

High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza and Wild Birds: Communications guide for managers of wild animal populations

Purpose

This is a general guide to assist managers of wild animal populations with public communication on high pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI) in wild animals in Australia. It may also be useful for managers of captive wild animal populations, such as zoos, fauna parks and rehabilitation sites, as well as Government agencies.

This guide is limited to communications while HPAI has not been detected in wild animals in Australia.

Context

Since 2021, a new strain of HPAI (H5Nx clade 2.3.4.4b) has caused unprecedented outbreaks of HPAI in wild birds and poultry in all continents apart from Oceania (including Australia and New Zealand) and mainland Antarctica. The emergence of this new strain of HPAI represents an increased risk to Australia, which is partly because an outbreak of the 2.3.4.4b strain is likely to have more severe impacts than previous strains of HPAI, including impacts on wild birds.

In recognition of this increased risk to Australia, managers of wild animal populations are encouraged to (i) raise awareness about HPAI amongst their stakeholders to enhance early detection of HPAI in wild animals; and (ii) enhance biosecurity to mitigate the risk of HPAI introduction, establishment and spread in wild animal populations. The need for managers of wild animal populations to undertake HPAI awareness and outreach amongst their stakeholders is reflected in Wildlife Health Australia's [HPAI Risk Mitigation Toolbox for Wildlife Managers](#).

Following a detection of HPAI in wild animals in Australia, communication and engagement will be coordinated nationally by the National Biosecurity Communication and Engagement Network ([NBCEN](#)), and is not the direct responsibility of managers of wild animal populations. For that reason, this guide will not cover communications that apply following the detection of HPAI in wild animals in Australia. It is recommended that managers of wild animal populations engage with the Department of Primary Industries or Agriculture in their State/Territory to discuss HPAI prevention and preparedness, and to review outbreak communications materials.

When to use this guide?

This guide may assist wildlife managers in preparing communications materials (e.g. signage, fliers, media releases, social media posts or website content) targeted to stakeholders that may interact with wild animal populations or their environments, including:

- members of the public
- bird banders, wildlife rangers and researchers
- veterinarians and animal health professionals.

Information to include in communications materials

Essential information to include...

- **Signs of illness** in wild animals that stakeholders should look out for.
- **What to do** if stakeholders observe unusual illness or deaths in wild animals, including **how to report** signs of disease consistent with HPAI.
- Any **biosecurity measures** or personal protective equipment (PPE) requirements for the site and wild animal populations.

Recommended information to include...

- Information about **human health risks** from HPAI.
- Information on the **avian influenza situation in wild animals** in Australia and overseas, and risk of HPAI to wild animals in Australia. The information should emphasise the current increased risk level to Australia and therefore the need for heightened vigilance
- The fact that HPAI is a **nationally notifiable disease**, and that AUSVETPLAN sets out the nationally agreed response approach to AI outbreaks in Australia. This includes agreed policy in Australia with respect to LPAI or HPAI detection in wild birds.
- Guidance on **what may happen if HPAI is detected** in wild animals in Australia (response and recovery), as described in the [HPAI Risk Mitigation Toolbox for Wildlife Managers](#).

Communication Style

This checklist can be used to encourage balanced communication.

Don't...

- Use sensationalist language including “clickbait” style headlines.
- Use exaggerated claims or descriptions.
- Use fear inducing photos of wild animals.
- Use fear inducing or emotional language particularly when discussing HPAI risks.
- Use “us versus them” language.

Do...

- Ensure use of scientifically accurate, referenced information.
- Seek technical review (see below).
- Use matter-of-fact language without hyperbole.
- Provide context for quotes, claims or research findings.
- Emphasise the ecological and economic benefit and importance of wild animals.
- Promote co-existence with wild animals.
- Address and dispel misconceptions and myths.
- Ensure any photos of people handling wild animals show correct use of PPE.
- Provide advice and language tailored to different stakeholder groups.

Communication Style Examples

X *“Members of the public should not go near or touch wild animals as they might catch bird flu, a deadly disease”.*

- Lacks information so can easily be misinterpreted.

