

H5 Avian Influenza (H5 Bird Flu) and Wildlife

Advice for people working with wildlife in the field

Version 4.0, January 2026

People who work with wildlife in the field, such as **bird banders, wildlife rangers and researchers**, should be aware of H5 bird flu to ensure appropriate reporting and investigation, and to minimise risks to themselves, other people, and animals. If sick or dead wildlife are observed:

- **AVOID** – keep yourself and others safe. Do not make direct or indirect contact with sick or dead wildlife or their immediate environment. Do not handle or remove sick or dead wild birds or mammals unless instructed to do so by government authorities.
- **RECORD** – make a note of what you observe, including: number of animals affected, species/type of animal, location (GPS reading), date and time. Take photos or videos if safe to do so.
- **REPORT** multiple sick or dead wild animals 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.

What is H5 Bird Flu?

Bird flu is also known as "[avian influenza](#)" or "AI". The different strains of bird flu viruses are classified as either low pathogenicity (LPAI) or high pathogenicity (HPAI). Which group a bird flu virus belongs to depends on how seriously it affects poultry. HPAI bird flu viruses can cause serious illness and death in poultry, and sometimes also in wild birds.

H5 bird flu is also known as *high pathogenicity avian influenza H5N1*. It includes the serious and highly contagious H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b strain which has been spreading globally since 2021 through the movement of wild birds, with unprecedented impact. **H5 bird flu has not been detected in Australia.**

H5 bird flu has caused significant illness and deaths in poultry, wild birds and mammals in all geographical regions except Oceania (which includes Australia and New Zealand). Overseas it has infected more than 560 bird species and more than 100 mammalian species, including wild marine and land mammals. The current global situation means an increased level of risk to Australia via the movements of infected wild birds from the northern hemisphere, Antarctic/Sub-Antarctic regions, or from regions just to the north of Australia¹. H5 bird flu 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 H5 bird flu in wildlife see the [WHA H5 bird flu FAQs](#).

Which species are affected?

- **Wild birds:** All wild bird species should be considered potentially susceptible to H5 bird flu. Overseas, wild birds commonly affected by H5 bird flu include waterfowl, shorebirds, seabirds and predatory or scavenging species.

¹ Wildlife Health Australia (2025) Technical Update - Global High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza in Wildlife Available from: https://wildlifehealthaustralia.com.au/Portals/0/Incidents/HPAI_Technical_Update.pdf

- **Domestic poultry and captive birds:** poultry (e.g. chickens, turkeys) are particularly susceptible to H5 bird flu, but it should be assumed that all domestic bird species can be infected.
- **Wild mammals:** terrestrial mammals, especially carnivores (e.g. foxes) and marine mammals (e.g. seals, sea lions), are susceptible to H5 bird flu. Infection of terrestrial mammals is presumed to occur via consuming infected birds through predation or scavenging. Infection of marine mammals is thought to have occurred via close contact with, or ingestion of infected birds, or contact with marine environments contaminated with virus from infected birds.
- **Domestic mammals:** a range of domestic mammals (including livestock and pets) have been reported with H5 bird flu, including domestic cats, dogs and cattle.

What to look out for and how to report

Infected **live birds or mammals** may show a wide range of signs, including:

- lack of coordination, tremors, seizures, 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
- sudden death, including the potential for mass mortality events.

If you encounter sick or dead wildlife, you should AVOID – RECORD – REPORT:

AVOID – keep yourself and others safe. Do not make direct or indirect contact with sick or dead wildlife or their immediate environment. Do not handle or remove sick or dead wild birds or mammals unless instructed to do so by government authorities.

RECORD – make a note of what you observe, including: number of animals affected, species/type of animal, location (GPS reading), date and time. Take photos or videos if safe.

REPORT multiple sick or dead wild animals via the [Emergency Animal Disease \(EAD\) Hotline](#) on 1800 675 888².

Authorities will evaluate the need for further investigation and laboratory testing. Whether further investigation is undertaken will consider multiple factors including the number of sick or dead animals, species affected, clinical signs, and ability to collect appropriate samples for laboratory testing. Even if testing is not undertaken, all reports help inform our understanding of the disease and how to manage it.

Can humans catch H5 bird flu?

- Bird flu viruses, including H5 bird flu, have the potential to infect humans.
- Human infections with bird flu are rare, usually mild, and are generally associated with close contact with infected animals or their environments.
- It is recommended to **AVOID** contact with sick or dead wildlife and their immediate environment (e.g., land or waterways in which sick or dead wildlife have been observed).
- For more information on how to stay safe when handling wildlife suspected or confirmed to be infected with H5 bird flu, see advice below.
- It is safe to eat properly cooked eggs, meat and poultry products.

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.

What to do during routine wild animal observation or handling

- Become familiar with the clinical signs associated with H5 bird flu in wild animals.
- Operate with an increased awareness of the potential risk of H5 bird flu in wild animals.
- Always maintain good hygiene and biosecurity practices before, during and after working with wildlife (see [Hygiene and biosecurity](#) below).
- Where possible, before undertaking activities, observe for any unusual signs of sickness or deaths.
- If dead or sick wildlife are observed, remember to **AVOID, RECORD and REPORT**.

Hygiene and biosecurity

To prevent spread of disease and protect the health of wildlife, domestic birds and humans, good hygiene and biosecurity practices should be maintained when visiting sites, moving between sites and when handling wildlife. This includes measures prior to arrival, during activities and after departure.

The following measures should **always** be taken when observing or handling wild animals, even if they appear healthy. For further information on best practice biosecurity measures for those working with wildlife, see the [National Wildlife Biosecurity Guidelines](#).

- Use appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), including gloves, a facemask and eye protection, and ensure PPE is removed properly to avoid self-contamination.
- Particular attention should be given to hand hygiene after handling wildlife, after contact with potentially contaminated materials and after removal of gloves. Hands and arms should be washed with abundant soap and warm water, then dried thoroughly. Hand sanitizer (gel with 60 to 90% ethanol concentration) can be applied to reinforce disinfection but should not replace proper handwashing.
- Avoid rubbing eyes or touching the mouth, eating, drinking or smoking until hands are clean.
- Handle wildlife in a well-lit and well-ventilated area to minimise the possibility of inhaling dried faecal or other material.
- Use clean bird bags for each bird to minimise the risk of transmitting disease between birds.
- Where practicable, use a clean or new pair of gloves for each animal, especially for species which do not congregate or live in close proximity to each other.
- Clothing, footwear, vehicles and equipment (e.g. used for capture, handling, marking, holding) should be thoroughly cleaned after use, followed by disinfection. Waste material (e.g. disposable gloves) should be disposed of appropriately (e.g. sealed in plastic bags).
- Avoid contact with domestic birds and poultry for 48 hours after handling wild birds and avoid visiting multiple field sites in one day.

More information and resources

The WHA website [H5 Bird Flu resource centre](#) includes information and links to resources for:

- Animal health professionals and wildlife care providers
- Wildlife managers
- Communication about H5 bird flu
- H5 bird flu human health considerations



Find out more at wildlifehealthaustralia.com.au

Email: admin@wildlifehealthaustralia.com.au

Or call [+61 2 9960 6333](tel:+61299606333)