# Position Statement

## AVIAN INFLUENZA

The global spread of avian influenza viruses has resulted in widespread bird mortalities and conservation challenges when it comes to protecting wild birds. The aim of this statement is to inform all stakeholders about the potential interaction between wild birds and the avian influenza virus, and what interventions are possible to limit the impacts caused by avian influenza viruses.

## BIRDLIFE SOUTH AFRICA POSITION STATEMENT

### WHAT IS AVIAN INFLUENZA?

First documented in 1878 with various strains and outbreaks circulating since then, Avian Influenza is usually associated with intensive domestic poultry production. Spill over into wild populations can occur where there is close contact between wild and domesticated birds and biosecurity is low. Primary transmission is from one bird to the other through respiratory droplets and faecal contamination of water and food, which can happen more easily in poultry farms where birds are close together but also in wild congregatory species and/or at roost sites.

Avian Influenza viruses can be classed as low or high pathogenicity.

Low Pathogenicity Viruses are quite common in many bird species: they are not highly transmittable and do not readily cause mass mortalities in wild and domestic birds.

High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza (HPAI) are less common but outbreaks can spread rapidly and cause significant high levels of mortality in domestic and wild birds. Rare and threatened waterbirds might be at highest risk from HPAI, particularly species that have low genetic diversity (Dalton et al. 2016).

The specific role of wild birds in the long-distance transmission of the avian influenza virus remains unclear but wild birds can be both victims of outbreaks and vectors for transmission. There is relatively little data available about the true long-distance, regional and local transmission of the virus, including possible transmission through national and international poultry trade and its by-products, and mechanisms of transmission amongst domestic, captive and wild birds. There have been cases of transmission from birds to other species, including sea lions, foxes, felids and mustelids, with a few cases of transmission to humans.

Apart from HPAI, other viruses and bacteria can cause mass mortalities in wild birds or domesticated birds. These include but are not limited to, botulism, pigeon paramyxovirus, trichomonas, avian herpes viruses, avian cholera, avian malaria and also cyanobacterial blooms.

### HPAI OUTBREAKS IN SOUTH AFRICA

There have been a few HPAI outbreaks in South Africa, which usually start in poultry farms and spread into wild bird populations. It is very difficult to estimate the numbers of wild birds that have died of HPAI as testing is expensive and it can be difficult to find all the carcasses. In instances of significant outbreaks at poultry farms, the only way that HPAI can be stopped is to cull all the birds.

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**Recent outbreaks of HPAI include the following:**

- 2017/18: H5N8 strain of HPAI which affected numerous poultry farms before spreading to wild birds, causing mass mortalities of Greater Crested (Swift) Terns with smaller numbers of African Penguins, Cape Gannets and Cape Cormorants also being affected, amongst others.
- 2020/21: H5N1 strain of HPAI which again started in poultry farms and spread to wild birds, causing mass mortality of Cape Cormorants (approx. 25 000 birds) and affecting fewer numbers of African Penguins.
- 2023: A few cases of H5N1 have been reported, but a new strain (H7N6), mostly affecting poultry, has been detected.

**HOW TO IDENTIFY A POSSIBLE OCCURRENCE AND WHAT TO DO**

- Whilst it is not uncommon for single birds to die from various causes, five or more dead birds in the same area may be cause for concern.
- Symptoms in birds include lethargy, secretions around the eyes and nostrils, shaking, and spasms/seizures (sometimes causing the head to be pulled backwards).
- Avoid contact with sick or dead birds: if you must handle either a live bird or carcass, wear appropriate protective gear, including gloves, goggles and a mask. Ensure that you wash and disinfect anything that has come into contact with the infected bird and change your clothes.
- Keep pets away from dead birds.
- Report the incident to your closest rehabilitation centre, conservation authority or the local veterinarian with your location, the species and symptoms noted. If possible, without touching the birds, take close-up photos.

**PROTECTING WILD BIRDS FROM AVIAN INFLUENZA DURING AN OUTBREAK**

- Avoid areas where large colonies of birds roost, especially around waterways, or where outbreaks have been confirmed.
- Poultry farmers (ostrich and chicken farms) should enforce strict biosecurity measures, and poultry farms should limit access by members of the public.
- Aviculturists and other bird keepers (pet bird owners, zoos, bird parks) should have measures to prevent contact between captive and wild birds.
- Large numbers of carcasses should be reported to the government veterinary services.
- Single birds should be sealed hygienically in a double bag and handed to a veterinary practice.
- In order to avoid transmission via bird bags, ringing equipment and ringers' hands, ringing or handling of wild birds should not be undertaken during outbreaks, especially the ringing/handling of waterfowl or in areas near waterbodies - such activities should be suspended until no new cases of HPAI are reported in wild birds in the area.
- There should be no consideration of killing wild birds, spraying toxic products or deploying other disease control measures which may negatively affect wetland or other habitats. Such actions would contravene provincial and national legislation, and violate South Africa's commitments in terms of several international conventions and agreements.

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**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AND RESOURCES**

To find out more about Avian Influenza and HPAI:

- World Organisation for Animal Health: https://www.woah.org/en/disease/avian-influenza/
- Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds: https://www.unep-aewa.org/en/topics/avian-influenza

**To report suspected outbreaks among seabirds and marine mammals:**

| Province | Location | Organisation | Phone | Email/website |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **SEABIRDS** | | | | |
| Western Cape | Cape Town | SANCCOB | 021 557 6155<br>078 638 3731 (after hrs) | reception@sanccob.co.za<br>www.sanccob.co.za |
| | West Coast | | | |
| | Gansbaai | African Penguin and Seabird Sanctuary | 072 598 7117 | apss@dict.org.za |
| | Hermanus | | | |
| | Mossel Bay | SAPREC | 082 364 3382 | info@saprec.co.za |
| Eastern Cape | Gqeberha | SANCCOB | 041 583 1830<br>064 019 8936 (after hrs) | reception@sanccob.co.za<br>www.sanccob.co.za |
| Kwa-Zulu Natal | Entire coast | uShaka Seaworld | 031 328 8222<br>031 328 8060 (after hrs) | saambr.org.za<br>Ushaka-sea-world |
| | South of Umkomaas | SCAR | 083 246 6765 | admin@scar-rescue.co.za |
| | North of Umkomaas | CROW | 031 462 1127<br>031 469 0583<br>083 212 5281 (after hrs) | info@crowkzn.co.za<br>www.crowkzn.co.za |

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| Province | Location | Organisation | Phone | Email/website |
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| **MAMMALS** | | | | |
| Western Cape | Entire province | Government department | Deon: 072 477 7170<br>Steven: 083 462 5345<br>Mduduzi: 072 810 0312 | |
| Eastern Cape | Entire province | Bayworld Stranding Hotline | 071 724 2122 | bayworld.co.za |
| Kwa-Zulu Natal | Entire province | uShaka Sea World | 031 328 8222<br>031 328 8060 (after hrs) | Ushaka-sea-world |

*Author: Dr Hanneline Smit-Robinson with inputs from veterinarians, Dr P Stapelberg and Dr B Gardner. Revised by Christina Hagen and Kirsten Day.*