Watching for H5N1 Avian Influenza (bird flu) in Australia

birdlife AUSTRALIA

Summary

Avian Influenza, or bird flu, is an infectious disease of birds caused by strains of Influenza A virus. It affects poultry and wild birds and can be spread to mammals including humans. The H5N1 strain is a highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) 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 apart from Australia and experts predict it could arrive here with the spring migration of shorebirds and seabirds from the northern hemisphere.

An outbreak of H5N1 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.

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.

Image - above: Christmas Island Frigatebird - Kay Parkin.
Back: Australian Pelican - Stephen Garth

What are the symptoms of 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 H5N1 has infected local populations and should be reported.

Individual dead birds, or less 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 necks 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
- Sudden death

Save Birds. Save Life.

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

AVOID

Avoid contact with sick or dead wildlife and their environment. Do not allow pets to touch or eat sick or dead wildlife.

RECORD

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

REPORT

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 (and 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
- Contact details of any observers

Scan here for more information

Other ways to help:

Never handle or move dead birds or any birds with suspected Avian Influenza.

Be ready to report a case.
Familiarise yourself with the warning signs and immediately report the details of any suspected case by calling 1800 675 888. Save this number to your phone.

Reduce the spread.
Wash your footwear before and after visiting national parks, nature reserves or agricultural areas to help reduce the chance of accidentally spreading H5N1 in contaminated soil. Be sure to remove all mud, soil and debris, on-site.

Help birds with their social distancing by not feeding them.
It is best not to feed birds as this brings them into close contact with each other, increasing the likelihood of diseases being spread. This applies to several diseases already present in Australia.

Be aware.
Avoid disturbing flocks of birds and keep dogs leashed on beaches when birds are present to prevent unnecessary movement and mixing of birds, and to reduce unnecessary stress that can weaken immune responses.

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