New tick-borne disease in dogs, canine babesiosis, found in the UK

Scientists at University of Bristol conducting the Big Tick Project say recent confirmed cases of *Babesia canis* in four dogs in Essex that had not travelled abroad, have increased the need for surveillance of tick-borne disease in the UK.

Launched last year, the Big Tick Project has become the largest-ever veterinary study of ticks and tick-borne disease in the UK, if not worldwide. In addition to the potential for tick mapping and greater understanding about what is perceived to be a rise in the risks to dogs and people from Lyme Disease, the emergence in four dogs in Essex of babesiosis, a life-threatening disease transmitted to dogs by infected ticks usually found in Europe, has highlighted the need for a major investigation on the scale of the Big Tick Project, says Professor Wall. Professor Wall says: “The recent *Babesia* cases in Essex are of huge significance. The fact that we now appear to have established populations of the tick *Dermacentor reticulatus* acting as vectors of the introduced pathogen *Babesia canis* is a new and important development and a major concern for animal health. It clearly demonstrates the potential dangers from the inadvertent introduction of novel disease pathogens if vigilance and surveillance are not maintained.”

Dog owner Hollie Wilson’s dream French holiday with husband Craig and two dogs Olive and Badger turned into a nightmare when Olive, a pointer, was bitten by a tick. Within days, Olive’s condition had deteriorated and it was clear that she was becoming seriously unwell. On arrival back in the UK, the Wilson’s rushed their dog to their vet and after extensive tests, canine babesiosis, suspected by the vet on duty that day who had seen the disease in her native Poland, was confirmed.

Hollie says: “Her gums were completely white and she was anaemic. The race was on to find the recommended drug treatment and there was a lot of ringing round before she could finally be treated.

“I can honestly say without all the help from our vets, Olive would not be here today. It was due to their persistence in finding she had babesiosis and how Olive was treated so quickly, that she has made a full recovery.

“Looking back, losing Olive to babesiosis would have been heart-breaking.

“Back then, I probably wasn't aware so much of the risks of tick-borne disease before all this happened and was probably a bit naive as to where these risks were found. However I am most definitely aware of the dangers carried by ticks now!

“I think my message is to talk to your vet and find a tick treatment that is effective for your dog and ensure you use it on a regular basis as you never know which tick is infected. Although Lyme disease is well documented I am all too well aware now of the risk of other diseases that can be life threatening such as babesiosis. Seeing the disease being carried in ticks in the UK is extremely worryingly as a dog owner and more needs to be done through campaigns such as The Big Tick Project to raise awareness.”