

Avian influenza (Bird flu) – the situation with *Garden Birds in the UK*

Updated June 22nd 2009

Up-to-date information on the current status of H5N1 avian influenza in the UK is available at the Defra website - www.Defra.gov.uk. Guidance for appropriate action with regards to poultry, wild birds (including garden birds) and other species within active avian influenza restriction zones should be sought direct from Defra (See *Further information*).

Recent events in Europe

Highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) H5N1 strain was first detected in 1996 and is thought to have been circulating since in S.E. Asia. During the period between February and April 2006, spread of the virus was confirmed across Europe (13 member states). The HPAI H5N1 strain in Western Europe has been confirmed mainly in birds, primarily waterfowl, but also in a small number of cats. There has been no human case in Western Europe to date.

On April 6th 2006, the Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA) confirmed presence of the HPAI H5N1 virus in a single whooper swan found in Cellardyke, Scotland. No other cases in wild birds were found.

On February 3rd 2007, the VLA confirmed that poultry found dead on a farm near Lowestoft in Suffolk contained the HPAI H5N1 virus. The resulting restriction zones were lifted on 12th March 2007. No cases in wild birds were found.

On November 13th 2007, the VLA confirmed that turkeys found dead on a farm near Diss contained the HPAI H5N1 virus. Evidence of HPAI H5N1 infection was confirmed in turkeys and ducks managed at a free-ranging system at the index site and in turkeys at a second site with the same owner. Genetic analyses of the virus isolates confirmed that the birds were infected from a single source with closest genetic identity to a viral isolate from wild birds in the Czech Republic detected in mid-2007. The isolate was distinct from that isolated from poultry in Suffolk earlier in 2007. The resulting restriction zones were lifted on December 19th 2007. No cases in wild birds were found.

On January 10th 2008, HPAI H5N1 virus was first confirmed in waterfowl in Dorset by the VLA. A total of eleven wild birds (10 mute swans and one Canada goose) were positive for the virus. Government restrictions and monitoring zones were lifted on March 27th 2008. No evidence of disease was found in local domestic poultry.

On June 4th 2008, Defra confirmed that avian influenza of the highly pathogenic strain H7N7 had been detected in laying hens on a farm near Banbury in Oxfordshire. There was no evidence of disease spread to other domestic poultry or wild birds. The government restrictions and monitoring zones that had been put in place following this outbreak were lifted on 8th July 2008.

Following the lifting of restrictions on 8th July 2008, trade with other EU countries was resumed. Under international rules, the UK became officially free from avian influenza in November 2008.

Whilst our knowledge of the HPAI H5N1 virus is increasing rapidly, our understanding of the epidemiology of the virus remains limited and risk assessments are based on available information. Continued surveillance in wild birds and poultry, combined with vigilant biosecurity measures for captive poultry, remain priorities for disease control.

Background

The HPAI H5N1 strain of avian influenza virus is primarily an infection of poultry (ducks and chickens) and the risk of transmission to humans remains low. Almost all of the human cases have been associated with very close contact with affected domestic poultry. The virus is shed in birds' droppings and nasal secretions.

To date there is evidence of limited person-to-person transmission of H5N1 strain in a small number of cases; the disease is not readily transmitted from human to human. However, there is the potential for the virus to change through mutation or reassortment to a form that can spread easily from person to person. Whilst the potential for the development of pandemic flu is serious and demands global contingency planning, the risk currently remains theoretical.

Ornithological organisations are working with the government on disease surveillance in wild birds. Disease screening of live waterfowl from reserves and shot waterfowl from a variety of sites across Britain is ongoing.

Birdwatchers and members of the public can help the government's current targeted surveillance for avian influenza by reporting observations of wild bird mortality to Defra on Tel: 08459 33 55 77 (See *below*).

Feeding Garden birds

Whilst the HPAI H5N1 virus has been shown to have the ability to infect and cause illness in a wide variety of birds, **garden bird species are currently considered to be a low risk group.**

It is extremely unlikely that avian influenza could be transmitted to people by feeding birds in the garden, but the GBHi recommends that following good hygiene precautions at bird feeding stations is sensible at all times.

Garden birds in the UK have the potential to carry some diseases that can affect humans and pets, for example *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter* and *E.coli* bacteria. The likelihood of a disease outbreak in garden birds is thought to increase where large numbers of birds congregate at feeding areas for prolonged periods of time, particularly where hygiene levels are poor and droppings are allowed to accumulate. Greenfinches and house sparrows are some of the species most commonly affected by disease caused by *Salmonella* infection.

The risk to human health from wild birds in the UK is remote and can be minimised by avoiding direct contact with sick or dead birds or their droppings. The GBHi recommends following sensible hygiene precautions as a routine measure when feeding garden birds and handling bird feeders and tables. Following these rules will help avoid the risk of any infection transmitting to people and help safeguard the birds in your garden against disease.

