Bluetongue in Europe and the role of wildlife in the epidemiology of disease

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Abstract

The article reviews a current bluetongue (BT) epidemiological situation in Europe, BT restricted zones and the role of wild ungulates as a reservoir for bluetongue virus (BTV) and its transmission. BT has been eradicated from central and northern Europe, however it is still circulating in some regions of southern and south-eastern Europe. According to the recent information of the Directorate General for Health and Consumer Affairs (DG SANCO) disease caused by BTV1 was spreading at the beginning of 2014 in Corsica (France). Moreover, four BTV1 cases were noticed in the west Spain (Cáceres province), 59 BTV4 outbreaks in south Spain (Andalusia), 10 in the region of Algarve in Portugal and about 200 outbreaks of BTV4 in Greece (Peloponesse and Evros regions). On 4th July the first outbreak of BTV4 was also confirmed at the south Bulgarian border and by 5th September 2014 disease was noticed in 21 of 28 administrative districts of Bulgaria. In August 2014 the BTV4 disease was reported in south-east of Romania and as for 8th September 184 outbreaks of BT were confirmed in 17 counties of this country. As of 3 September 2014 in Europe there has been fourteen BT-affected zones, in different regions of Italy, Spain, Portugal, Cyprus, Malta, France (Corsica), Greece, Bulgaria and Romania. Most species of wild ruminants and camelids are susceptible to BTV infection, although frequently asymptomatically. Wild sheep, bighorn and mouflon, are susceptible to BTV infection and can develop fatal clinical disease, as do domestic sheep. Experimental or natural infection of antelope, wapiti, musk, ox, bison, yak, white-tailed deer and African buffalo also produced clinical disease, whereas blesbock, mountain gazelle, roe deer, red deer and Eurasian elk did not show clinical sign after natural or experimental infection and infection was recognized by the presence of BTV viral RNA or specific antibodies. The wildlife due to the long-term carrier state may act as a reservoir for BTV and play an important role in its transmission.

Key words: bluetongue, Europe, wildlife, epidemiology
Introduction

Bluetongue (BT) is an infectious disease of ruminants and camelids (Vervoord and Erasmus 2004), caused by bluetongue virus (BTV), a RNA virus belonging to the Orbivirus genus in the Reoviridae family (Mertens et al. 2005) and transmitted by biting midges of the genus Culicoides (Mellor et al. 2000). BT has a significant economic impact, mainly due to the disease effect on animals (morbidity, mortality, reproductive failure, reduction in milk yields and weight gain) and, most of all, to the disruption of international trade of animals and animal products (Saegerman et al. 2008). Up-to-date 26 immunologically distinct serotypes of BTV have been identified worldwide (Schwartz-Cornil et al. 2008, Chaignat et al. 2009, Mann et al. 2011). BT is endemic in many tropical, sub-tropical and temperate regions of the world (America, Australia, Africa and some regions of Asia), between latitudes 40°S and 53°N, during times of the year that are optimal for vector activity (Mellor et al. 2000). Historically, Europe has experienced only sporadic incursions of BT, involving a single virus serotype on each occasion (Mellor and Boorman 1995). However, since 1998, probably due to climatic changes, BTV spread northwards into the Mediterranean Basin, where five BTV serotypes (1, 2, 4, 9 and 16) have been identified (Purse et al. 2005). In the summer of 2006, for the first time, the BTV has crossed latitude 50°N and BT outbreaks caused by BTV serotype 8 occurred in North-Western Europe: the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, France, and Luxembourg (Wilson and Mellor 2008). In 2007-2008, the BT situation changed for the worse, BTV8 spread to the other regions of Europe and the number of outbreaks increased rapidly (about 50000 cases of BT were reported). Additionally, two new BTV serotypes, BTV1 and BTV6, were detected (Wilson and Mellor 2009). However, the implementation of BT compulsory vaccination programmes in Europe in spring 2008 resulted in reduction of BTV8 cases from about 50000 in 2007-2008 to 350 in 2009 and 19 in 2010. The last case of BT caused by BTV8 was reported in May 2011 in north Sardinia (Italy) (http://eubtnet.izs.it/btnet.reports/BTV8.html).

