

June 2026 Avian Influenza H5 bird flu: Frequently Asked Questions

What is Avian Influenza?

Avian Influenza, or bird flu, is an infectious disease of birds caused by strains of the Influenza A virus. It primarily affects poultry and wild birds and can be spread to mammals, including humans. H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b (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 in Australia. In recent years, large-scale outbreaks of the H5N1 strain of bird flu have killed millions of wild birds and tens of thousands of mammals around the world. Australia had its first detections of H5 bird flu in June 2026 in a Brown Skua, found on Western Australia's southern coast.

What are the symptoms of H5 bird flu in birds?

Numerous dead birds in a location, including small groups or clusters of wild birds of any species could be a sign that H5 bird flu has infected local populations and should be reported. Signs of unusual illness or death should be reported in seabirds, waterbirds, shorebirds or birds of prey. 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
- 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 H5 bird flu 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.

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

BirdLife Australia generally advises against feeding wild birds. One of the reasons for this is that feeding birds can then bring them into close contact with each other, increasing the likelihood of diseases being spread. To be extra cautious at this time, we strongly advise against feeding wild birds. Bird baths may still be used, provided they are cleaned frequently. This advice may change as the presence of H5 bird flu in Australia escalates.

Is it safe to visit bird sanctuaries and reserves?

Yes. H5 bird flu typically only spreads to people who are in close contact with sick birds. Watching birds and enjoying nature is safe (and good for you!). As always, keep to paths, and follow the direction of signage to avoid disturbing wildlife.

What about walking my dog at the beach or local lake?

Controlling dogs in habitat areas that are important for birds is always a good idea. With the potential threat of H5 bird flu in our environment, keeping your dog on a lead while visiting beaches or your local lakes/wetlands is a good way to reduce disturbances to birds. Healthy and resilient bird populations are the best defence against H5 bird flu. For the health of our pets, it is also recommended to ensure dogs are not interacting with dead or dying birds, or swimming in wetlands where H5 bird flu may be present.

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

Not necessarily, but it should be reported. 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 presence of H5 bird flu 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.

How did H5 bird flu first arrive in Australia?

Highly pathogenic avian influenza was first detected in a migratory Brown Skua at Cape Le Grand National Park, south-western Western Australia on 19th June, 2026. In the days prior, devastating scenes of wildlife mortality from H5N1 in the sub-Antarctic had made headlines.

Those observations were made by researchers with the Australian Antarctic Program in October 2025 and January 2026 on [Heard Island, about 4,000km south-west of Perth](#). Prior to H5N1's arrival on Australia's external territory of Heard Island, Australia and New Zealand remained free of the virus. Seabirds such as skuas and petrels following the Southern Ocean Flyway from the Antarctic Peninsula to Tasmania and mainland Australia were identified early as species that could carry the virus to the Australian continent. Scavengers, including both skuas and petrels, play vital ecological roles as "clean-up crews" in their ecosystems, and are particularly vulnerable to the devastating effects of H5 bird flu.

How does H5 bird flu spread?

Like other viruses, H5 bird flu is spread by infected animals coming into contact with each other. Close contact between birds, such as in agricultural settings, or in 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 domestically, in chicken litter. Wild 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. Scavenging species such as raptors, gulls and crows/ ravens feeding on the carcasses of infected birds or targeting prey species already weakened by an infection may also play a role in transmission. Mammals, including Tasmanian Devils and rakali, and invasive predators such as pigs, foxes and rodents may also spread the virus.

Are other strains of bird flu already present in Australia?

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

How does H5 bird flu differ from other highly pathogenic strains of avian influenza?.

The speed and scale of H5 bird flu outbreaks around the world since 2021, and the fact that these outbreaks occurred in wild bird and mammal populations, is unprecedented. Over 600 species of bird and 100 mammalian species have been affected.

What does H5 bird flu's arrival in Australia mean for Australian birds and other wildlife?

A major outbreak of H5 bird flu in Australian birds could cause large numbers of birds to become infected and die. This could have disastrous consequences, as one in six Australian birds are already facing the threat of extinction. 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 ecosystem.

How will bird flu impact bird conservation efforts?

Conservation efforts are often targeted toward helping species that are suffering from low or declining populations to return to healthier levels. H5 bird flu has the potential to substantially reduce populations even further. 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 possible extinction. An unmitigated outbreak could therefore undo years of investment in threatened species recovery and set Australia back in its trajectory toward achieving 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 this profile of greatest 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, including skuas and petrels also have a higher risk of encountering the virus due to their feeding habits.

