

SAFETY & ENVIRONMENT ALERT

Avian (bird) Influenza

Background

The avian influenza virus (HPAI) H5N1 strain is extremely contagious amongst birds and has been causing widespread deaths of seabirds in the northern hemisphere, southern Africa, and the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. It is expected that HPAI will arrive in the Southern Ocean and Antarctica this summer (2022–23) with returning migratory species, but once in the area, HPAI could be transmitted by other bird species and potentially seals.

Human infection

The risk of infection in humans **is low**. Known infections to date have resulted in mild-to-severe illness.

Transmission

- Bird-to-bird transmission can be through the faecal-oral route, contamination (e.g. water, soil), direct contact and respiratory droplets. People can spread HPAI by exposing birds to contaminated clothing, equipment or food.
- Bird to human transmission has occurred in people interacting directly with birds. To date, no examples of human-to-human transmission have been detected.

Advice for Expeditioners

- Assume that HPAI will arrive in seabird populations this summer.
- It is **mandatory** for all expeditioners to complete the online AAD Environmental Management course and attend pre-departure presentations before heading south. The information includes detailed biosecurity precautions. Ensure you have completed this training ASAP.
- Avoid areas (as much as possible) where seabirds and seals haul out, transit, or congregate.
- Maintain the AAD's wildlife approach distances, as detailed in your field manual. If wildlife approaches you, safely back off to maintain the prescribed distance.
- **Do not** touch or go near dead or dying wildlife (seabirds and seals).
- Wash/sanitise hands frequently, especially if touching any of the surrounding environment.
- Avoid walking, sitting, lying or leaving equipment on the ground or rocks in areas where faeces have been freshly deposited, or in waterbodies downstream from wildlife congregations.

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Additional advice for people working around wildlife

- Before approaching wildlife, observe from a distance (use binoculars) to detect any unusual behaviours (e.g. loss of coordination/balance, trembling, respiratory distress, lethargy, drooping wings, dragging legs and unresponsiveness). If unusually high numbers of dead animals and/or multiple signs of odd behaviour are detected, **DO NOT** approach. From a safe distance, video suspect animals and take panoramic photos of the site. Leave the area, clean and disinfect any clothing and items that may have come in contact with potentially contaminated faeces/soil/water ASAP (seawater or snow may be used in the first instance to remove soil/faeces). Do not travel to other wildlife concentrations. Report the finding to your Station Leader (and Rangers on Macquarie Island) immediately. Assist with the submission of an incident report using the IHIS system.
- Consider whether handling or working closely with wildlife can be avoided. If not, wear appropriate PPE when working around wildlife concentrations: **face mask, eye cover and gloves**. When handling wildlife, dispose of or disinfect PPE/equipment (double bag & incinerate) between sites.
- **If you have had potential contact monitor your health**. Report any symptoms or illness to the Polar Medicine Unit Doctor on station or ship without delay for medical assessment and advise your supervisor. Don't forget to lodge a report using the incident reporting system, SIRUS.
- Minimise movements between wildlife aggregations where possible.
- **Do not** handle sick, dying or dead birds or undertake the collection of samples from them unless explicitly instructed to do so.
- If disease is suspected and you are advised and approved to assist with sample collection, wear **disposable overalls** in addition to the above-mentioned PPE. Refer to the Unusual Animal Mortality Response Plan 2019–22, CM9 ref: [D19/24006](#).
- When moving between sites and concentrations of wildlife, maintain a vigorous cleaning regime. Disinfect outer clothing and equipment, particularly your boots. Wash your hands and arms with soap and water.
- Keep a log of field site visits to wildlife aggregations.



Disinfection methods

- Use soap/detergent when washing your hands and arms.
- For boots, field equipment and outer clothing, spray/soak in a broad-spectrum grade disinfectant, such as F10 (dilute 10ml into a litre of water) or 60-90% ethanol, 60-90% isopropyl alcohol or 10% bleach (sodium hypochlorite).
- Refer to the Safety Data Sheet for safety information.

References

1. Dewar, M et.al. (2022) The Risk of Avian Influenza in the Southern Ocean. A Practical Guide, Advice from the SCAR Antarctic Wildlife Health Working Group. CM9 ref: [D22/43684](#)
2. World Organisation for Animal Health (2022) Avian influenza and Wildlife Risk management for people working with wild birds. CM9 ref: [D22/43682](#)

Work Safe.
Home Safe.