

## **Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza/ Bird flu: Frequently Asked Questions v3**

### **1. I have found a dead/ dying bird what should I do?**

In England and Wales, if you find a single bird of prey or owl, 3 or more dead wild waterfowl (swans, geese or ducks), gulls, or 5 or more dead wild birds of any other species (including gulls) at the same place at the same time, report them to the DEFRA helpline on 03459 33 55 77.

DEFRA are testing some of the birds that are reported for bird flu – they are unable to test all of them. If the bird(s) are on an RSPB reserve, please also inform the reserve staff. Do not touch or handle the bird(s).

#### **1a. I have found a dying/ sick bird, should I call the RSPCA?**

The RSPCA are not accepting any seabirds into their centres, because of the risk of bird flu (which if introduced into the centre, would then mean the whole centre would need to close), but both organisations are still continuing to attend sick or dying birds.

### **What is bird flu/ how does it spread?**

**2. What is HPAI?** This stands for Highly Pathogenic Avian Flu, also known as avian or bird flu. It is a virus that causes a disease in birds, including poultry, pigeons and wild birds. Like other viruses there are lots of different strains, most of which cause no or few signs of disease in infected wild birds. By contrast HPAI (which is causing the current outbreak) can cause severe disease and high mortality. Pathogenic means “disease causing”.

**3. Which bird species are affected?** Over last winter bird flu was primarily affecting overwintering geese, as well as swans and ducks and some raptors. A much wider number of species are now affected, especially seabirds (including gannets, great skuas, tern species, guillemots, gulls), but also other species such as waders and corvids (crow family).

**4. How does bird flu spread?** The virus is spread via infected bird faeces, nasal secretions, and saliva. Wild birds are often more resistant than domestic ones to bird flu and can carry the disease without showing symptoms. This has led to speculation that they are main cause of spreading, but there are several ways. Globally the most significant has been the unrestricted movement of poultry and poultry products.

**5. Where has bird flu come from?** Whilst bird flu circulates in wild birds quite normally, and has for millennia, the new strain of HPAI is a more recent issue and is hitting already struggling bird populations. It originated in intensive poultry operations in East Asia and has now spread into wild birds by two ways: the movement of poultry, poultry products and associated vehicles and equipment; and through the movements and migrations of wild bird populations.

**6. What are the symptoms of bird flu?** The main clinical signs of HPAI in birds (which can include any or a combination of the following) are: sudden and rapid increase in the number of birds found dead; swollen head; closed and excessively watery eyes; lethargy and depression; recumbency and unresponsiveness; incoordination and loss of balance; head and body tremoring; drooping of the wings and/or dragging of legs; twisting of the head and neck; haemorrhages on shanks of the legs and under the skin of the neck; respiratory distress such as gaping (mouth breathing), nasal snicking (coughing sound), sneezing, gurgling or rattling; discoloured or loose watery droppings. Clinical signs can vary between species of bird and some species (for example ducks and geese) may show minimal clinical signs.

**7. Are species other than birds affected?** Bird flu has been found in small numbers of foxes, harbour seal, grey seal and otter.

**What is happening?**

**8. How bad is it?** This is the largest outbreak ever in the UK.

**9. Is there bird flu in my area?** We don't yet have a comprehensive picture for the whole of the UK. Over the last few weeks, we've seen it intensify in Scotland affecting some of our globally important seabird populations. It's also now present down the east coast and south coast of England, and it seems likely therefore that it will spread throughout the UK. Shetland appears to be the most heavily affected area, but there have also been reports of widespread sick and dead seabirds at Fair Isle, Orkney, the Western Isles, St Kilda, Bass Rock, Mull of Galloway and many other places.

**10. What will be the impact on our bird populations?** We are concerned about the impact on all of our birds, but in particular at the moment our seabirds. Scotland's seabird populations are of major global significance. For example, the UK is home to 56% of the world's gannet population and Scotland has 60% of the world's great skuas. They are already under massive pressure from human impacts including climate change, lack of prey fish, deaths through entanglement in fishing gear (known as by-catch) and development pressure. Many seabirds breed in dense colonies, now risking rapid and devastating spread of HPAI.

Seabirds tend to live for a long time and take longer to reach breeding age. They also usually have fewer chicks. This means deaths from avian flu could further decrease declining numbers and that any recovery from the disease would take far longer.

We don't yet know what the full impact will be on birds but will be carrying out monitoring to help us understand more and to identify what action might be needed.

**11. Will the outbreak get worse?** Unfortunately, the timing is not good. Many of our coastal seabird colonies have bird flu, and mid-June is the time when many young will hatch. This means there will be increased movement in and out of the colonies as birds bring food to their young, which may mean that bird flu is spread further.

**What is RSPB doing?**

**12. What is RSPB doing about this?** We are doing our best to optimise the outcome for wild birds, whilst also protecting the health and well-being of our teams and visitors to our sites.

On our reserves where we know there is bird flu, we are taking measures where possible to both reduce disturbance to vulnerable birds and to reduce the risk to the public. This might include asking the public to keep dogs on a short lead, restricting access to some areas or restricting some activities. Minimising unnecessary flight among infected birds is important as using energy could inhibit their ability to fight the virus and additional movement could spread the virus.

