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H5N1 Bird Flu – Practical Precautions for Australian Aviculturists

H5N1 bird flu continues to spread among Australia’s wild birds. As at 4 pm AEST, 21 August 2026, Australia had recorded 297 confirmed H5 bird flu events in wild birds: 182 in South Australia, 86 in Victoria, 11 in New South Wales, 10 in Western Australia, seven in Tasmania and one in Queensland.

As H5N1 bird flu is confirmed in more locations and species, authorities have advised that it will no longer be possible or necessary to test every species in known areas of transmission or every bird involved in an investigation. Reporting will instead be targeted to provide a clear picture of the national situation and identify significant developments. This means confirmed-event numbers will increasingly understate the actual number of infected wild birds.

Australia is the land of birds. We see birds in all environments, from heavily populated urban centres, rural areas, rainforests and even in our drier desert regions. Our amazing birdlife is found in densities not seen on most continents, which sadly makes this outbreak a significant risk to a substantial number of species.

Despite our large and widespread wild bird population this does not mean that private avicultural collections are at high risk of infection. ACA considers the risk to most avicultural collections to remain low if the sensible biosecurity precautions recommended in this article are implemented. The objective is to reduce the opportunities for H5N1 to move from infected wild birds into captive collections.

Bird flu does not easily spread to people, and no infections of the H5N1 strain have been reported in people in Australia. Bird flu infections in people are rare. When people get infected, it is usually after close contact with infected birds. Do not handle sick or dead birds, particularly wild birds - this is your best protection.

For most aviculturists the key biosecurity precautions are straightforward: prevent wild-bird faeces entering aviaries, protect drinking water from contamination, avoid sharing water at bird gatherings, quarantine new and returning birds, keep waterfowl separated, and maintain good hygiene and pest control.

Covering aviaries

Australian aviculture differs from that in many cooler countries. Parrots, finches, doves, quail and other birds are commonly maintained in substantial outdoor aviary complexes incorporating sheltered areas and exposed wire-mesh flights. These structures are well suited to the Australian climate but can allow wild-bird droppings and contaminated rainwater to enter the aviary.

ACA continues to recommend covering exposed aviary flights with a solid, impermeable roof where H5N1 presents an immediate risk. South Australian and Victorian aviculturists, particularly those located near watercourses, are advised to do this now. Aviculturists elsewhere should consider how their aviaries could be covered should the virus become established locally.

Suitable materials include clear polycarbonate and suitable UV-stabilised reinforced plastic sheeting. Shade cloth alone is not sufficient because it does not prevent contaminated water or faecal material passing through. Roofing should extend beyond the aviary walls approximately 150 mm where practicable, or down the sides of the aviary approximately 300 mm. The aim is to reduce

wild bird contamination entering through the roof or sides, while adequate ventilation and protection against excessive summer heat must be maintained.

The purpose is straightforward: prevent potentially infected wild-bird faeces from entering the aviary from above. Feed and drinking water should also be protected from contamination by wild birds.

Rainwater used for drinking

Many Australian aviculturists deliberately use rainwater for their birds. It is often preferred to treated town water and is readily accepted by many birds. H5N1 does not mean that rainwater must be abandoned, but roof-collected rainwater needs to be considered as another possible pathway by which the virus could enter a collection.

An infected wild bird can deposit faeces on a house, shed or aviary roof. Rain can subsequently wash this material through gutters and downpipes into a rainwater tank. Research on avian influenza viruses shows that it can persist in freshwater for extended periods, with survival strongly affected by temperature and water conditions. Storage in a rainwater tank for long periods should not be relied upon to make potentially contaminated water safe.

Where treated town water is available, temporarily changing to town water may be the simplest and safest option when H5N1 is circulating in the local area. Properly operated municipal drinking-water treatment and chlorination are effective against avian influenza viruses.

Where rainwater continues to be used, contamination should first be reduced at the source. Keep catchment roofs and gutters clean, reduce opportunities for wild birds to roost on catchment areas where practicable, use an effective first-flush diversion system, and keep tanks sealed, screened and properly maintained. These are all standard recommended practices for using rainwater for human consumption.

Treating rainwater

Boiling is a simple and practical treatment option for many private aviculturists. Experimental work demonstrates that H5 viruses are readily inactivated by heat. Water heated above 75°C for a period exceeding 5 minutes is considered sufficient to inactivate the virus. A normal electric kettle brings water to approximately 100°C and, when allowed to cool naturally, remains at elevated temperatures for considerably longer. Rainwater can therefore be brought fully to the boil and then allowed to cool naturally in the kettle or in a clean, covered container before being supplied to birds.

For larger collections requiring substantial quantities of water, an appropriately designed filtration and UV treatment system may be more practical. UV treatment provides disinfection without adding chlorine or substantially changing the characteristics for which many aviculturists prefer rainwater.

Chlorination using sodium hypochlorite (bleach) is also effective at inactivating H5N1. However, many aviculturists specifically use rainwater because their birds prefer it to chlorinated town water, so routine chlorination may be less desirable. Ordinary sediment or cartridge filtration alone should not be relied upon to inactivate H5N1.

Treated water should be kept in a clean, covered container.

Bird sales, shows and expos

Bird sales, shows and expos remain an important part of Australian aviculture. The presence of H5N1 in Australian wildlife does not in itself mean these activities need to cease. Some simple changes in practice are, however, sensible.

