Avian Influenza H5N1: Frequently Asked Questions

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What is Avian Influenza?

Avian Influenza, or bird flu, is an infectious disease of birds caused by strains of the Influenza A virus. It affects poultry and wild birds and can be spread to mammals, including humans. H5N1 (or H5 bird flu) is a strain of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) that is being closely monitored by Australian authorities due to the potential risk of spread to Australia.

Large-scale outbreaks of the H5N1 strain of bird flu in the past two years have killed millions of wild birds and tens of thousands of mammals around the world.

H5N1 bird flu has spread to all continents except Australia, and experts predict it could arrive here with the spring migration of shorebirds and seabirds from the Northern Hemisphere.

What are the symptoms of H5 bird flu in birds?

Numerous dead birds in a location, including small groups or clusters (five or more) of wild birds of any species could be a sign that H5 bird flu has infected local populations and should be reported.

Individual dead birds, or fewer than five sick or dead wild birds, should be reported if they are seabirds, waterbirds, shorebirds or birds of prey.

In individual birds, warning signs that should be reported include:

- A lack of coordination, tremors, swimming in circles
- Twisted neck or other abnormal posture
- Inability to stand or fly
- Diarrhoea
- Difficulty breathing, coughing or sneezing
- Swelling around the head, neck and eyes
- Cloudiness or change in colour of the eyes, and
- Sudden death.

What should I do if I see or find a sick or dead bird?

If you find a sick or dead bird that you suspect could have Avian Influenza (H5N1), remember to:

- **AVOID** contact with sick or dead wildlife and their environment. Do not touch, move or approach the bird, and do not allow pets to touch or eat sick or dead wildlife.

- **RECORD** what you see, the location the animal was found, and take photos or video (if possible) without approaching the bird.

- **REPORT** any unusual illness or death in wild birds and other wildlife immediately via the **Emergency Animal Disease Hotline on 1800 675 888.**

Details that will assist the response include:

- Location (address and/or GPS coordinates if possible)
- Date and time of the sighting, including when signs of disease were first noticed
- The estimated number of sick or dead animals and other animals at the site,
- Notes of any clinical signs that sick animals are showing, and
- Contact details of any observers.

What might a major H5 bird flu outbreak mean for Australian birds and other wildlife?

An outbreak of H5 bird flu in Australian birds could be catastrophic. It can be expected to cause large numbers of birds becoming infected and dying. This could have disastrous consequences, as one in six Australian birds are already facing the threat of extinction. The additional threat of bird flu is therefore of great concern for bird conservationists and organisations like BirdLife Australia.

The impact of H5 bird flu can be particularly devastating in birds that have small populations and/or are restricted to a small number of locations – in some populations of birds overseas, outbreaks of H5N1 have caused over 50% of the species to be wiped out, including the Sandwich Tern in Europe and the Peruvian Pelican in South America.

H5 bird flu is also known to be deadly to other animals, including marine mammals such as seals. The sudden loss or reduction of any species is likely to have negative flow-on effects for the wider ecosystems they are a part of.

How will bird flu impact bird conservation efforts?

Conservation efforts are deployed to help species that are suffering from low or declining populations recover to healthier levels. H5N1 has the potential to decimate populations. In some cases, a drop in numbers could reduce a population of birds to a level that is no longer viable for that species to

recover, leading to their extinction. An unmitigated outbreak could undo years of investment in threatened species recovery and set Australia back in its trajectory towards biodiversity targets.

Which species are most at risk of significant losses caused by H5 bird flu?

All species of birds are potentially susceptible. Birds which gather in high densities to feed or roost, and those which share habitats with several other species (typical of many shorebirds and waterbirds) have a greater chance of contracting and spreading the virus.

Species that nest in colonies, particularly those that occur at only a few sites, are at the greatest risk because close contact helps the virus spread, and being restricted to a small number of locations means any outbreak will impact a large proportion of the population. In Australia, several threatened species fit the profile of most concern, including the Christmas Island Frigatebird, Abbott's Booby and Gould's Petrel. Other species that are currently not listed but which may be at risk include the Black Swan and Australian Pelican.

Birds of prey and other birds which scavenge on deceased animals also have a higher risk of encountering the virus due to their feeding habits, but they typically occur in lower densities and are therefore less likely to spread the virus outside their area.

