



Policy on Avian Influenza

Scope of This Policy

SWT manages 122 wildlife reserves. Some of these are important sites for resident and migrating wildfowl. The Trust therefore has a responsibility to inform and protect its staff and visiting members of the public from the potential health risks associated with coming into contact with infected birds. The Trust also has a responsibility to help minimise the risk of spreading the disease by monitoring for signs of infection and alerting the appropriate authorities to suspected cases. This policy outlines the Trust's views on dealing with and minimising the risk of an infection outbreak.

Policy Headline

SWT will work with the appropriate authorities and follow guidelines specified by SEERAD and Defra in dealing with suspected outbreaks of avian flu (H5N1). The Trust will take all necessary precautions to prevent contact between infected birds and Trust staff and visitors to its reserves. The Trust will actively monitor the populations of wild birds on its key wildfowl reserves. The Trust does not advocate any large scale culling of wild birds as a means of preventing or reducing risk of widespread infection.

Policy Statement

- ♦ The Trust will, so far as is reasonably practicable, provide staff and volunteers with the relevant information, instruction, training and supervision to enable them to take appropriate action if they suspect avian flu is present in dead or dying birds found on SWT reserves. *See Policy Supplement 1*
- ♦ In the event of any suspicious deaths of wild birds on its reserves, the Trust will make immediate contact with Defra via the helpline number on 08459 335577
- ♦ The Trust will assist with surveillance operations, as part of our day to day work, by monitoring wild bird populations on its key wildfowl reserves for signs of infection and any significant increase in the numbers of sick or dead birds. *See Policy Supplement 2*
- ♦ The Trust will endeavour to provide factual advice in response to enquiries from members of the public and the media in relation to avian flu and wild birds. *See Policy Supplement 3*
- ♦ The Trust will make every effort to follow any health and safety advice and instructions issued by the Scottish Executive (SEERAD) and Defra (www.defra.gov.uk) in all its work with wild birds
- ♦ The Trust supports increased biosecurity measures for commercial poultry keepers as the principle means of minimising the risk of a large scale outbreak in Scotland.
- ♦ The Trust does not advocate the culling of wild birds as a preventative or control measure

Background

Avian Flu (H5N1) is a serious disease primarily affecting domestic poultry, although it can also be found in wild birds. The disease may be transmitted to the UK by migrating birds. Waterfowl, such as ducks, swans, geese, waders and gulls, are believed to be particularly at risk. Wild birds carrying the H5N1 virus have now been detected in many continental European countries, including France.

Protecting Scotland's wildlife for the future

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The current variant of bird flu appears to be highly virulent within bird populations and any outbreak will be characterised by rapidly increasing numbers of sick and dead birds. However, its transmission across species does appear to be difficult, and it is passed to humans only through direct contact with bird excreta, saliva and body fluids. It is possible therefore to contract the virus by picking up carcasses of birds that have died of the disease.

Defra is the government body responsible for coordinating action for prevention and control of avian flu. It has 24 hour helpline Tel: 08459 335577 which can be called for advice and assistance with suspected outbreaks.

1. Defra advice is to contact the helpline where incidents of mortality affecting significant numbers of birds have occurred at the same time in the same place; however single or multiple deaths of swans are also of interest. A wild bird die off is characterised by an unusual number of wild bird deaths in one area. The usual number of deaths depends on several things; for example, more deaths will be expected if the bird population is high, food is scarce or if the weather is bad. An unusually high number of deaths generally involve several birds of one species, or a larger number of birds from several species.

Policy Supplement 1

Ensuring Health and Safety

Although the risk of contracting the disease from wild birds is low, the following precautions must be taken to safeguard the health and safety of staff, volunteers, visitors and any other users of our reserves.

When handling apparently healthy wild birds;

- ◆ Work in well ventilated areas if working indoors
- ◆ If working outdoors, where practical work upwind of birds and keep your face away from holding bags / cages to minimise the risk of inhaling dust and feathers etc.
- ◆ If handling gulls, waders or waterfowl, always wear tough tear resistant gloves - not latex - that can be disinfected or safely disposed of
- ◆ Do not put your hands near the mouth when wearing or removing the gloves
- ◆ Regularly wash your hands, nails and forearms with soap and water (dry thoroughly), and especially before eating, drinking or smoking
- ◆ Disinfect work surfaces and any equipment that will move between sites

When handling sick or dead birds, take the following ADDITIONAL precautions;

Do not handle sick or dead birds associated with an unusually high mortality rate (see above).

