotic cecal lamina propria and the submucosa, there were many protozoal trophozoites consistent with the morphology of Histomonas spp. Multiple sections of nematodes (Capillaria spp.) were present within the lumen (Fig. 2). Direct fecal examination and fecal flotation demonstrated moderate amounts of Capillaria spp. and few Eimeria spp.

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enteritis. The microscopic lesions together with the isolation of *C. perfringens* in this case are similar to previously reported avian clostridial enteritis (Ficken and Wage, 1997). To our knowledge, *C. perfringens* enteritis has not been reported in quails. Damage to the intestinal mucosa is a predisposing factor for clostridial infection (Ficken and Wage, 1997). It has been reported that coccidiosis and stress are predisposing factors for ulcerative and necrotic enteritis (Davis, 1973; Al-Sheikhly and Al-Saieg, 1980). Poor hygiene and management are also predisposing factors to Clostridial infection (Ficken and Wage, 1997). Contaminated feed and litter with *C. perfringens* have been incriminated as sources of infection (Ficken and Wage, 1997). In this case, the combined intestinal mucosal injury and trauma due to *Eimeria* spp. and *Capillaria* spp. infection, poor hygiene and management, and increased clostridial proliferation with subsequent feed and litter contamination have predisposed the birds in this case to increased susceptibility to clostridial infection.

Histomoniasis (blackhead disease) is a disease caused by the protozoan parasite *Histomonas meleagridis* (McDougald, 1997). *Histomonas meleagridis* is transmitted horizontally through intermediate hosts such as intestinal nematodes *Heterakis gallinae* and the earthworm. Bobwhite quails (*Colinus virginianus*) are usually considered a reservoir for the disease (Kellogg and Reid, 1970). The severity of histomoniasis is increased with bacterial co-infection with *C. perfringens* and *E. coli* (MaDougald, 1997). Although a natural outbreak of atypical histomoniasis has been reported in quails (Dhillon et al., 1980), no concurrent bacterial and protozoal infection has been reported. The present article demonstrates a concurrent bacterial and protozoal infection.
E. coli infection in avian species can cause many clinical manifestations (Barnes et al., 1997). Colisepsepticemia is one of the avian disease manifestations of E. coli infection and has been reported in chickens, turkeys, and quails (Barnes et al., 1997; Arenas et al., 1999). In our case, E. coli was isolated from specimens of liver, spleen, and intestine.

To the author’s knowledge, this is the first report of combined C. perfringens, Eimeria spp. and Capillaria spp. enteritis and Histomonas spp. hepatitis with E. coli septicemia in quails. Avian pathologists should consider multiple etiologies for enteritis in quails.

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References