Do not share drinking water between birds, cages or exhibitors. At some events it has been common practice to use a common watering container or water source between cages. This practice should be avoided. Each cage or group should have its own clean drinking-water container

and water supply. Drinkers and other equipment should not be transferred between unrelated birds without first being thoroughly cleaned and disinfected.

Feed, utensils and equipment should similarly be managed to minimise opportunities for material from one group of birds to reach another.

Misinformation – a concern for clubs

Some clubs have expressed concern that, despite the relatively low H5N1 risk associated with properly managed bird sales and shows, such events may attract criticism or misinformation about the risks to birds or people. ACA does not consider this, by itself, a reason to cancel properly managed avicultural activities. Clubs should instead ensure that appropriate biosecurity measures are in place and clearly communicate those measures to exhibitors, members and the public. ACA has a range of suitable posters and flyers that could be printed and prominently displayed at the entrance and within the venue.

Good biosecurity is not only important for protecting birds; it also enables clubs to demonstrate that their events are being conducted responsibly and in accordance with current disease-risk advice. Decisions about cancelling or postponing an event should be based on the actual disease situation and relevant government advice, rather than speculation or misinformation.

Quarantine birds returning from sales and shows

Quarantine has always been good avicultural practice and becomes even more important with H5N1 present in Australia. Both newly acquired birds and your own birds returning home from a sale, show or expo should be quarantined before being returned to the main collection.

The recognised flock-level incubation period for high pathogenicity avian influenza is 14 days. Experimental H5N1 studies in susceptible passerines and budgerigars also demonstrate that disease generally develops relatively rapidly. Zebra finches experimentally infected with H5N1 suffered 100% mortality within five days in one study, while affected budgerigars were generally moribund or dead within approximately two days of the onset of clinical signs. Other passerine studies have similarly demonstrated rapid disease and mortality, although susceptibility varies between species and virus strains.

The available evidence therefore indicates that finches, parrots and similar susceptible aviary birds are highly unlikely to remain healthy, long-term carriers of H5N1. A bird that remains alive and completely healthy after an effective 30-day quarantine is consequently very unlikely to be carrying an active H5N1 infection.

The columbid family – pigeons and doves – requires somewhat different consideration. Infection may not always result in obvious symptoms or rapid death in these birds, and infected birds may survive while shedding virus for a period. However, available experimental evidence indicates that shedding is generally relatively short-lived and does not indicate prolonged H5N1 carriage. A 30-day quarantine period therefore remains a reasonable precaution.

ACA recommends a 30-day quarantine period. This provides a substantial margin beyond the recognised H5N1 incubation and acute infection periods and, importantly, quarantine is not only about H5N1. The longer period also provides protection against other avian diseases that may take longer to become apparent.

Waterfowl require additional care

Waterfowl are different and should not be treated in the same way as parrots and finches. Ducks, geese and other waterfowl are important natural hosts of avian influenza viruses and can sometimes be infected and shed virus while showing few or no obvious signs of disease.

Waterfowl should therefore never be housed in the vicinity of birds being quarantined following a sale, show or purchase. More generally, aviculturists keeping waterfowl should exercise additional caution and, wherever practicable, separate waterfowl from other aviary birds and manage their water, equipment and husbandry independently.

Rodents and insects

An effective quarantine area must also consider rodents and insects. Physical separation of the birds achieves little if rats, mice, flies or other potential vectors can move freely between the quarantine enclosure and the main collection.

Rodents can potentially contribute to avian influenza transmission as mechanical vectors and, under experimental conditions, some mammalian species can become infected with H5N1 and shed virus. Insects, particularly flies, can also mechanically carry contaminated material. Current Australian avian influenza planning recognises these potential pathways.

Good quarantine practice should therefore include effective rodent and insect control. Keep spilled seed and waste under control, prevent rats and mice entering bird areas, control flies and other pest insects, and do not allow waste or contaminated equipment to provide a pathway between the quarantine area and the established collection.

Manage the quarantine area last

Feed, water and service the main collection first and quarantined birds last. Wherever practicable, quarantine equipment including feed containers, drinkers, cleaning equipment and footwear should not be shared with the main collection.

After servicing quarantined birds, wash your hands thoroughly and clean or change contaminated footwear and clothing before returning to the main aviary area. This helps protect the established collection and is also sensible personal hygiene when dealing with a zoonotic influenza virus.

Keep the risk in perspective

H5N1 is now present in Australian wildlife and aviculturists need to take it seriously. The appropriate response, however, is preparedness rather than alarm. For most private avicultural collections, the risk remains low if straightforward precautions are taken.

Cover exposed aviaries where appropriate. Protect feed and drinking water from wild-bird contamination. Where H5N1 is circulating locally, consider changing from rainwater to treated town water or appropriately treat rainwater before use. Do not share drinking water at bird sales, shows and expos. Quarantine newly acquired and returning birds. Keep waterfowl away from quarantine and, where practicable, separate from other aviary birds. Include rodents and insects in the biosecurity plan. Service quarantine birds last and maintain good personal and equipment hygiene.

Australia's private avicultural collections contain large populations of parrots, finches, doves, quail and many other native and exotic birds. Some of these collections also maintain significant populations of native species that are threatened in the wild or have disappeared from parts of their former range. Protecting these collections is important both to individual bird keepers and to the longer-term conservation value of Australian aviculture.

ACA will continue to review its advice as H5N1 spreads and further information becomes available.

Further information: birdflu.gov.au



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