

POSITION STATEMENT

Avian influenza in South Africa

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The global spread of avian influenza viruses has resulted in mortality and conservation issues for wild birds. The aim of this statement is to inform all stakeholders about the potential interaction between wild birds and the avian influenza virus and to ensure the protection of wild birds.

BIRDLIFE SOUTH AFRICA POSITION STATEMENT

- Many influenza viruses are not highly transmittable and do not readily cause mass mortalities in wild and domestic birds. The highly infectious avian influenza outbreaks are usually associated with intensive domestic poultry production.
- Primary transmission is from one bird to the other and this can happen more easily in congregatory species and/or at roost sites.
- Rare and threatened waterbirds might be at highest risk, e.g. species that have undergone population bottlenecks (Dalton et al. 2016).
- The specific role of wild birds in the long-distance transmission of the avian influenza virus remains unclear. Research questions include determining the true long-distance, regional and local transmission of the virus, including possible transmission through national and international poultry trade and its by-products, and mechanisms of transmission amongst domestic, captive and wild birds.
- Apart from avian influenza, other viruses and bacteria can cause mass mortalities in wild birds or domesticated birds. These include, but are not limited to, botulism², pigeon paramyxovirus, trichomonas, avian herpes viruses, avian cholera, avian malaria and also cyanobacterial blooms.

During a confirmed outbreak of avian influenza, what can we do to protect our wild birds and limit the spread thereof?

- Avoid areas where large colonies of birds roost, especially around waterways, or where outbreaks have been confirmed.
- Poultry farmers (ostrich and chicken farms) should enforce strict biosecurity measures, and poultry farms should be avoided by members of the public.
- Aviculturists and other bird keepers (pet bird owners, zoos, bird parks) should avoid any contact between captive and wild birds.
- Report large scale bird deaths to the relevant authorities (state veterinarians and provincial nature conservation) or to BirdLife South Africa.
- Large numbers of carcasses should be handled by the government veterinary services. Single birds could be buried in the garden or sealed hygienically in a double bag and handed to a veterinary practise which would be willing to send it for communal incineration free of charge.
- Avoid ringing or handling of wild birds until no further cases of H5N8 is reported in wild birds in the area, especially the ringing/handling of waterfowl or in areas near waterbodies. The disease can be transferred between birds by contaminated bird bags, ringing equipment and ringers' hands, etc.
- There should be no consideration of killing wild birds, spraying toxic products or negatively affecting wetland habitats as disease control measures. Such actions would contravene provincial and national legislation and international commitments.

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- See www.birdlife.org/worldwide/policy/update-avian-influenza
- The United Nations Environment Programme/Convention on Migratory Species (UNEP/CMS) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) co-convened the Scientific Task Force on Avian Influenza and Wild Birds in 2005. The latest statement on H5N8 in poultry and wild birds by the Scientific Task Force on Avian Influenza and Wild Birds can be downloaded at: www.birdlife.org/sites/default/files/scientific_task_force_on_avian_influenza_and_wild_birds_h5n8_hpai_december_2016_final.pdf#overlay-context=worldwide/policy/update-avian-influenza