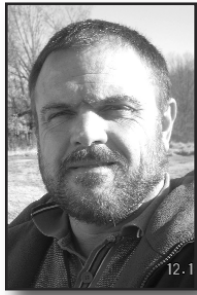


Just Exactly What Are Turkey Mites?



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We are now in the middle of deer season, and hunters are traveling deep into the woods in search of venison. This annual celebration of hunter versus prey has other players that many of us only give notice to when we become prey. There are

many things that look to other animals to provide a meal.

I often get calls from people who have been attacked by “turkey mites.” The stories were that turkey mites were especially brutal with hundreds of bites and severe itching that could last for weeks. This confused me because I had never heard of a turkey mite. So, I began to pour over the literature to find out the biology of this dastardly villain. I found no information about a mite that attacked both turkeys and people. I changed the focus of my investigation and asked anybody who got turkey mites to send in a sample. In every case, the “turkey mites” were actually the first life stage (larva) of a tick.

Most of the ticks found in the United States are hard ticks (Acari: Ixodidae). Of these, most are three-host ticks. That means they require three separate animals to feed on in order to complete their life cycle.

A typical life cycle goes like this: Eggs hatch, the tick larvae (usually with only six legs) crawl up grass, weeds, etc. and hold their front legs up in the air in order to grab onto anything that passes by (questing). Once on the animal, they feed for a little while and then drop off the animal and molt into the next life stage (nymph). They now quest for another host, feed and then drop off again to molt into the adult stage. Finally, they quest for the last host animal. Once aboard, the female begins to feed and the males

seek the females. The female will only become heavily engorged with blood (replete) after she is mated. Once she is mated and fully replete, she drops off, lays her eggs and dies – completing the cycle.

Keep in mind that ticks do not transmit diseases from mother to egg. This means that a tick must feed on an infected host before it can transmit diseases such as Rocky Mountain spotted fever, tularemia, Lyme disease, ehrlichiosis, STARI, relapsing fever or babesiosis. However, conceivably, tick paralysis could be caused by any life stage since it is not caused by a virus, bacteria or protozoan, but by factors in the tick saliva.

So what can you do to protect yourself from turkey mites ticks? Wear long-sleeve clothing with tight-fitting cuffs. Liberally apply tick repellents that contain DEET. Application of permethrin based repellents to your clothing also works well, but do not apply these directly to your skin. Check yourself for ticks when you get home.

If you do find a tick, carefully remove it by grasping the tick as close to your skin as possible with tweezers and gently put pulling pressure on it until it relaxes its mouthparts and comes out whole.

Pulling too quickly or hard can complicate things by leaving the tick’s mouthparts in your skin. It usually takes 12 to 24 hours of feeding before an infected tick can transmit a disease to you.

See a physician as soon as possible if you start experiencing high fevers, unexplained rashes or a pounding headache after being bitten by any tick. These symptoms are common to all of the tick borne diseases. Δ

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