BT epidemiological situation and restriction zones in Europe

BTV has been eradicated from central and northern Europe, however it is still circulating in some regions of southern and south-eastern Europe. According to the information of the Directorate General for Health and Consumer Affairs – European Commis-
Bulgaria, whole territory and Romania, whole territory of counties: Iasi, Neamt, Bacau, Vaslui, Vrancea, Galati, Buzau, Braila, Ialomita, Calarasi, Prahova, Dambovita, Arges, Valcea, Gorj, Mehedinti, Dolj, Teleorman, Giurgiu and Ilfov, part of territory of counties: Botosani, Suceava, Tulcea, Constanta.

**Bluetongue in wildlife**

BT is considered endemic in wildlife in the large parts of Africa and North America (Gerdes 2004). Wild ruminants are included in the European Council Directive 2000/75/EC of 20 November 2000, laying down specific provisions for the control and eradication of bluetongue, but vaccination and movement restrictions can only be applied in farmed or managed ruminants, being almost impossible in wild free-ranging hosts of the virus. Most, if not all, of the species of wild ruminants are susceptible to BTV infection. However, infected animals usually do not show clinical signs of disease, particularly indigenous animals in region where BT is endemic (Johnson et al. 2006). While European Union compulsory control measures have been put in place to control the spread of BT in livestock, the role of wild ruminants as susceptible hosts should be considered in any strategy to control of BT (Fernandez-Pacheco et al. 2008). In order to know the role of wildlife in the epidemiology of BT, several species of wild ruminants and camels have been investigated to elucidate their potential role on BTV control, as well as the occurrence of clinical disease. It was shown that wild sheep such as bighorn (*Ovis canadensis*) and mouflon (*Ovis aries musimon*) are susceptible to BTV infection and can develop fatal clinical disease, as do closely related domestic sheep (Fernandez-Pacheco et al. 2008). The clinical signs of BT were also produced after experimental infection of pronghorn antelope (*Antilocapra americana*), American bison (*Bison bison*), and African buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*) (Tessaro and Clavijo, 2001). Under natural conditions the disease may also be present in wapiti (*Cervus elaphus canadensis*), axis deer (*Axis axis*), fellow deer (*Dama dama*), sika deer (*Cervus nippon*), musk deer (*Moschus moschiferus*), roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), Spanish ibex (*Capra pyrenaica*), and captive yak (*Bos grunniens grunniens* (Howerth et al. 2001, Fernandez-Pacheco et al. 2008, Ruiz-Fons et al. 2008, Rodriguez-Sanchez et al. 2010)). BTV infection, antibody response and clinical disease
after experimental infection have been reported in several North American deer species belonging to the subfamily Odocoileinae, such as: white-tailed deer (Odocoileus virginianus), black-tailed deer (Odocoileus hemionus colombianus) and mule deer (Odocoileus hemionus) (Work et al. 1992) (Table 1). Conversely, BTV-infection of less susceptible wild animals is asymptomatic or causes only mild clinical signs, e.g. after natural or experimental infection of blesbok (Damaliscus pygargus) and mountain gazelle (Gazella gazella) no clinical signs of BT have been shown (Shimshony et al. 1988, Bender et al. 2003). The BTV natural infection of moose (Alces alces) and roe deer (Capreolus capreolus) has been recognized on the basis of the presence of specific antibodies and/or viral RNA in samples of blood taken from infected animals (Linden et al. 2008, Rodrigue-Sanchez et al. 2010).

