Field-Tested, Tick-Infected: Protecting Sporting Dogs from Disease

*by **Keith Schopp***

Something was terribly wrong with Claira, our four-year-old German Shorthaired Pointer.

Just 30 minutes into a Southern Illinois quail hunt, she came hobbling back, tail tucked and barely able to walk. Her lymph nodes and neck were swollen, and her front legs were stiff at the shoulders. Claira was a dog that never quit hunting – until she did that December day in 2008.

The initial diagnosis after preliminary bloodwork: Cancer. I was devastated. Claira – the sweetest and best bird dog I ever had and only four! We were referred to a specialty clinic. They tended to agree with the cancer diagnosis. Another gut punch.

But wait. Maybe it wasn't cancer. Maybe, just maybe, it was something else. The specialty clinic veterinarian ordered more bloodwork and screening. Bingo. It was a tick-borne disease. And not just one. Claira had Lyme disease, Ehrlichiosis and a third tick-borne disease I can't remember. We'd never been so happy. Antibiotics and doxycycline did their magic and Claira lived to be almost 17.

"Medically, we call that a co-infection," said Dr. Sharon Albright, DVM, CCRT and manager of communications and veterinary outreach for the AKC Canine Health Foundation. "Claira was infected with multiple tick-borne diseases and that's actually common in dogs and humans. Diagnosis can be a challenge and sometimes the symptoms overlap with cancer or other diseases."

Dr. Albright says Claira's story underscores the need to advocate for your sporting dog and to work with your primary care veterinarian to discuss tick-borne diseases and appropriate testing options.

"Sporting dog owners know their dogs so well," said Dr. Albright. "You have your hands on the dog on a regular basis and can notice subtle changes in performance. Trust your gut. If performance or behavior is not normal for this animal, then you need to act and see your veterinarian. If you suspect a tick-borne illness, ask about testing."

Tick Tock

The clock is running. Infection rates for tick-borne pathogens including Lyme disease, Ehrlichiosis, Anaplasmosis, Rocky Mountain spotted fever and babesiosis are on the rise and can cause serious debilitating and even life-threatening illnesses.

“If you spend enough time outdoors with your dogs, chances are they’re going to be exposed to a tick-borne pathogen,” said Dr. Albright. “We know the geographic range of various tick species is expanding, testing capabilities are improving and overall tick-borne disease awareness is increasing. The combination of all those factors is contributing to apparent rise in infection rates.”

Dr. Christine Petersen, DVM, PhD and associate dean at The Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine, agrees and said data shows tick-borne infection rates are increasing significantly. She points to the Companion Animal Parasite Council website that tracks incidence of various diseases including heat maps for the U.S. and Canada.

“If you just look at Lyme, the most well-known and studied tick-borne infection in dogs, we’ve gone from about 162,000 confirmed cases in 2012 to more than half a million cases in 2024 alone. That’s real.”

Tick-borne diseases are found in all 50 states and Canada, and the main tick vector for Lyme is found in the Northeastern, Mid-Atlantic, upper Midwestern states and adjacent areas of Canada.

Realizing the risk and growing threat to canine and human health, the AKC Canine Health Foundation created the Tick-Borne Disease Initiative in 2016. To date, CHF and its donors have invested more than $1.1 million in 16 grants to study tick-borne disease.

An Occupational Hazard for Sporting Dogs

Dr. Petersen turned her tick-borne attention to sporting dogs for a CHF-funded study from 2019-2021. Working with the English Springer Spaniel Field Trial Association, Dr. Petersen and her team went to field trials across the upper Midwest to perform physical exams, collect blood and test dogs for tick-borne illness. Dr. Petersen and her team examined the different clinical responses from infected dogs and sought to determine why some of those dogs suffer no ill effects while others may experience severe clinical signs including fever, swollen/painful joints and even kidney disease. The wide range of clinical responses is likely caused by interactions between the tick-borne bacteria and each dog’s immune system.

“It was a joy to be with those dogs in the field while they’re working,” said Dr. Petersen. “We went to six or seven field trials as part of that grant and probably saw 600 dogs and their people. If we did a snap test on 100 dogs at a trial, eight or nine of those dogs would test positive. We were handing doxycycline out in the field and treating those dogs the same day. That helped my whole team feel a sense of responsibility and accomplishment.”

Dr. Petersen calls risk of tick-borne illness an “occupational hazard” for sporting dogs.

“You quickly learn why sporting dogs are at higher risk,” she said. “Those dogs go where the ticks are. Whether it’s pursuing grouse or pheasants or competing in a field trial, just doing their job puts them at risk.”

She also added that it’s important to remember that these diseases also can have serious effects in people. “It’s a ‘yes and’ problem for sporting dog owners. Our dogs can be the canaries in the mine for us. It’s always good to do tick checks after coming out of the field. Find a friend for your back and wear insect spray on your socks to avoid carrying blood-sucking hitchhikers!”

Signs and Symptoms

While most dogs that test positive may not present symptoms or get sick, Dr. Petersen said joint swelling, lethargy and “shifting lameness” are classic symptoms of tick-borne illness. “With shifting lameness, a dog will favor one leg, then later change and favor the other.”

She adds that bloodshot eyes, loss of smell or scenting ability and change in performance are also signs to watch for.

Don’t Let Your Guard Down

Dr. Albright said safeguarding your dog as it navigates tick-infested forests and fields requires diligence year-round.

“Those darn ticks are crafty,” said Dr. Albright. “Just because it’s winter and cold doesn’t mean dogs are safe from a tick bite.”

The tick prevention toolkit includes inspecting your dog from nose to tail after every outdoor event – think tailgate check; using a tick preventative product that can be applied topically or administered orally and considering vaccination for Lyme borreliosis for dogs that live or travel to regions with emerging or endemic Lyme disease.

“Work with your veterinarian to understand what the risks are for each dog and come up with the best strategy for testing and prevention,” said Dr. Albright. “Ask about products you can use to prevent flea and tick bites and disease transmission. Remember, nothing is 100 percent. You should also consider how often your dog swims or gets wet and how that could impact the effectiveness of topical tick prevention products.”

Purina’s Partnership with AKC Canine Health Foundation

Since it began in 2002, the Purina Parent Club Partnership (PPCP) Program has provided more than $9.25 million for canine health research, breed rescue and educational efforts to positively impact the general health and well-being of dogs. Some of this funding has helped to support studies that investigate tick-borne illnesses – like Dr. Petersen’s work with English Springer Spaniels.

The PPCP program enables Purina Pro Club members to earn Purina Points by purchasing qualifying Purina products – like Purina Pro Plan – and submitting proof of purchase. An annual donation from Purina is shared between Purina Pro Club members’ designated parent breed club and that club’s Donor Advised Fund at the AKC Canine Health Foundation.

“That money generated by the Purina Parent Club Partnership Program is in the hands of the parent breed club and the research they choose to support ties to that club’s interests and needs,” said Dr. Albright.

Tick-related Resources and Recommendations

“Sporting dog owners must be vigilant and advocate for their dogs,” said Dr. Albright.

For a deeper dive into tick-borne illnesses and the latest in research and recommendations, Dr. Albright suggests visiting the following sites:

- Tick-Borne Research Initiative
- Companion Animal Parasite Counsel
- American Animal Hospital Association – Canine Vaccination Guidelines
- American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine – Consensus Statement update on Lyme borreliosis in dogs and cats

Keith Schopp is a freelance journalist and retired communications executive with a passion for sporting dogs and conservation. Based in Southern Illinois and North Dakota, Schopp enjoys following his Labrador retrievers and German shorthaired pointers wherever gamebirds can be found.