

Guidelines for managing wildlife infected with H5 bird flu on public land

October 2026

Purpose

These guidelines are for public land managers to support the management of dead wildlife following the declaration of a H5N1 avian influenza (H5 bird flu) outbreak in Victoria.

As H5 bird flu has been detected in Victoria, public land managers are responsible for managing risks on the land that they manage.

These guidelines should be considered in your Emergency Response Plan and any specific Incident Management Plans that your organisation may already have in place to ensure you are prepared for an outbreak of H5 bird flu.

Public land managers should check [Agriculture Victoria's website](#) as information and advice in these guidelines are subject to change.

Which organisations do these guidelines apply to?

The guidelines apply to all organisations that manage public land, including:

- Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA)
- Parks Victoria
- Traditional Owner Corporations
- Catchment Management Authorities
- Phillip Island Nature Parks
- Great Ocean Road Coast and Parks Authority
- Game Management Authority
- Alpine Resorts Victoria
- Councils
- Volunteer Committees of Management
- Royal Botanical Gardens
- Water Corporations
- Port Authorities

Signs and symptoms in wild birds

The most important sign to be aware of is sudden death. Other signs of H5 bird flu in wild birds are:

- ruffled feathers, depression, closed eyes
- inability to stand or fly
- diarrhoea
- difficulty breathing, coughing or sneezing
- swelling around the head, neck and eyes
- cloudiness or change in colour of the eyes
- lack of coordination, tremors, swimming in circles
- twisted necks or other unusual posture

H5 bird flu should be considered if a high proportion of a flock or group of birds become ill very quickly – progressing from normal to severe illness or death within 24 to 48 hours. You may not know if the birds have H5 bird flu, however you should treat them as though they do in line with the advice below.

Report sick or dead wildlife

Report sick or dead wildlife, by calling the **Emergency Animal Disease Hotline** on **1800 675 888**. You can also report single dead wild birds using the [online Wildlife Disease Reports form](#).

Report clusters (5 or more) of sick or dead wild birds of any species, anywhere in Victoria.

Report even one sick or dead:

- penguin or pelican
- bird of prey (e.g. hawk, owl, eagle)
- black swan
- marine mammal (e.g. seal, sea lion, dolphin)

Restricting access to the land you manage

Even though H5 bird flu has been detected in Victoria, public land must remain open and accessible. The presence of H5 bird flu in wildlife does not, of itself, require restriction of access to public land. This is because the spread of the disease through the environment will inevitably occur through wildlife movements and will be ongoing.

Refer to [Public Land Access Protocol](#) for further guidance.

Control Orders

Following an outbreak of H5 bird flu, Agriculture Victoria may declare that specific areas are under controlled or restricted access through a Control Order to contain its spread.

- Check if an Infected Area, Control Area or Restricted Area declaration is in place for your region by accessing the latest information on the outbreak on [Agriculture Victoria's website](#).
- If control orders and movement restrictions are in place for your region, you must follow the requirements of the controlled or restricted area outlined by Agriculture Victoria.
- Some infected places may also be placed under a Quarantine Notice.

Authorisation to interfere with wildlife

All wildlife, living or dead, are protected under the *Wildlife Act 1975*. Anyone interfering with, possessing or disposing of wildlife, including dead wildlife, requires authorisation under the *Wildlife Act 1975* unless a valid exemption applies.

A **control area order (wildlife)** is in place for dead wildlife sampling, handling and disposal on public land statewide. This order authorises land managers to move and dispose of wildlife that have died from H5 bird flu on public land.

Response to dead whales and dolphins must be in line with the Victorian Cetacean Emergency Plan, including seeking authorisation under the Wildlife Act from the Conservation Regulator.

If there are signs that wildlife died because of wildlife crime or other diseases, cases can be reported to the [Conservation Regulator](#) and the wildlife left in place until advice is received.