✓ *“HPAI can infect people, although infections with the current strains are uncommon and have typically only occurred in people who have had close contact with infected birds. Infection can cause a wide range of symptoms from no symptoms at all, to severe illness and death (see [Australian Department of Health and Aged Care](#)). Always view wild animals at a distance and avoid contact with sick or dead wild animals.*

- Provides context; includes practical advice and links to reliable sources of further information.

X *“Headline: Ducks in the city - a cause for concern”*

- 'Clickbait' style headline using negative, fear-inducing language

✓ *“Headline: Waterbirds and migratory birds in our park: here’s what to remember”*

- Informative and appealing headline. Can lead into discussion about the species of birds typically found at the site.

X *“Avian influenza is a deadly disease of birds that is at Australia’s doorstep. We must all play our part to keep it out of Australia.”*

- Fear-inducing and emotional language. Lacks information about the real risk to Australia.

✓ *“ Since 2021, a new strain of HPAI has caused significant illness and deaths in poultry and wild birds on all continents except Australia and Antarctica. Recent research has determined that the likelihood of this new strain entering Australia via migratory birds has increased compared to previous years, with August to November being the period of particular concern as this is when migratory birds return to Australia from the northern hemisphere. The [WHA webpage on HPAI](#) has information on how stakeholders can reduce the risk of HPAI to Australia.*

- Informative and factual.

X *“If you see sick or dead wildlife and suspect avian influenza, call your local council.”*

- Incorrect reporting channel.

✓ *“ If you see sick or dead wildlife and suspect avian influenza, you must report it to:*

- The 24-hour Emergency Animal Disease Hotline on 1800 675 888
- The Department of Primary Industries or Agriculture in the State/Territory in which the event has occurred
- Your local State/Territory WHA Coordinator
- Your local private veterinarian.
- Correct reporting channel.

Use these words

Native Diverse
Pollinators
Seed dispersers
Ecologically significant
Protected Complex
Insect controllers
Beneficial
Important

Avoid these words

Pests
Diseased Harmful
Disease spreading
Nuisance animals
Dangerous
Virus-laden Deadly
Harbour disease

Review of communications materials

It is recommended that managers of wild animal populations provide the Department of Primary Industries or Agriculture in their State/Territory with the opportunity to review communications materials relating to HPAI prevention and preparedness prior to publication.

Other contacts who may be of assistance in reviewing communications before release:

- Wildlife Health Australia Wildlife Coordinators or Environment Representatives in the relevant state/territory agency ([link to contact details](#))
- Wildlife Health Australia staff ([link to contact details](#))
- University researchers and ecologists.

Useful Talking Points

About avian influenza

- Avian influenza (also known as bird flu) is a viral disease caused by influenza A virus.
- As with other viruses, there are different and numerous strains. Strains of avian influenza are categorised as either low pathogenicity (LPAI) or high pathogenicity (HPAI) depending on the potential severity of disease caused in poultry.
- LPAI naturally occurs in wild birds in Australia, notably waterfowl (ducks, geese and swans) and shorebirds, with little ill effect.
- Some specific LPAI subtypes (subtypes H5 and H7) can evolve to high pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI) forms following spillover and circulation in poultry.
- HPAI typically causes severe disease in poultry and may also impact other species including wild birds, wild mammals and humans.
- Although avian influenza viruses do not normally infect humans, some subtypes have been associated with disease in humans ranging from mild illness to severe disease.

Avian influenza- reporting requirements

- Avian influenza (both LPAI and HPAI) in birds is a notifiable disease in Australia, meaning that if you suspect or can confirm that an animal is showing symptoms of avian influenza, you must report it to:
 - The 24-hour Emergency Animal Disease Hotline on 1800 675 888
 - The Department of Primary Industries or Agriculture in the State/Territory in which the event has occurred

- Your local State/Territory WHA Coordinator
- Your local private veterinarian.

Avian influenza- current overseas situation

- Since 2021, a new strain of HPAI (caused by a strain known as 2.3.4.4b) has caused significant illness and deaths in poultry, wild birds and wild mammals on all continents except Oceania (Australia and New Zealand), and mainland Antarctica.
- The emergence of this strain is associated with a significant increase in the frequency and geographic range of HPAI outbreaks in both wild birds and poultry overseas.
- Mortalities have been observed in a wide range of bird and mammal species, seen as individual animal deaths and mass mortalities.