Do not handle dead birds where you have any reason to suspect unusual death

Do not bring sick or dead birds indoors

PPE must be worn when handling carcasses

When handling gulls or waders, minimise exposure to mucus membranes by wearing protective goggles or other suitable eye protection and a particulate dust mask – Respirator type FFP3 (standard lightweight mask)

Full hood powered respirator should be considered where a good seal cannot be achieved (e.g. because of facial hair)

Isolate carcasses and mark – “Do not touch”

- ◆ If in any doubt whether to handle a sick or dead bird, contact the Defra Helpline on 08459 335577

*** Consult SWTs *Avian Flu Monitoring Risk Assessment* prior to carrying out monitoring operations**

Policy Supplement 2

Monitoring Wild Bird Populations / Reporting Suspected Cases of Avian Flu

Surveillance of wildfowl for avian influenza is one of our best defences against incursion of the disease in poultry as it provides an effective early warning system. Twenty-one wildfowl sites across Scotland, including SWT's reserve at Montrose Basin, are being surveyed regularly for significant mortality events, from which dead birds are sampled for testing. SNH co-ordinate this work and SWT submit a monthly report to them, detailing the number of days the site was checked, the days sick / dead birds were reported and the total number of dead birds and species reported to Defra.

2. When monitoring reserves as part of our day to day operations; look out for any significant and rapidly increasing numbers of sick or dead birds (5+ birds of single species or any wildfowl). Remember that birds die of many causes (e.g. botulism). If a small number of birds are found dead, record these and continue monitoring. If in any doubt as to whether a die-off is suspicious; contact the Defra Helpline on 08459 335577. If you identify unusually large numbers of dead birds, call the Defra Helpline
3. *You'll be referred to the nearest Scottish Agricultural College (SAC) laboratory. Specialists at the labs will then make an assessment on what further action, if any, should be taken. Out of hours calls will be automatically re-routed to Defra's duty office.*

Follow up action to reporting an incident

- ◆ If relevant veterinary authority decides not to screen for H5N1, continue monitoring as usual
- ◆ If veterinary authority collects samples for screening; inform Stuart Brooks, Head of Conservation at Cramond House.

Pending the outcome of screening (1-14 days)

- ◆ All personnel and volunteers will be instructed not to touch dead birds
- ◆ Consideration will be given to restricting public access on reserves where the public or others might come into contact with infected birds, their droppings or water
- ◆ Signs may be erected warning the public not to enter closed areas of a reserve, to avoid contact with wild birds and not to feed them
- ◆ Monitoring continues on daily basis following health & safety procedures agreed with relevant authorities

If screening is negative, SWT staff will;

- ◆ Inform HQ at Cramond
- ◆ Re-open the closed areas of the reserve (if necessary)
- ◆ Brief all personnel and volunteers accordingly
- ◆ Continue monitoring birds

If screening is positive, SWT staff will;

- ◆ Act on any advice from the appropriate authorities
- ◆ Inform HQ at Cramond and Jules Acton at the Wildlife Trusts on 07917 574837
- ◆ Consider closure of parts of the reserve where the public or others may come into contact with infected birds, droppings or water where there is a potential ongoing risk
- ◆ Seek advice from veterinary authority on implementing measures to reduce the risk of passive transfer, such as, pressure washers, brushes, hoses, water
- ◆ Seek advice from veterinary authority on approved disinfectant to clean vehicles, equipment and footwear
- ◆ Continue monitoring on daily basis following health & safety procedures agreed with relevant authorities

Policy Supplement 3

Avian Influenza Contingency Plan – Response Level: March 2007

Level 1 Montrose Basin Monitoring Plan

Trigger: Notified by Defra through SNH 2006. One of 21 sites in Scotland.

Action: SWT Montrose Basin Ranger, Angus Council Ranger Service monitoring and recording to set WEEKLY strategy.

Status: RED

Level 2 East of Scotland Surveillance Zone

Trigger: Notified by Defra through SNH 2006.

Action: Relevant RMs notify their convenors to look out for dead wildfowl / groups of dead birds and notify Defra through helpline and then the RM, but NOT to instigate a formal surveillance programme.

Status: RED

Level 3 Avian Influenza identified on single non SWT wildlife reserve

Trigger: Notified by Defra through State Vet Service in Scotland

Action: SWT's response on reserve within the 3km, 10km or wider Wild Bird Surveillance Area, up the monitoring at Montrose Basin to DAILY and monitor any reserve within 3km zone DAILY and 10km zone and WBSA at least weekly.

Status: BLACK

Level 4 Avian Influenza identified on multiple non SWT wildlife reserve

Trigger: Notified by Defra through State Vet Service in Scotland

Action: As above, but more staff and volunteers mobilised by COM

Status: BLACK

Level 5 Avian Influenza identified on SWT wildlife reserve

Trigger: Notified by Defra through State Vet Service in Scotland

Action: Reserve probably closed by vets and surveillance continues as per level 3. Communications plan comes into operation.

Policy Supplement 4

AVIAN INFLUENZA – MODEL QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS FOR MEDIA / PUBLIC ENQUIRIES

Trust personnel must endeavour to provide correct advice to media or public enquiries relating to avian flu and wild birds. Avoid commenting on issues not related to **wild** birds, directing any such enquiries to the appropriate authorities. The following guidelines should be used for responding to enquiries;

What is Avian Influenza (bird flu or poultry flu)?

