

Animal Health Advisory: Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI)

Detected in Wild Birds in California

7.22.2022

Key Points

- Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) H5N1 was confirmed in wild birds in California on 7/15/22.
- HPAI H5N1 can infect and cause high mortality in both wild and domestic birds, including backyard and commercial flocks. Symptoms in wild birds range from asymptomatic or mild to severe disease and death, depending on the species infected.
- Risk of transmission of HPAI H5N1 to humans is considered low at this time. Individuals that have job-related or recreational exposures to birds should wear personal protective equipment (PPE) including mask, eye protection and gloves when handling birds.
- Help to protect birds by improving biosecurity and taking precautions to limit the spread of disease between wild and domestic birds (take down bird feeders and bird baths).
- Report sick or dead birds to Veterinary Public Health (VPH) by calling 213-288-7060 or by completing this [reporting form](#) and emailing it to vet@ph.lacounty.gov. The public may report dead birds using the VPH [online reporting portal](#).

Dear Colleagues,

Avian influenza (AI) or bird flu, is a viral infectious disease of birds caused by type A influenza viruses. Influenza viruses are classified based on two surface proteins, Hemagglutinin (H) and Neuraminidase (N), which combine to form different subtypes (e.g., H5N1). Different subtypes or strains within a subtype vary in their ability to cause disease in birds. AI viruses are categorized as either highly pathogenic (HP) or low pathogenic (LP) based on their molecular characteristics and ability to cause disease and mortality in chickens in a laboratory setting.

On July 13, 2022, HPAI Eurasian H5N1 was confirmed in three wild birds (2 Canada geese and 1 American white pelican) in Colusa and Glenn Counties in Northern California. These are the [first detections of avian influenza H5N1 in wild birds in California](#). Although AI viruses circulate naturally among waterbirds, the current strain of H5N1 that is circulating in the U.S. and Canada has been the cause of illness and death in a greater variety of wild bird species than in previous AI outbreaks. The virus is also of concern for domestic poultry as it is highly contagious and may cause great mortality in backyard and commercial flocks. To date, there are no confirmed cases of avian influenza in domestic poultry in California.

As of July 18, 2022, [data from the USDA](#) shows that HPAI H5N1 has been detected in at least 1,826 individual wild birds in 43 states and the District of Columbia since January 2022. The infection has been confirmed in 388 commercial and backyard domestic poultry and mixed-species flocks in 37 states. Prior to being detected in North America, HPAI H5N1 infections in birds had been reported in Europe and Asia since August 2020.

Clinical signs in birds infected with HPAI may range from asymptomatic or mild to severe, depending on the species infected. Wild birds at highest risk of infection include waterfowl (swans, geese, diving ducks), waterbirds (gulls, terns, cranes, herons, shorebirds), and birds that prey or scavenge on these species such as eagles, hawks, falcons, corvids, and vultures. Clinical signs in wild birds infected with HPAI may include sudden death, or neurological signs such as swimming in circles, head tilt, tremors, weakness, lack of coordination, and respiratory distress. Although non-specific, clinical signs in domestic birds may include swelling of the head and eyes, diarrhea, weakness, respiratory distress, and loss of appetite.

Spread of the virus occurs through either direct bird to bird contact or indirectly through fomites such as clothing, footwear, vehicles, rodents, insects, feed, water, feathers, etc. The virus is shed in bodily fluids such as respiratory droplets, mucus, saliva, and feces.

Although infection among songbirds, including many common backyard birds, appears to be rare, the general public can help to protect birds by taking down bird feeders and bird baths. When wild birds congregate at feeders and baths, there may be increased fecal contamination of the environment which may lead to increased spread of disease between birds and from wild birds to domestic birds such as backyard poultry. Contact between wild and domestic birds should be prevented by excluding wild birds from contacting or entering domestic bird enclosures and by ensuring that food and water are not shared between them.

Although AI viruses usually do not infect people, there have been rare cases of human infection that ranged in severity from asymptomatic or mild illness to severe disease resulting in death. To date, Asian lineage H7N9 and HPAI Asian lineage H5N1 viruses have been responsible for the most human illness from AI, including cases with the most severe clinical signs and those with the highest mortality. At present time, the risk to the general public's health from the current H5N1 viruses is low. Human infections with AI can happen when the virus is inhaled (in droplets or in dust) or when it enters the person's eyes, nose, or mouth (either through unprotected contact with infected birds or contact with contaminated surfaces). The spread of AI viruses from one infected person to another is very rare and when it has occurred, it has only spread to a few people. However, because AI viruses can change and gain the ability to spread easily between people, it is very important to monitor for both human infection and person to person spread.

[Humans that have job-related or recreational exposures to birds](#) should wear personal protective equipment (PPE) when handling birds including a mask, eye protection, gloves, and dedicated clothing and footwear. The general public should avoid handling wild birds and observe them only from a distance. After handling any bird, people should wash hands well with soap and water and change clothes before having contact with other birds, especially domestic poultry or pet birds. It is safe to eat properly handled and cooked poultry and poultry products in the United States. The CDC recommends that everyone 6 months and older or that may have exposure to sick birds get a seasonal flu vaccine. The seasonal flu vaccine will not prevent infection with AI but it can reduce the risk of getting sick with both human and bird flu viruses at the same time.

[HPAI H5N1 viruses have been detected in other animals](#), causing illness including severe disease and death in some cases. During this outbreak foxes and seals in the U.S. have been identified as infected with HPAI. Other species that have been found to be infected both naturally and experimentally with the virus in Europe and Asia include pigs, cats, dogs, wild stone marten, civet cat, and tigers and leopards in zoos.

At present time, HPAI H5N1 has not been detected in birds in Los Angeles County. However Veterinary Public Health (VPH) and other agencies are closely monitoring the situation. Veterinarians that suspect HPAI in wild or domestic birds should report to VPH by calling 213-288-7060 or using this [report form](#) and emailing it vet@ph.lacounty.gov. Members of the public reporting sick or dead wild or domestic birds can use this [online reporting portal](#).

Additional resources:

[2022 Detections of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza](#) – United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)

[2022 Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza Information Sheet](#) – California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW)

[Avian Influenza Updates](#) – California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA)

[Bird Flu Current Situation Summary](#) – Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

[Influenza \(Flu\) – Information on Bird Flu](#) – Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

[Avian Influenza \(AI\) or Bird Flu](#) – Los Angeles County Veterinary Public Health (VPH)

Sincerely,

Karen Ehnert, DVM, MPVM, DACVPM
Director
Veterinary Public Health
Los Angeles County Department of Public Health
313 N. Figueroa St, Room 1127
Los Angeles, CA 90012
(213) 288-7060
(213) 481-2375 Fax
kehnert@ph.lacounty.gov
<http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/vet/>

Please email vet@ph.lacounty.gov if you wish to unsubscribe or need other AHAN-related assistance. To sign up for future Animal Health Alerts or to view previously released AHANs, please visit
<http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/vet/AHAN.htm>.