Avian influenza in Australia

- HPAI strain 2.3.4.4b has not been detected in Australia in wild birds or poultry.
- LPAI viruses have been detected in wild birds in Australia and are part of the natural virus community of Australian wild birds. Targeted surveillance has not detected HPAI virus in Australian wild birds previously.
- Recent research has determined that the likelihood and consequence of this new strain entering Australia via migratory birds has increased compared to previous years, with August to November the period of particular concern as this is when migratory birds return to Australia from the northern hemisphere.

What can stakeholders do to reduce the risk of HPAI

There is no way to prevent HPAI entering Australia through migratory movements of wild birds into Australia. However, work is underway to increase the chances of detecting any outbreaks early and preparing to respond if outbreaks occur. Stakeholders should:

- Become familiar with the clinical signs associated with avian influenza in wild birds.
- Report unusual signs of disease or mass deaths in wildlife to:
 - The 24-hour Emergency Animal Disease Hotline on 1800 675 888
 - The Department of Primary Industries or Agriculture in the State/Territory in which the event has occurred
 - Your local State/Territory WHA Coordinator or
 - Your local private veterinarian.
- For those interacting directly with wildlife, such as researchers, you must operate with an increased awareness of the potential risk of disease in wild birds. Always maintain good hygiene and biosecurity practices before, during and after working with wildlife. Where possible, before undertaking activities, observe for any unusual signs of sickness or deaths in wild birds.
- Contact with sick or dead birds or other animals should be avoided.
- Contact with land or waterways in which sick or dead birds or other animals have been observed should also be avoided.
- If you develop flu-like symptoms after handling wild birds, contact your health care provider.

Response to an HPAI outbreak in Australia

- Australia has nationally agreed response and cost-sharing arrangements in place to respond to animal disease incursions and outbreaks, including for avian influenza.
- The Avian Influenza AUSVETPLAN is part of our national response arrangements. This plan sets out the nationally agreed approach to avian influenza outbreaks in Australia and can be found at animalhealthaustralia.com.au.
- The Australian Government publishes information about all current response activities on outbreak.gov.au.

Useful Resources

WHA HPAI [resources](#):

- HPAI Advice for people who encounter sick or dead wild birds
- HPAI Risk management advice for bird banders, wildlife rangers and researchers
- HPAI Advice for veterinarians and animal health professionals
- Fact sheet: Avian influenza in wild birds in Australia
- Technical Issue Update – Global High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza Events
- HPAI Risk Mitigation Toolbox for Wildlife Managers.

Other WHA resources:

- [WHAT TO DO IF... You see sick, orphaned or injured wildlife?](#)
- [National Avian Influenza Wild Bird Surveillance](#)
- [Emergency Wildlife Disease Response Guidelines](#)
- [National Wildlife Biosecurity Guidelines](#).

AUSVETPLAN:

- The Avian Influenza AUSVETPLAN sets out the nationally agreed response approach to AI outbreaks in Australia. This includes agreed policy in Australia with respect to LPAI or HPAI detection in wild birds.
- The **AUSVETPLAN Disease Strategy for Avian Influenza** can be downloaded from [Animal Health Australia website](#) under Disease-specific documents.

Example HPAI communication materials from overseas:

- WOAHA & IUCN Wildlife Health Specialist Group [Avian Influenza and Wildlife: Risk management for people working with wild birds](#)
- Dept for Environment Food & Rural Affairs- Avian influenza: [posters for land managers](#)
- Council of Managers of National Antarctic Programs- [one page summary](#)
- International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators- [2022-23 Biosecurity Protocols Regarding Avian Influenza](#)
- The Raptor Centre (University of Minnesota)- [notice to falconers](#)
- U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service [California Condor Recovery Program](#)
- Australian Antarctic Division Safety & Environment Alert- [Avian \(bird\) Influenza](#)
- Michelle Wille - [Avian influenza resources](#).