Avian influenza is a highly infectious disease caused by an influenza type A virus that normally infects birds. The disease in birds can manifest itself in a number of different forms ranging from relatively mild to severe. Certain wild birds, particularly waterfowl, commonly carry the milder forms.

What is H5N1?

H5N1 is the strain of avian flu virus detected at a turkey farm in Suffolk this year and that caused deaths in poultry and some wild birds in Southeast and Central Asia and Europe in 2006. This strain also caused some human infections in Asia.

What wild bird species are affected by H5N1?

Primarily ducks, geese, swans and gulls.

Do migrating wild birds carry H5N1 from country to country?

There's no concrete evidence that migratory birds have helped transmit the disease between countries or regions, but the possibility can't be ruled out. However, outbreaks in Europe have occurred along migratory flyways (including the Danube delta, a great gathering place for migratory waterfowl) during the autumn migration. At present H5N1 has not been isolated from healthy wild birds, only those that were dead or dying. This suggests that it is highly lethal and that most infected birds would not be capable of migration.

What does this mean for human health?

H5N1 is able to infect people because it is able to cross the species-barrier, although it doesn't do this easily. Where humans live in close proximity with wild and domestic birds, the mingling and exchange of human and animal viruses can occur more easily. However, the risk of transmission of the disease from wild birds to humans is very low. To minimise any risk it is advisable to carry out general hygiene precautions when handling wild birds, such as wearing disposable protective gloves when picking up and handling carcasses and washing hands, nails and forearms thoroughly with soap and water after handling the carcass. Advice on travelling to country's affected by H5N1 is available on the [Department of Health website](#).

Which groups of people would be most at risk in the UK in the event of an outbreak of avian flu?

People in close contact with infected poultry or infective material from poultry are most at risk. This would include poultry farm workers, veterinarians and others involved in disease control.

Can people get avian flu from other humans?

There have been a limited number of cases in which there is evidence to suggest person-to-person transmission but to date there is no evidence that the highly pathogenic avian influenza virus has adapted to spread easily in humans.

What precautions should I take around wild birds?

People should observe normal health and safety practices if coming into contact with wild birds. These include washing hands, nails and forearms with soap and water and drying thoroughly, particularly before eating, drinking and smoking. Anyone handling wild birds should follow the health and safety guidelines outlined above.

Should wild birds be culled to stop the disease spreading?

Evidence for the involvement of wild birds in spreading the disease is weak. Even if wild birds were found to be playing a major part in spreading the H5N1 virus, attempts to exterminate entire bird populations – by shooting, poisoning, netting and trapping or even explosives - have hardly ever succeeded in eliminating a problem. In fact, such attempts could spread the virus more widely, as survivors disperse to new places, and healthy birds become stressed and more prone to infection. The World Health Organisation, Food and Agriculture Organisation and OIE (the World Organisation for Animal Health) agree that control of avian influenza in wild birds by culling is not feasible, and should not be attempted.

How is the virus spread, if not by wild birds?

H5N1 might be transmitted by movements of poultry (and feathers), the trade in wild-caught birds, and the movement of soil/mud on wheels and feet. To date, all outbreaks that have been investigated have been traced back to poultry movements. Within south-east Asia, movements of poultry and poultry products are known to have been involved in the virus's spread among flocks and between countries.

Should wetlands be drained to deter waterbirds?

Apart from their extremely high conservation value, wetlands provide vital ecosystem services like flood control, water purification and nutrient recycling, and the livelihoods of many communities depend on them. Draining wetlands is not only environmentally disastrous, but also likely to be counterproductive for the same reasons that culling is more likely to spread the Avian Influenza virus than control it. Birds will seek alternative staging places on their migration routes, and wildfowl forced to fly further and endure more crowded conditions along their migration route will become stressed and exhausted, and more prone to infection.

How would the spread of avian influenza be controlled?

In the event of an outbreak, all birds on infected premises are killed and their carcasses disposed of. There would be movement restrictions and control on eggs, meat and anything likely to spread disease within a 10km radius of the infected site.

What surveillance is being carried out?

Surveillance of wildfowl for avian influenza is one of our best defences against incursion of the disease in poultry as it gives early warning of the presence of the disease. There are four strands of surveillance currently being carried out, which together provide comprehensive coverage of live and dead wild birds across Scotland. SWT's reserve at Montrose Basin is one of twenty-one monitoring sites across Scotland.

What powers do Scottish ministers have to deal with avian influenza in wild birds?

Under the new Avian Influenza (H5N1 in wild birds) (Scotland) Order 2006, Scottish ministers have powers to set up 3km Protection Zones and 10km Surveillance Zones, and to take a range of surveillance and biosecurity measures to ensure the disease is contained.

How do I find out more information?

The latest information on Avian Influenza and wild or domestic birds can be found on the following websites:

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/diseases/notifiable/disease/ai/qanda.htm#questions>

http://www.birdlife.org/action/science/species/avian_flu/faq_bird_flu.html

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