

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (bird flu) and cultural harvest

High pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) H5N1, or bird flu, is a highly contagious viral infection can affect all species of manu (birds). New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific remain free of HPAI H5N1 but, it is important to prepare for managing the risks it poses.

Risk to human health

There have been a very small number of humans infected overseas as part of the current global HPAI outbreak, generally through handling infected birds.

In other countries where avian influenza is present, human infection has generally only been found in people who have had a lot of contact with infected birds or other infected animals.

Handling, defeathering and preparing infected manu for consumption are risk factors for human infection so it is important to take care when handling manu that might be infected.

Risk to muttonbird (including tītī and kuia)

HPAI can be spread through contact with droppings and mucus from infected manu. Overseas evidence suggests HPAI is more likely to affect scavenging species (e.g. skua, black-backed gull) and colony nesting manu (e.g. red and black-billed gulls).

The most obvious sign of HPAI in wild birds is several sick or dead birds. Other signs, especially in waterfowl, can include drowsiness, lack of coordination and an inability to fly.

If HPAI arrives in Aotearoa New Zealand, muttonbird populations could be significantly impacted. Due to the risk to human health when working near, handling, or using products from infected manu, or manu from infected sites/populations, it's important to plan now for how to manage this risk. This could include how to keep yourself safe and prevent further spread. We will work with mana whenua on this planning.

Any group of three or more dead or sick manu should be reported to the MPI hotline (0800 80 99 66) to determine if HPAI is present before harvest continues in that area. Please do not touch or attempt to move any dead or dying wildlife, or those nearby that may appear healthy.



Sooty shearwater flock feeding at sea, Paterson Inlet, Stewart Island.

How to protect yourself when handling and cooking manu

You should always follow New Zealand Food Safety's advice, but in particular we recommend that you:

- don't harvest or handle wild birds (or their feathers) if they are obviously sick or found dead
- wash and dry your hands after handling or dressing wild birds
- don't eat, drink or put anything in your mouth while handling or cleaning harvested birds
- wash knives and other utensils, and scrub chopping boards between preparation of raw and cooked foods
- keep raw meat and poultry covered and away from ready-to-eat food, fruit and vegetables
- cook birds well
- scrub and disinfect all boots and equipment between hunting sites
- wash or hose down any clothes that have been in direct contact with birds after each hunting trip.

HPAI is sensitive to heat treatment, so cooking meat to reach and hold internal temperature of at least 73 degrees Celsius for at least 2-3 minutes kills bacteria and viruses, including HPAI A(H5) viruses.

What about feathers and bones?

HPAI can remain infective in feathers for 160 days at 4 degrees Celsius and, unlike other pathogens, is not killed by freezing. This means that handling feathers poses a health risk.

Bones also pose a health risk.

How long can the virus survive?

HPAI survives best in fresh water but is still very persistent in salt and brackish water for many months at cool temperatures.

It can survive for at least 12 months in freezing conditions (-20 and -30 degrees Celsius) and can survive repeated cycles of freeze-thaw and still be infective.

The virus can be killed by heating to over 73 degrees Celsius.

What should everyone do?

- Maintain a heightened awareness of disease risk when working with wildlife.
- Always maintain good biosecurity and personal hygiene practices to prevent spread and protect yourself. This includes scrubbing and disinfecting all boots and equipment between sites/species.
- Do not touch, handle or collect any dead or dying birds. These should be left alone to prevent spread and to protect human health.
- Anyone who sees three or more dead or dying birds, marine mammals or other wildlife should report it to the exotic pest and disease hotline 0800 80 99 66.
- Record as much information as you can, including GPS reading or other precise location information; photographs and/or videos of sick and dead birds; identify the species and estimate the numbers affected. Note how many sick or freshly dead are present as well as the total number present.



Titi (photograph by Dick Veitch, source DOC)

Background

HPAI has been spreading globally since December 2021, although at this stage New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific Islands remain free from the disease.

HPAI is having significant effects on wild populations of birds and marine mammals in other countries. There are reports from Europe of seabird colonies having lost approximately one third of nesting birds.

HPAI was confirmed in the south Atlantic subantarctic in early October 2023 (South Georgia Island) and the Antarctic peninsula in late February 2024.

The current risk to New Zealand is deemed low, but we are closely monitoring the global situation, and the risk may increase as the disease spreads to regions where it has never previously been identified.

Biosecurity New Zealand, a branch of the Ministry for Primary Industries, will be the lead agency if HPAI is detected in New Zealand or any of its territories.

International experience has shown that a One Health approach to the current strain of HPAI is essential. If HPAI is detected in New Zealand or its territories, Biosecurity New Zealand will be the lead agency and will coordinate any response in partnership with the Department of Conservation (DOC) and the Ministry of Health.

Further information

DOC website: www.doc.govt.nz/our-work/wildlife-health/avian-influenza/

MPI website: www.mpi.govt.nz/HPAI