Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza Update

Recommendations for DEC Field Staff

January 2025

Background

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) continues to infect birds and mammals across the US and Canada, including New York. Avian influenza is caused by an influenza type A virus that is carried by free-flying waterfowl and other waterbirds such as ducks, geese, and shorebirds, but can also infect domestic poultry (chickens, turkeys, pheasants, quail, domestic ducks, geese, and guinea fowl), raptors, corvids, and mammals. Not all avian influenza is highly pathogenic, but for this guidance reference to avian influenza will assume the highly pathogenic strain circulating though New York and across the country. Some infected wild birds can carry these viruses without getting sick, but domestic poultry and many species of wild birds get very sick and often die from these viruses. Songbirds and other passerine birds do not appear to be highly susceptible to infection.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states that the recent HPAI detections in birds pose a low risk to the public. HPAI H5N1 has been detected in over 60 humans in the United States, including one mortality. Infected birds shed avian influenza viruses in their saliva, mucus, and feces. Human infections with avian influenza viruses can happen when enough virus gets into a person's eyes, nose, or mouth, or is inhaled. There is likely little risk for the general public, but people with close or prolonged unprotected contact with infected birds or virus-contaminated environments, especially immunocompromised people, will be at greater risk of infection. Wildlife Staff should follow the PPE guidelines below when handling live high-risk species, like waterfowl, or any potentially infected live or dead animals.

Status of HPAI in New York

The first detection of HPAI in New York was in a backyard poultry flock in Suffolk County on February 19, 2022; since then, it has been found in captive birds in Dutchess, Ulster, Monroe, Fulton, Orleans, Wayne, Sullivan, Queens, Columbia, Washington, Tompkins, Onondaga, Putnam, Suffolk, and Kings counties. HPAI has been detected in free-ranging wild birds and mammals throughout the state. At this point, it is likely widespread, even in counties where it has not yet been detected. Wild birds confirmed as infected in New York include snow goose, Canada goose, tundra swan, mute swan, sanderling, black skimmer, Caspian tern, herring gull, great black-backed gull, American black duck, American wigeon, gadwall, green-winged teal, lesser scaup, mallard duck, northern pintail, northern shoveler, redhead duck, ring-necked duck, wood duck, pied-billed grebe, hooded merganser, common loon, great blue heron, double-crested cormorant, bald eagles, peregrine falcon, merlin, barred owl, eastern screech owl, great horned owl, snowy owl, cooper's hawk, red-shouldered hawk, red-tailed hawk, American crow, common raven, fish crow, ruffed grouse, Black vulture, and turkey vulture.

In addition to wild birds, HPAI has also been confirmed in red fox, striped skunk, Virginia opossum, raccoon, fisher, and bobcat in NY and a wide range of mammals, particularly carnivores, in other parts of the United States.

Updates on HPAI can be found on the Cornell Wildlife Health Lab website.

Guidance for DEC Field Staff

Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) during known HPAI outbreak:

When handling any high-risk species, live or dead, the minimum PPE should be, gloves (latex, nitrile, or rubber), disposable mask (N95 or KN95 recommended), eye protection or face shield, and rubber boots or waders. This includes handling any waterfowl for banding. In addition, wearing disposable Tyvek coveralls during these activities will protect clothing and should be worn when responding to large mortality events. The boots or waders and equipment should be cleaned and disinfected on-site with Virkon or 10% bleach solution so HPAI virus is not transported to another site. If responding to a report of a single dead bird of a lower risk species, minimum PPE should be a mask or face shield and gloves. The other precautions above still apply.

As always, care should be taken not to contaminate your clothing and to position yourself upwind of the carcass while bagging the specimen. Don't drink, eat, or smoke when handling wild birds. Be mindful of handling other objects (pens, cell phones) or touching your face while wearing contaminated gloves. After removing your gloves, wash your hands thoroughly for at least 30 seconds (using soap/water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer).

If you keep backyard poultry or other birds you should change clothing and shoes, shower, and disinfect any equipment used before you handle any live wild birds (banding, netting, etc.). The same precautions should be taken between field work and returning home.

