

# SAFETY & ENVIRONMENT ALERT

## Avian (bird) Influenza

### Background

The high pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI) virus (H5N1 strain) is extremely contagious amongst birds. It has and continues to cause widespread deaths of seabirds in the northern hemisphere and southern Africa, and was detected in South America in 2022. It is highly likely that HPAI virus will arrive in the Southern Ocean and Antarctica this summer (2023–24) as migratory species return to summer breeding and foraging grounds. Once in the area, the HPAI virus will likely be transmitted to other bird species, and may be transmitted to seals and cetaceans.

### Human infection

While the risk of infection in humans is low, when it has occurred, a significant proportion of those infected have developed severe illness or have died.

### Transmission

- Bird-to-bird transmission occurs variously through the ingestion of faecal matter, exposure to contaminated materials (e.g. water or soil), by direct contact between birds, or a bird inhaling contaminated respiratory droplets expelled by another bird.
- Bird to human transmission has occurred where people have been directly interacting with birds. To date, no examples of human-to-human transmission have been detected.
- Marine mammals living in close association with infected birds, or that are predators or scavengers of infected birds, may also be susceptible to infection, sickness and death.
- People can spread HPAI virus by exposing birds to contaminated clothing, equipment or food.

### Advice for Expeditioners

Assume that the HPAI virus will arrive in seabird and or seal populations this summer.

A monitoring program will be implemented through the Seabird Conservation team (AAD Science Branch) and they will provide assessments through the summer period. Updates will be provided through your Station Leader and additional Safety and Environment Alerts issued through the season.

Some key precautions include:

- Avoid areas (as much as practicable) where seabirds and seals haul out, transit, or congregate.
- Maintain the AAD's wildlife approach distances at all times. 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), and report all dead or dying wildlife to the Station Leader and online using IHIS.
- Wash or sanitise your hands frequently, and especially after you have been working outdoors.
- Avoid walking, sitting, lying or leaving equipment on the ground in areas where faeces have been freshly deposited, or in waterbodies near wildlife congregations.

All expeditioners **must** complete the online AAD Environmental Management course and attend pre-departure presentations before heading south. The course includes detailed biosecurity precautions.

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## Additional instruction for people working around wildlife

- **Only authorised expeditioners may handle or work closely with wildlife.** Movements to and between wildlife aggregations must be minimised as far as possible. Keep a log of all visits to wildlife aggregations.
- Before approaching wildlife, observe from a distance of at least 150m using binoculars where possible. Look for any evidence of dead animals (adults or juveniles) or unusual behaviours (e.g. loss of coordination, balance, trembling, respiratory distress, lethargy, drooping wings, dragging legs and unresponsiveness). If dead animals and or signs of odd behaviour are detected, **DO NOT** approach. If possible, and maintaining a safe distance, video the suspect animals and or take panoramic photos of the site. Leave the area, and then clean and disinfect any clothing and other items that may have come into contact with potentially contaminated faeces/soil/water ASAP. Snow or, as safe, seawater may be used in the first instance to remove soil or faeces. Do not travel to other wildlife concentrations.
- Report the finding to your Station Leader (and Rangers on Macquarie Island) immediately, and then online using IHIS.
- Those handling or working closely with wildlife, or around wildlife concentrations, must wear PPE including a **face mask, eye protection and gloves**.
- Having handled wildlife, dispose of (double bag & incinerate) or disinfect PPE and potentially contaminated equipment between sites. Disinfect outer clothing and equipment, particularly your boots. Wash your hands and arms with soap and water as soon as it is practicable to do so.
- **If you have had potential contact with ill wildlife, monitor your health.** Report any symptoms or illness to the Doctor on station or ship without delay, advise your supervisor, and report the matter as an incident using SIRUS.
- **Do not** collect samples of, from or associated with dead or ill wildlife unless explicitly authorised by your Station Leader.
- Your Station Leader will only authorise the collection of samples related to dead or infected wildlife following expert scientific review, planning and the training of those selected to conduct the sampling. Training will include donning and doffing of PPE, and sampling and storage procedures as per the [AAD Unusual Animal Mortality Response Plan 2019-2024](#).



### 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 information on these materials before use.

Additional Information and references on HPAI will be posted on the Environment pages on Blizz Line.

For further information, please contact [AADEnvironment@aad.gov.au](mailto:AADEnvironment@aad.gov.au) or [WHS@aad.gov.au](mailto:WHS@aad.gov.au)