- Clean and disinfect feeders/ feeding sites regularly. Suitable disinfectants that can be used include a weak solution of domestic bleach (5% sodium hypochlorite) and other specially-designed commercial products (See *Further information*). Always rinse thoroughly and air-dry feeders before re-use.
- Brushes and cleaning equipment for bird feeders, tables and baths should not be used for other purposes and should not be brought into the house, but be kept and used outside and away from food preparation areas
- Wear rubber gloves when cleaning feeders and thoroughly wash hands and forearms afterwards with soap and water, especially before eating or drinking
- It is advisable not to let birds feed directly out of your hands

Best feeding practices should be followed at all times to help ensure that the birds visiting your garden remain healthy. More information can be found in the GBHi booklet "Feeding Garden Birds – Best Practice Guidelines" and in the accompanying GBHi leaflet. Details of how to obtain these publications are available on the GBHi page of the UFAW website www.ufaw.org.uk.

The Garden Bird Health *initiative* monitors garden bird health through surveillance schemes and investigates diseases that affect garden birds. The aim of this work is to learn more about these conditions and the factors that influence their occurrence. This work is essential for developing methods for improving garden bird health and preventing disease at garden feeding stations in the future.

Reporting garden bird mortality?

If you find a dead bird in the garden, do not handle it directly with your bare hands or bring it inside the house.

Members of the public who see dead **garden** birds, or signs of disease in garden birds, are asked to call the **GBHi on Tel: 0207 449 6685.**

Reporting other wild bird mortality?

Defra have adopted a system of targeted screening of wild birds found dead in designated areas for avian influenza surveillance. Species that are considered by experts to be more likely to play a role in the spread of HPAI H5N1 will be considered for laboratory screening.

If you find dead **wild gulls, waders, ducks, geese or swans** and you are within a survey area or unsure whether you are in a surveillance area you may wish to contact the **Defra Helpline on Tel: 08459 33 55 77**, and choose the Avian Influenza option which will be open from **8.00 am – 6.00pm Monday to Friday**.

A map indicating the Defra Wild Bird surveillance priority counties is available at <http://www.Defra.gov.uk/animalh/diseases/notifiable/ai/wildbirds/surveymap.htm>.

Following the advice of Defra, if you have to move a dead bird for disposal:

1. Avoid touching the bird with your bare hands
2. If possible, wear disposable protective gloves when picking up and handling (if disposable gloves are not available, see point 7.)
3. Place the dead bird in a suitable plastic bag, preferably leak proof. Care should be taken not to contaminate the outside of the bag.
4. Tie the bag and place it in a second plastic bag
5. Remove gloves by turning them inside out and then place them in the second plastic bag. Tie the bag and dispose of in the normal household refuse bin.
6. Hands should then be washed thoroughly with soap and water
7. If disposable gloves are not available, a plastic bag can be used as a make-shift glove. When the dead bird has been picked up, the bag can be turned back on itself and tied. It should then be placed in a second plastic bag, tied and disposed of in the normal household waste
8. Alternatively, the dead bird can be buried, but not in a plastic bag
9. Any clothing that has been in contact with the dead bird should be washed using ordinary washing detergent at the temperature normally used for washing the clothing
10. Any contaminated indoor surfaces should be thoroughly cleaned with normal household cleaner

If you find a dead bird with a ring on it (in a garden or elsewhere), please note the number carefully; avoid direct contact with bird, for example by wearing gloves or handling the bird through a plastic bag. Report the ring by filling in the details at www.ring.ac, alternatively contact BTO on Tel: 01842 750050.

Where can I find further information...?

Feeding garden bird enquiries

Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW) – www.ufaw.org.uk Tel: 01582 831818

A booklet and a free-of-charge leaflet on best feeding practice for garden birds are available from UFAW

Poultry, animal health and wild bird queries

Defra - www.Defra.gov.uk Helpline Tel: 08459 33 55 77 (See *above*)

Avian influenza (Bird flu): <http://www.Defra.gov.uk/animalh/diseases/notifiable/ai/index.htm>

Wild bird queries

BTO – www.bto.org Tel: 01842 750050 http://www.bto.org/notices/flu_statement.htm

RSPB – www.rspb.org.uk Tel: 01767 680551

Avian influenza (Bird flu): <http://www.Defra.gov.uk/animalh/diseases/notifiable/ai/index.htm>

Human health queries

Health Protection Agency - www.hpa.org.uk

Frequently asked questions on avian influenza:

http://www.hpa.org.uk/infections/topics_az/influenza/avian/avianflufaq.htm

Queries regarding risk to domestic pets e.g. cats, dogs

Defra - <http://www.Defra.gov.uk/animalh/diseases/notifiable/ai/otheranimals/index.htm>