Which birds could bring H5 bird flu to Australia?

Migratory shorebirds like the Red Knot, which move through infected regions, are at risk and could be carriers of H5 bird flu. Although many migratory shorebirds are experiencing significant population declines they form large flocks that would enable the virus to spread through their population easily. Seabirds such as skuas and petrels may also bring the H5N1 virus to Australia as the Southern Ocean Flyway includes movements from the Antarctic Peninsula to Tasmania and mainland Australia.

How does H5N1 spread?

Like other viruses, H5 bird flu is spread by infected animals coming into contact with others. Close contact between birds, such as birds which nest colonially, is the most likely mechanism for the virus to spread quickly. As the virus appears in saliva and faeces, it can be transported easily in water, mud, sand and chicken litter.

Birds which regularly join mixed-species flocks in high densities and can travel long distances, like Freckled Ducks and Australian Pelicans, are at significant risk due to the potential for rapid transmission and spread over large areas within Australia.

Birds of prey can be infected by opportunistically feeding on the carcasses of infected birds or targeting prey species already weakened by an infection. Other pest animals, including invasive predators and rodents, may also spread the virus.

Are other strains of bird flu already present in Australia?

Yes, other strains of bird flu are already present in Australia. The H7 strain caused significant outbreaks in commercial poultry operations in New South Wales, ACT and Victoria in 2024. These existing strains are being managed and do not pose a serious threat to wild bird populations.

Why is this strain worse than the other strains of Avian Influenza that are already present in Australia?

H5N1 is a Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) which means it spreads more easily and is more deadly to birds and other wildlife than strains that are considered low pathogenicity (LPAIs). The H5N1 strain has had devastating impacts on wildlife overseas. As this is a new strain that Australian species are currently naïve to, there is no level of immunity already developed in populations of Australian birds.

Where have outbreaks occurred outside of Australia?

H5 bird flu has been detected in all continents outside of Australia, including on the Antarctic Peninsula. The strain continues to be reported throughout East Asia, where testing is active. This is relevant to Australia, as many birds migrate to Australia via these locations as part of the East Asian–Australasian Flyway (EAAF).

Does H5 bird flu pose a risk to humans?

The Australian Centre for Disease Control states that "most bird flu viruses don't spread easily from animals to humans. Human infections are rare, and typically occur after close contact with sick birds and livestock or contaminated environments. Poultry workers are most at risk. The risk to Australians is very low."

As human infections usually only occur from coming into contact with sick birds, simple measures to avoid this risk can be taken to greatly decrease the risk to human health, including keeping our distance, never handling sick or deceased birds, and reporting any suspected cases to the national **Emergency Animal Disease Hotline on 1800 675 888**.

For information on the risks to human health, please visit: www.cdc.gov.au/topics/bird-flu or consult your doctor.

What about risks to other animals such as domestic pets?

Generally, the risk to domestic birds such as backyard chicken flocks and pet birds in outdoor aviaries is low. Practicing basic biosecurity measures such as keeping feed and water trays clean, and minimising contact between your flock and wild birds is advised. For more information, visit: www.agriculture.gov.au/biosecurity-trade/pests-diseases-weeds/animal/avian-influenza/domestic

In H5 bird flu affected areas such as the United States a few pet cats have contracted the disease, but the risk is also low.

What is BirdLife Australia doing?

BirdLife Australia is sharing extensive data and expertise with government and wildlife health authorities to assist their preparedness and planning. We are keeping project teams and volunteers on the ground informed to boost surveillance of wild bird populations. We are also working with the appropriate authorities on communicating important information to the Australian community and utilising our connection with BirdLife International to share key learnings from overseas outbreaks.

BirdLife Australia sits on the National Avian Influenza Wild Bird Steering Group and the Victorian Response Team led by Victoria's Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) to provide dynamic updates on notable wild bird movements and congregations.

We are continually in communication with the appropriate authorities and strictly adhere to expert guidance and emergency response protocols provided by Wildlife Health Australia.

BirdLife Australia is working with Wildlife Health Australia and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, in collaboration with Deakin University and the University of NSW on a preparedness tool for health, poultry and conservation practitioners. This data-driven tool will be used to identify threat pathways (into Australia and onward spread) and points of sensitivity (for threatened bird communities and interactions between wild birds and poultry). This preparedness work will use data collected by BirdLife Australia, including Birdata and others on the movements and timing of migratory birds and congregations of waterbirds.