Camelids have also been reported to be susceptible to BTV infection; a severe clinical signs with lethal disease was reported in naturally infected llamas (Meyer et al. 2008) whereas experimental infection of two llamas induced specific antibodies against BTV but caused asymptomatically (Afshar et al. 1995). Also alpacas (Vicugna pacos) after experimental infection with BTV8 displayed very mild clinical signs. Seroconversion was first measured 6-8 days after infection (dpi) and RNA levels in blood were very low, and quickly cleared after seroconversion. However, spleens collected post-mortem were still positive for BTV RNA, over 71 days after the last detection in blood samples (Schulz et al. 2012). In three camels (Camelus dromedaries) experimentally infected with BT6 no clinical signs of BT were observed, however all animals seroconverted and developed BT6 specific neutralizing antibodies after challenge (Table 1). All camels developed a viraemia from 7 dpi and BTV was isolated from the blood of all three animals suggesting that camels may act as a reservoir for BTV and play an important role in its transmission (Batten et al. 2011). Although BT is a disease found in ruminants and camelids, under certain circumstances it can also be transmitted to carnivores. BT has been recorded in Eurasian lynxes (Lynx lynx) kept in a Belgian zoo after the cats were fed on aborted or still-born foetuses of ruminants raised on neighbouring farms (Jauniaux et al. 2008). Specific antibodies to BTV were also identified in African carnivores including lions, cheetahs, wild dogs, jackals, hyenas and genets (Alexander et al. 1994). These cases can also be explained by ingestion of flesh and organs of BTV-infected animals. Moreover, the presence of BTV antibodies have been found in Florida black bears (Ursus americanus floridanus) and Florida panthers (Puma concolor coryi) (Dunbar et al. 1998). The antibodies against BTV have also been found in the elephantidae (Bhat et al. 1998).

BTV infection of the susceptible wildlife can results in a wide variety of lesions and clinical signs, ranging from sudden death to asymptomatic infection (Howerth et al. 2001). BTV serotypes 1, 8 and 17 have been associated with clinical signs and lesions in either experimental or natural infections in wild-white deer (Howerth and Tyler 1988, Johnson et al. 2006). Clinical signs reported in this animal include severe depression, weakness, fever, anorexia, hyperemic oral mucosa, crusts in the nares, severe respiratory distress, reddening of the muzzle and ears. Moreover, swollen and cyanotic tongue, excessive salivation, oral ulceration, multifocal haemorrhage in the skin and mucosa, severe bloody diarrhea and laminitis were observed. Organs most frequently affected include tongue, heart, spleen, lymph nodes and kidneys (Howerth et al. 2001). In the acute form, haemorrhagic lesions are due to endothelial damage and disseminated intravascular coagulation (Howerth and Tyler 1988). Cardiovascular lesions consist in pericardial, subpericardial and subendocardial haemor-

### Table 1. Viraemia and seroconversion in BTV-infected wildlife.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Species</th>
<th>Viraemia duration</th>
<th>Viraemia onset</th>
<th>Viraemia detection methods</th>
<th>1st antibodies</th>
<th>Antibody duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>European red deer (Cervus elaphus)</td>
<td>over 112 days</td>
<td>1 dpi</td>
<td>virus isolation and RT-PCR</td>
<td>1-7 dpi</td>
<td>over 112 dpi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camel (Camelus dromedaries)</td>
<td>28 days</td>
<td>5-7 dpi</td>
<td>virus isolation and RT-PCR</td>
<td>11 dpi</td>
<td>over 75 dpi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black-tailed deer (Odocoileus hemionus colombianus)</td>
<td>1-10 days</td>
<td>2-9 dpi</td>
<td>virus isolation</td>
<td>6-13 dpi</td>
<td>over 692 dpi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White-tailed deer (Odocoileus virginianus)</td>
<td>2-5 days</td>
<td>2 dpi</td>
<td>virus isolation</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American bison (Bison bison)</td>
<td>1-4 days</td>
<td>4-7 dpi</td>
<td>virus isolation</td>
<td>11-28 dpi</td>
<td>over 127 dpi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

dpi, days post-infection
n.d., not determined
rhages. Typical clinical signs in the persistent form of BT in white-tailed deer include erosion and ulceration of dental pad, hard palate, tongue, gingival, forestomachs and abomasums as well as food lesions, ranging from coronitis and laminitis to complete sloughing of the hooves (Howerth et al. 2001). In European mouflon, taxonomically considered as a subspecies of domestic sheep, the clinical signs reported include inflammation of mucous membranes, congestion, swelling and haemorrhages (Fernandez-Pacheco et al. 2008). BTV infection of less susceptible wild animals is asymptomatic or causes only mild clinical signs. In experimentally infected black-tailed deer (Odocoileus hemionus columbianus), the only clinical sign was hyperthermia, body temperature ranging from 40°C to 41.2°C (Work et al. 1992). In European red deer (Cervus elaphus) no clinical signs have been reported, both after natural and experimental BTV infection (Lopez-Olivera et al. 2010, Rodriguez-Sanchez et al. 2010). In African wild ruminants, BTV infection is asymptomatic and BTV was isolated from several species of scrohorn antelope: addax (Addax nasomaculatus), Nubian ibex (Capra nubiana), sable antelope (Hippotragus niger) and African buffalo (Syncerus caffer) (Verwoerd and Erasmus 1994).

