



## **Avian Influenza: Advice to Birdwatchers**

### **1. AVIAN INFLUENZA AND BIRDWATCHERS**

#### **1.1 Wild bird to human transmission**

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) H5N1 is spread mainly through nasal secretions and faeces. In nearly all cases in humans the infection resulted from close and prolonged contact with infected poultry. Even in these circumstances, the virus is very rarely transmitted from poultry to humans: the number of human H5N1 infections is tiny compared to the number of people exposed to infected poultry.

Apart from one unproven case in Turkey, there are no known cases of transmission from wild birds to humans. Thus the risks to human health from wild birds carrying avian influenza currently seem extremely low.

#### **1.2. Is birdwatching safe?**

Yes, since the risk of acquiring infection from wild birds is so low. However, it is important to exercise common sense and good hygiene. Sites of known H5N1 outbreaks are best avoided. Wherever you are, avoid touching wild birds, their droppings or water near them, and wash your hands before eating and after any contact with animals. Never try to pick up sick or dead animals. These simple precautions will minimise the risk from other, commoner infections as well as avian influenza.

#### **1.3. Helping with surveillance of wild birds**

Many countries are conducting surveillance programmes for wild birds. These typically include monitoring wetland and other sites for sick or dead birds, and taking faecal samples from live, apparently healthy birds. BirdLife Partners and other bird conservation organizations are involved with this monitoring work. Birdwatchers and wildfowling can make a valuable contribution to these programmes. Always follow local or national guidelines and protocols. Sampling should only be carried out by those with proper training and protective clothing.

Birdwatchers in the field can help by keeping their eyes open for any suspicious deaths or sickness amongst wild birds. All birdwatchers encounter dead birds occasionally, and

almost all these deaths will be due to perfectly usual causes, such as cold weather or starvation. However, if you come across an incident that seems out of the ordinary, report it promptly to the appropriate authorities, such as a local government office.

What constitutes an incident worth reporting? Again, common sense is needed. The UK government's advice, for example, is to contact the authorities if you find one or more dead swans, ducks or geese, more than three dead birds of the same species, or more than five dead birds of different species, in the same place.

#### **1.4. Feeding wild birds**

The birds that visit feeders and bird tables are very unlikely to carry the H5N1 virus. Observe normal, sensible hygiene precautions: wash hands after handling equipment that has been splashed with bird faeces.

Clean and disinfect feeders, bird-tables and bird-baths regularly, using 10% disinfectant solution. Rinse out several times after treatment to ensure all the disinfectant has been removed. Water containers should be rinsed out daily during the warmer months.

Do not bring the feeders into the house to clean them, but do it outside, using separate utensils. Wear gloves when cleaning feeders and bird tables, and always wash your hands when finished.

Bird-tables and feeding areas should be swept clean regularly, and moved several times a year, to prevent build up of food particles or droppings. If food takes days to clear either from containers or the ground, reduce the amount of food that you put out.

#### **1.5. Birding tourism**

The same essential precautions apply wherever you are birdwatching. When travelling to areas where outbreaks have been reported, it is wise to take additional precautions, such as avoiding visits to live animal markets and poultry farms, and avoiding poultry or egg dishes if these are undercooked or raw.

## **2. GOVERNMENT AND OTHER OFFICIAL RESPONSES TO BIRD FLU**

### **2.1. Culling**

The World Health Organisation, Food and Agriculture Organisation and OIE (the World Organisation for Animal Health) agree that control of avian influenza in wild birds by culling is not feasible, and should not be attempted.

Experience suggests that control of problem birds by culling very rarely works. Where wild birds may be carrying HPAI H5N1, any attempts at culling would spread the virus more widely. Survivors would disperse to new places, and healthy birds become stressed and more prone to infection.

As well as being ineffective, or even making things worse, culling represents a distraction of effort from more useful and appropriate control measures.

If your local or national government or other authority announces plans to cull wild birds, you should contact them immediately. Point out that this is against the advice of the FAO, WHO and OIE, and that it is almost certain to prove counter-productive by scattering potentially infected birds more widely. Also contact your national BirdLife Partner, which may be coordinating campaigns and other responses to misguided attempts at culling.

## **2.2. 'Deterrence' through habitat destruction**

Some governments have proposed draining wetlands and destroying reedbeds and other breeding and roosting grounds to deter returning migrant birds from settling. Deliberate environmental damage of this kind poses risks not only to birds and biodiversity, but also puts human and economic wellbeing in jeopardy. Apart from their extremely high conservation value, wetlands provide vital ecosystem services like flood control, water purification and nutrient recycling, and the livelihoods of many communities depend on them.

If your local or national government announces plans to drain wetlands, or otherwise destroy nesting, feeding and roosting sites, you should contact them immediately. Point out that this is against the best advice, and likely to prove counterproductive. Displaced birds may move to new sites, where it will be harder to monitor them for signs of infection. Birds will gather in greater numbers at remaining sites, where a combination of stress and crowded conditions will increase the likelihood of infection spreading.