**13. Why are RSPB just leaving dead/ dying birds on the ground?** Our policy in most cases is to leave the dead birds on the ground, unless we consider their location to create a significant public health risk. This is because handling dead or dying birds is a health risk for the workforce. An example of a higher risk location would be close to a path, or in a car park. Removing dead birds can also cause disturbance and unnecessary flight among infected birds. This bird movement takes energy that the birds need to be conserving so that they can be more resilient to the disease and can also spread the disease further. This is a difficult balancing act and local reserve staff are keeping the situation under constant review.

**What should governments/ agencies be doing?**

**14. What does RSPB want governments to do in response to the current HPAI outbreaks?**

- To set up a Task Force to develop a National Response Plan for HPAI in Wild Birds in each of the four countries of the UK and build cross-UK coordination and information sharing. (A Task Force is now in place and operating in Scotland and in Wales)
- Clear guidance on wild bird carcass removal and disposal in high-risk areas.
- To develop effective monitoring, surveillance, research and reporting systems to build real-time understanding of the virus and its progress in wild birds.
- To help build resilience in seabird populations to diseases such as HPAI by

#### **14a. Should wild birds be culled in response to HPAI outbreaks**

The following points are for reactive use in comms when the idea of culling wild birds as a response to HPIA is raised:

- The RSPB maintains that the killing of wild birds should never be considered as a disease control measure for HPAI.
- Any culls as efforts to control HPAI would run contrary to advice from the UN FAO as well as contravening commitments made by signatory countries to the Convention on Migratory Species and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands
- It would be impossible to target effectively: understanding of the disease is incomplete and the prevalence of infected, virus-carrying but asymptomatic or apparently asymptomatic birds during outbreaks is unknown and likely to vary between species.
- Even were all cases evident, any cull could never guarantee to remove all individuals and to significantly reduce risk.
- Disturbance from culling activity risks further spread of the virus and additional stress on birds.

#### **Humans and bird flu**

**15. Can I catch bird flu?** Human infections with HPAI are rare and the risk to the general public's health is very low. However, some viruses, such as H5N1 or H7N9, have been associated with human disease. This is why we are encouraging people not to have close contact with sick or injured birds. Of all the reported cases of HPAI in humans worldwide, almost all have been associated with extremely close contact with infected birds (dead or alive) within populations of domestic poultry. Close contact includes touching infected birds; contact with droppings or bedding;

killing or preparing infected birds for cooking; inhalation of aerosols (e.g. feather dust).

**16. Can I be protected against bird flu?** There is no vaccine against bird flu, the seasonal flu vaccine does not protect against it.

**17. What are the symptoms of bird flu in humans?**

i) Conjunctivitis.

ii) Fever with a temperature  $\geq 38^{\circ}\text{C}$ .

iii) Cough or shortness of breath requiring hospitalisation.

iv) Diarrhoea, vomiting, and abdominal pain.

Contact a doctor if you have concerns.

**Garden birds:**

**18. Could I get bird flu from the birds in my garden?** Bird flu is predominantly being reported in bird species that are not commonly found in gardens and therefore this is very unlikely. There are many reasons why a garden bird might be dead or dying through natural causes. Should you find a dead or dying bird in your garden, it would nevertheless be wise to apply good hygiene standards if you need to move a dead bird – wear gloves and wash hands thoroughly.

**19. I have found a dead bird in my garden, could it be bird flu?** As above.

**20. Should I continue to feed garden birds/ clean the bird feeders in my garden?**

It is extremely unlikely that bird flu could be transmitted to people by feeding birds. Nevertheless, good hygiene at bird feeding stations is always sensible, both to protect the birds and ourselves. This includes regularly cleaning feeders outside with mild disinfectant, removing old bird-food, spacing-out feeders as much as possible and washing your hands. It is, of course, always sensible to wash your hands thoroughly after feeding ducks or other birds, or if you come into contact with bird droppings.

**Pets/ outdoor activities**

**21. Might my dog catch bird flu?** There have not currently been any cases of this, and it would need to involve your dog coming into close contact with sick or dead birds. We are recommending that dog walkers avoid areas where there is known

to be bird flu. Do not allow your dog to go into areas where there are sick or dead birds and keep them on a short leash.

**22. Could I catch bird flu when I go fishing/ boating/ swimming in the sea/ a river? / I usually go swimming / surfing etc in the areas where there is now bird flu, is that okay?** The virus is known to remain in water for some time where there have been incidents of bird flu. If your planned activity is in an area where there have been no reports of bird flu or it does not involve being in the water, then the risk will be very low. If your activity is planned in an area where there is known to be bird flu, then it best to practice good hygiene after your activity. If you come across any dead or dying birds, do not touch them and report them to the DEFRA/ DAERA helpline (see first question above). If your activity is likely to disturb birds, then please consider using an alternative area. Disturbing birds may increase the rate of spread between birds as they are moved to other areas. Disturbance also reduces the resilience of wild birds to fight disease as it uses their energy stores.

**23. What can I do to help?** It is important that we know as much as possible about the spread of the disease so please do report dead or dying birds that you find but stay away from them. Please consider contributing to the RSPB's bird flu appeal which will make a real difference in the work we are doing to respond to bird flu. Details on the RSPB website.