BirdLife Australia is also advocating for practical steps the Australian Government can take to mitigate the impact of an outbreak on Australian birds and other wildlife.

What else is being done to protect Australian birds?

Surveillance:
Wildlife Health Australia chairs the National Avian Influenza Wild Bird Surveillance program, which monitors for suspected cases in wild bird populations. Staff from BirdLife Australia are part of this steering group, and provide expert advice and an ecological perspective.

Government actions:
BirdLife Australia has advocated for practical steps that the Australian Government can take to mitigate the impact of an outbreak on Australian birds and other wildlife. The funding announcement of $100 million in October 2024 is welcomed, and includes:

1. The establishment of a national wildlife task force with jurisdictions (state and territories) known as the HPAI Preparedness Taskforce.

2. Wildlife-specific national funding that is directed toward identifying and prioritising at-risk species and high-value sites, and the development of detailed response plans, including protocols for carcass removal.

3. Scaling up public communication and developing measures to prevent disturbance and virus transmission – see DAFF's new bird flu website here.

4. Increased awareness and support to communities, including those in remote and regional areas. This includes land managers who may be at the front face of an outbreak and First Nations People.

5. Undertaking vaccination trials, and identifying and funding for other high priority research projects. Other actions by the Australian Government, including quarantine and biosecurity measures, are outlined on the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry website.

What are some specific ways an outbreak of H5 bird flu could be managed?

BirdLife Australia is advocating for practical steps the Australian Government can take to mitigate the impact of an outbreak on Australian birds and other wildlife, including:

1. Establish a broader national wildlife taskforce, ensuring each state/territory government appoints a dedicated bird flu coordinator for wildlife responses.

2. Allocate increased wildlife-specific national funding that can be directed toward:

    a) Identifying and prioritising at-risk species and high-value sites, and urgently developing detailed response plans, including protocols for carcass removal.

    b) Scaling up public communication and developing measures to prevent disturbance and virus transmission.

    c) Undertaking vaccination trials, and identifying and funding other high priority research projects.

What else is needed to prepare for bird flu?

BirdLife has a network of over 52 volunteer groups and branches nationally, and if resourced, would enable the organisation to better gear up these community members to actively monitor for and play a role in early detection and potential response needs.

More generally, we need to work together to build resilience in wild bird populations. Healthy bird populations are better able to respond to and survive outbreaks. Our staff and volunteers are working hard around Australia to manage the threatening processes that are impacting our

birds. Increasing habitat by revegetation and ecosystem protection and reducing threats such as hunting and driving on beaches help our vulnerable species.

Is there an existing H5N1 vaccine to protect birds?

Yes, but this can only feasibly be provided to captive or closely managed populations. Overseas, 36,000 birds have been vaccinated in 250 zoos with very few adverse reactions. Although vaccination in the wild is more difficult, it has been done in the US and is being trialled in New Zealand, France, South Africa and elsewhere for threatened species. The Australian Government is investigating the potential for the vaccination of wildlife.

Can I still feed wild birds during a bird flu outbreak?

BirdLife Australia generally advises strongly against feeding wild birds. Before and during an outbreak of bird flu, we can help birds with their social distancing by not feeding them. Although an outbreak is unlikely to appear first in urban birds, it is best to avoid feeding them anyway, as feeding brings them into close contact, increasing the likelihood of diseases being spread.

Is it safe to visit bird sanctuaries and reserves?

Yes. H5 bird flu is not yet present in Australia and generally only spreads to people who are in contact with sick birds. Watching birds and enjoying nature is safe (and good for you!).

I've seen dead birds washed up on Australian beaches (wrecks). Is this a sign of an H5 bird flu outbreak?

Not necessarily. Birds that migrate long distances to Australia face significant challenges and not all of them survive the journey. In some years, and increasingly in recent years, large numbers of deceased migrating seabirds, such as Short-tailed Shearwaters (also known as 'muttonbirds'), can wash up on Australian beaches (an event described as a 'wreck'). While this is not necessarily unusual, given the current risk of H5 bird flu arriving in Australia, it is important these events are reported so they can be appropriately investigated as a precaution.

Instances of numerous dead birds in a location should always be reported. Individuals are reminded not to make contact with dead or live birds.