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 encountering 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/avianinfluenza/domestic. In H5 bird flu affected areas such as the United States, a few pet cats have contracted the disease, but the risk is low. However, evidence has shown that indoor cats live longer, healthier lives, with the added bonus of keeping birds safe too, so keeping cats away from wild birds has many benefits.

What is BirdLife Australia doing?

BirdLife Australia is sharing extensive data and expertise with government and wildlife health authorities to assist preparedness and planning efforts. We are keeping project teams and volunteers on the ground informed to support 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, and providing expert advice to the appropriate authorities, and we strictly adhere to the emergency response protocols provided by Wildlife Health Australia. BirdLife Australia has worked 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 (AviFluMap). This data-driven tool helps 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 uses data collected by BirdLife Australia, including Birdata, on the movements and timing of migratory birds and congregations of

waterbirds. We're also advocating for practical steps the Australian Government can take to mitigate the impacts of H5 bird flu on Australian birds and other wildlife, and calling for appropriate levels of investment to support the resilience of birds and 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 ecological perspectives.

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. In 2024, \$100 million was announced which included:

- The establishment of a national wildlife task force with jurisdictions (state and territories) known as the HPAI Preparedness Taskforce.
- 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.
- Scaling up public communication and developing measures to prevent disturbance and virus transmission – see DAFF's new bird flu website [here](https://www.agriculture.gov.au/biosecurity-trade/pests-diseases-weeds/animal/avian-influenza/resources).
- 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.
- 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.

Now that H5 bird flu has reached Australia, BirdLife Australia has joined calls from the Invasive Species Council to advocate for the Federal Government to allocate an additional \$200 million over the next two years to strengthen wildlife resilience and to protect coastal and beach habitats.

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:

- Further bolster the resilience of wildlife populations by delivering threat mitigation actions for priority sites and species. Tailored on-ground, threat mitigation actions must be prepared with a thorough risk-assessment process -- with jurisdictions, land managers, species and site experts, and Traditional Ecological Knowledge Elders, whose kinship and family systems are critical to these efforts.
- Increase direct monitoring of threatened and most common species of wildlife most susceptible to H5 bird flu.
- Investment in conservation planning for priority species that considers short and long-term actions needed to respond to compounding risks.

What role is the BirdLife Australia Network playing?

BirdLife Australia is not leading Australia's biosecurity response, and we continue to provide data and expertise about understanding bird populations, identifying risks, monitoring impacts, and protecting the habitats birds depend on. BirdLife Australia has a network of over 52 volunteer groups and branches nationally, and these community members can play a role in early detection – by being the eyes and ears on the ground across our lakes, beaches and wetlands. Community members on the ground may be the first observers of a potential case, making reports of sightings so the agencies authorised and resourced to respond can act quickly and safely. BirdLife Australia is the recent recipient of a \$440,000 [grant from Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry](#) (DAFF) for the purpose of enhancing capacity for citizen science monitoring of wild birds – including reports to the EAD Hotline and the use of the newly launched Bird Impact Tracker (a feature on Birddata). This project also addresses data transfer to support HPAI preparedness.

More generally, we are working together as a network to build resilience in wild bird populations. Healthy bird populations are better able to withstand 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 invasive species, native bird hunting and disturbances to beach habitat areas, all help our vulnerable species.

Is there an H5 bird flu vaccine to protect threatened birds?

Yes – however the broadscale vaccination of wild birds is not considered feasible. The Australian Government has developed a policy on the use of avian influenza vaccines for the protection of rare, protected and valuable avian species, and is currently undertaking vaccine trials to provide safety data for vaccine use in small Australian bird species.

What can I do to help BirdLife Australia?

1. Report. Stay calm and stay safe by avoiding contact with any sick or dead birds. Follow the steps of Avoid, Record and Report as detailed on our dedicated H5 bird flu resource centre. <https://birdlife.org.au/h5n1-avian-influenza/>.
2. Donate. While we cannot stop H5 bird flu from spreading in Australia, we can give birds a better chance of surviving it by protecting and restoring the habitats they depend on. Your donations help us protect and restore critical bird habitats across Australia, monitor bird populations and identify emerging threats, advocate for stronger environmental protections and better conservation outcomes and support science-based conservation efforts that help birds survive and recover. You can donate to our conservation work by following the [link here](#).
3. Upskill to help our monitoring efforts. You can help support researchers and conservationists tracking the impact of H5 bird flu by logging your sightings into Birddata. Recently, Birddata has launched the Bird Impact Tracker (BIT) feature. The BIT feature does not replace the EAD Hotline – rather it enables users to log sightings of sick, injured, or dead birds to help support conservation efforts. <https://birddata.birdlife.org.au/bird-impact-tracker>