BT virological and serological surveillance of wildlife is carried out systematically for several years in different regions of Europe (Linden et al. 2008, Garcia et al. 2009, Rodriguez-Sanchez et al. 2010) (Table 1). The highest titres of BTV antibodies have been detected in samples of sera taken from free-ranging European red deer and fallow deer (Dama dama) from Cervine subfamily (Ruiz-Fons et al. 2008, Garcia et al. 2009, Linden et al. 2009). The RNA of BTV serotype 8 was detected by Real-Time RT-PCR (rRT-PCR) in naturally-infected wild deer in Belgium (Linden et al. 2008) and BTV1 and BTV4 genetic material in blood of European red deer and mouflons in Spain (Garcia et al. 2009) while BTV1 and BTV8 RNA in red deer in France (Rossi et al. 2010). As for domestic ruminants, BT transmission among wildlife depends almost exclusively on the presence of the Culicoides vector in the environment. BTV prevalence and outbreaks follow a seasonal pattern in Europe, infection generally occurring in late summer and early fall. This seasonal variation is related to vector abundance, which depends on climate factors, such as humidity and temperature (Sleeman et al. 2009). Apart from the annual seasonality, there are inter-annual cycles in the occurrence of BTV. In endemic areas of North America, deer populations are infected on-one to three-year cycles, whereas in epidemic areas BT occurs in an eight-to ten-year cycle. These cycles can be related to combined effects of herd immunity and fluctuations in vector populations (Howerth et al. 2001). Moreover, BTV can exceptionally be transmitted by alternative vectors e.g. ticks (Bouwknecht et al. 2010). Transplacental, oral (including colostrums), semen and mechanical (wound) contacts have been suggested as possible mechanism for BTV transmission (Menzies at al. 2008, Lopez-Olivera et al. 2010, Santiago-Moreno et al. 2010).

The wildlife, particularly cervids, because of their wider distribution in Europe, could be used as sentinels for surveillance of BTV. Antibodies against BTV have been reported in European reed deer shortly after being detected in domestic livestock (Linden et al. 2008, Ruiz-Fons et al. 2008, Rodriguez-Sanchez et al. 2010). Occasionally, contact of wild ungulates with BTV has been reported in geographic regions where BTV has not been found in domestic livestock (Garcia et al. 2009). BTV-specific antibodies or RNA were detected in wild ruminants even one year after its successful control in domestic ruminants (Rodriguez-Sanchez et al. 2010). However, when interpreting the presence of antibody in serum samples from calves the presence of maternal antibodies should be considered. Since maternal antibodies have been reported to last up to 17-18 weeks of age in white-tailed deer, European red deer should not be sampled before late autumn for data to be reliable (Gaydos et al. 2002). BTV RNA has also been directly detected in spleen of naturally-infected European red deer by means of RT-PCR (Rodriguez-Sanchez et al. 2010, Rossi et al. 2010). Both antibodies against BTV and positive RT-PCR results have been reported to last up to 112 days after experimental infection of this animal for BTV1 and BTV8 (Lopez-Olivera et al. 2010) (Table 1). On the basis of results confirming the high susceptibility of European red deer to BTV infection, the detection of specific BTV antibodies in blood and RNA in spleen, and wide European distribution of red deer, make this species a good sentinel for surveillance of BTV (Ruiz-Fons et al. 2008, Rodriguez-Sanchez et al. 2010). Besides, the epidemiological data confirm the more cases of BTV infection among domestic ruminants in the regions where there are wild animals, mainly from cervus family. In summary, it can be concluded that wild ungulates due to the long-term carrier state may act as a reservoir for BTV and play an important role in its transmission.

References


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