Risk of HPAI infection for field staff: The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) states that the health risk from this strain of avian influenza is low, "however some people may have job-related or recreational exposures to birds that put them at higher risk of infection." Follow the above precautions when handling wild birds, particularly waterfowl, gulls, and raptors to reduce your risk. Consider receiving seasonal influenza vaccines to reduce the risk of co-infection with seasonal human flu viruses. Monitor your health for any signs of flu-like symptoms within 10 days of handling wild birds and consult your health care provider if you have any questions.

Mortality Response

The Wildlife Health Program is monitoring the spread and impact of HPAI in the state. Response depends on the specific event so refer to the guidance below. **With the exceptions noted below (larger events, sensitive locations, or species) a physical response by staff is not necessary in most cases.**

When taking a call, please utilize and direct members of the public to utilize the **NYSDEC Avian Influenza Reporting Form: https://arcg.is/1S9nrf2**

If you respond to collect samples or carcasses, record a count (or estimate) of dead/sick from each species and an estimate of the number of live/seemingly unaffected birds or other species present. Include location data (coordinates) and date of first observation and environmental conditions. Report large mortality events to the WHU even if samples are not collected for testing.

In cases where DEC field staff are not responding to collect samples or carcasses from the landscape, please instruct members of the public to limit contact with dead wildlife and to keep children and pets

away. If removal is deemed necessary by the landowner, the landowner should be instructed to wear disposable gloves, a mask, and eye protection. They should avoid direct contact with the carcass or carcass fluids by using a shovel and wash their hands and clothing immediately after with soap and hot water. Carcasses should be triple bagged (garbage or contractor bags) and put in an outdoor trash receptacle.

The Wildlife Health Program is interested in examining and testing specimens from the following scenarios:

- Mortality events involving 20+ ducks or geese in counties without HPAI detections in 2025
- Mortality events involving 12+ shorebirds or gulls in counties without HPAI detections in 2025
- Mortality events involving 12+ dead crows or ravens in counties without HPAI detections in 2025
- Any multiple dead/sick swans
- Any single or multiple dead/sick eagles (or other raptors if cause is unknown)

See map on Cornell Wildlife Health Lab website for counties with and without HPAI detections in 2025. In larger-scale mortalities in new areas *please collect **three** of the freshest-looking carcasses from each species affected*. Place in individual bags to avoid cross contamination. If feasible, collect all remaining dead birds for disposal to get them off the landscape and make them unavailable to scavengers. Call the WHU if any guidance is needed.

Live Animal Response

There is no treatment for HPAI and transporting suspect HPAI-infected birds to wildlife rehabilitation facilities is discouraged to prevent the spread of the disease to other animals in care. When responding to a mortality event and higher-risk bird species that have clinical signs suggestive of HPAI (and not attributable to trauma or toxicity) are present, euthanasia should be considered at the discretion of field staff and with permission from the Regional Wildlife Manager. Staff may euthanize birds on-site if not within public view or move them to the nearest suitable location and follow the Euthanasia SOP (updated 2024).

Wildlife Health Specimen Submission Guidelines

Disposal of Carcasses

Wearing appropriate PPE, carcasses can be collected, triple bagged (garbage or contractor bag), and placed in an outdoor trash or dumpster for disposal. Carcasses can be transported to the Wildlife Health Unit in Delmar or Cornell Animal Health Diagnostic Center for disposal with advanced notice and permission. Please contact wildlifehealth@dec.ny.gov for inquiries about disposal at the WHU or Melissa Fadden, mf766@cornell.edu, regarding disposal at Cornell.

If mortality events occur without testing requested by the Wildlife Health Program (see criteria above), carcasses can be collected and disposed of at the discretion of regional staff or left in place.

Please consider the following events as high priority for carcass removal and disposal:

- Public parks or school yards with heavy use - coordinate with local entities
- Areas with known bald eagle congregations or nesting sites

- Situations deemed high profile by Regional Wildlife Managers due to publicity or likely media attention

Further Information:

CDC Avian Influenza

Biosafety for Field Work

USDA Detections of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza in Wild Birds-2025

USDA Guidance for Captive Wild Birds