

High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza and Wildlife

Advice for people who encounter sick or dead wild birds

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Summary

This advice has been prepared for individuals or groups who may encounter sick or dead wild birds.

High pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI) is a type of bird flu, an infectious disease that causes severe illness and death in poultry and wild birds. HPAI can also cause disease in mammals, including rare cases in people.

Since 2021, a new strain of HPAI (H5N1 2.3.4.4b) has caused significant illness and deaths in poultry, wild birds and wild mammals in all geographical regions except Oceania (which includes Australia and New Zealand).

Mortalities have been observed in a wide range of bird species, seen as individual bird deaths and mass mortalities. The current global situation means an increased level of risk to Australia via migratory birds from the northern hemisphere and local non-migratory movements of infected wildlife¹.

It is important that individuals and groups who encounter sick or dead wild birds are aware of HPAI, to ensure an appropriate investigation is undertaken and to ensure any risks to themselves and other animals are minimised.

Any unusual illness or death in wild birds should be reported via the [Emergency Animal Disease Hotline](#) on 1800 675 888². Further details of what to look for are included [below](#).

What is avian influenza?

Avian influenza (also known as bird flu) is a viral disease caused by influenza A virus. There are different strains of avian influenza which are categorised as either low pathogenicity (LPAI) or high pathogenicity (HPAI) depending on the potential severity of disease caused in poultry. HPAI viruses are associated with severe disease and high number of deaths in poultry. The strain of HPAI currently causing the global outbreaks of disease is called H5N1 2.3.4.4b. This strain of HPAI has **not** been detected in Australia.

Avian influenza viruses can be transmitted between birds or to other animals via direct contact with respiratory secretions and faecal material, predation or scavenging, and indirect exposure to contaminated environments or objects (e.g. clothing, boots, equipment, etc.).

For further details about avian influenza in wild birds see the [WHA Fact Sheet](#).

¹ Wildlife Health Australia (2023) Technical Issue Update - Global High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza Events Available from: https://wildlifehealthaustralia.com.au/Portals/0/Incidents/HPAI_Technical_Issues_Update_V3Sept23.pdf

² The **Emergency Animal Disease (EAD) Hotline** is a toll-free number that connects callers to the relevant state or territory officer. Anyone suspecting an EAD outbreak should use this number to get immediate advice and assistance.

Which species are affected?

- **Birds:**
 - **Wild birds (native and feral species):** it should be assumed that all wild bird species can be infected by HPAI H5N1 2.3.4.4b virus. Overseas, wild birds commonly affected by H5N1 2.3.4.4b include waterfowl, shorebirds, seabirds and predatory or scavenging birds.
 - **Domestic poultry and captive birds:** poultry (e.g. chickens, turkeys) are particularly susceptible to infection with HPAI virus, but it should be assumed that all bird species can be infected by HPAI H5N1 2.3.4.4b virus.
- **Mammals:**
 - HPAI infections have been reported in mammals.
 - **Wild mammals (native and feral species):** mammals, especially those that may consume or come into contact with birds (e.g. foxes, other scavenger or predatory species) and marine mammals (e.g. seals, sea lions) are susceptible to HPAI H5N1 2.3.4.4b.
 - **Domestic mammals:** a range of domestic mammals (including livestock and pets) are susceptible to HPAI H5N1 2.3.4.4b.

What to look out for

- Small groups or clusters (5 or more) of sick or dead wild birds of **any** species.
- Individual or less than 5 sick or dead wild birds:
 - seabirds, waterbirds, shorebirds or birds of prey (e.g. eagles, hawks)
 - any other bird species with signs of avian influenza infection as outlined below.

Infected live birds may show a wide range of signs if they are sick, including:

- lack of coordination, tremors, swimming in circles
- twisted necks or other unusual 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.

Can people be infected?

- Although avian influenza viruses do not normally infect humans, some strains have been associated with disease in humans ranging from mild illness to severe disease and death (see [Australian Department of Health and Aged Care](#)).
- Avoid contact with sick or dead birds or other animals.
- Avoid contact with land or waterways in which sick or dead birds or other animals have been observed.
- Information for bird owners, including protecting yourself and your birds, is available at [Australian Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry](#).
- It is safe to eat properly cooked eggs, meat and poultry products.

What to do

- **AVOID** contact with sick or dead wildlife and their environment. 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.
- **REPORT any unusual sickness or mass mortality events in wildlife via the [Emergency Animal Disease Hotline on 1800 675 888](#)**. Reporting will alert authorities to the event so they can evaluate the need for diagnostic testing or other investigation. Even if testing is not undertaken, all reports help inform our understanding of the disease and how to manage it.

More information and resources

More information and resources on HPAI and wildlife are available on the WHA website [HPAI incident page](#).

Topics include:

- general HPAI advice and information from WHA (e.g. a Fact Sheet on AIV and Australian wild birds, HPAI advice targeted for particular stakeholder groups, technical advice, videos and a communications guide)
- WHA HPAI and wild animals in Australia - risk mitigation toolboxes
- national and international HPAI guidelines from government agencies
- other relevant information (e.g. human health, communications materials).



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