Managing dead wildlife on public land

In most cases, the preferred approach is to leave dead wildlife in place to decompose naturally, as this reduces handling and allows natural ecological processes to occur. Removal and disposal may be appropriate where a site-specific assessment identifies greater risks in leaving the wildlife in place due to impacts on:

1. Public safety and amenity as well as the health and safety of workers and volunteers.
2. Threatened species, other important species, culturally significant species and places, important environmental places, and industry biosecurity.
3. Broader wildlife and ecosystem impacts.

Cumulative or recurring wildlife deaths from the virus are likely over days and weeks. The compounding impact of recurring wildlife deaths may mean that a land manager should consider clean up and disposal of wildlife where immediate public safety and amenity risks are not evident. For example, a less popular beach may require clean up if the cumulative impact of wildlife deaths leads to a public amenity issue after several days.

Disposal

Land managers may dispose of small numbers (up to five) of dead wildlife through existing general waste services. Dead wildlife must not be disposed of through Recycling and Food Organic and Garden Organic services.

For waste entering landfill via general waste, ensure double bagging and safe handling prior to disposal (see below for advice on safe handling practices).

For larger numbers of dead wildlife, land managers may dispose at a landfill which has an EPA permission to accept putrescible waste.

Refer to details on managing transport, receipt and disposal of waste that contains dead wildlife in [Guidelines for waste service providers on the disposal of dead wildlife during a H5N1 Avian Influenza response](#)

Additional support for complex and high-risk events

Many public land managers routinely manage complex and high-risk issues, including matters involving iconic and culturally significant species and places, through their established operational, emergency management and Traditional Owner partnership arrangements.

The land manager remains responsible for assessing the site, determining and implementing appropriate management actions, and engaging relevant partners and stakeholders.

DEECA can support with advice on access control, collection, containment, temporary storage, transport, disposal and stakeholder engagement. Contact the **Emergency Animal Disease Hotline** on **1800 675 888** for advice.

Volunteers

Where appropriate, public land managers are encouraged to engage with volunteers regarding opportunities to assist with clean up or other response activities such as surveillance.

Land managers are responsible for determining suitable roles and implementing any arrangements, including ensuring appropriate supervision, training, safety measures and personal protective equipment are in place. The health and safety of volunteers must be prioritised, and activities are to be consistent with existing land manager guidance.

Avoiding unintended impacts on wildlife and ecosystems

Removal of dead wildlife is unlikely to significantly reduce the risk of the virus spreading through wildlife and may cause unintended stress and disturbance to living wildlife.

Before intervening, consider whether collection, vehicle or vessel movements, machinery, noise or personnel at the site could disturb live wildlife, increase stress, disperse potentially infected animals, disrupt nesting or breeding, or spread contaminated material to another location.

Where cleanup is required, plan the work to minimise disturbance to live wildlife and avoid sensitive nesting, roosting or breeding areas wherever practicable.

Traditional Owner H5 bird flu response

DEECA is committed to supporting self-determination and building meaningful partnerships with Traditional Owners, including early genuine engagement and participation in decision-making.

Many birds and animals hold deep cultural significance for Traditional Owners. They have spiritual connections with a range of species and each group has different cultural protocols and obligations for different species. Some Traditional Owner groups have their own emergency management protocols and these need to be followed on a place-based basis.

Where dead wildlife must be removed, dispose of it on Country wherever practical, and engage with Traditional Owners regarding death of culturally significant species.

Traditional Owners can apply for authorisation under the Wildlife Act to use wildlife for cultural purposes:
<https://www.vic.gov.au/education-management-permits>.

Public land managers must ensure they meet any relevant legislative obligations relating to Traditional Owners and engage with impacted Traditional Owners in line with existing partnership, land management and place-based engagement arrangements.

If required, DEECA's First Peoples Advisor (SBOC.firstpeoples@agriculture.vic.gov.au) can assist with identifying whether Traditional Owner engagement is required and, where necessary, help coordinate contact with the relevant Traditional Owner Corporation.

Health and safety - general advice

H5 bird flu is a zoonotic disease, which means it can be transmitted from animals to humans. Avian influenza infection is rare in people, however people who have close or prolonged contact with infected birds or animals or their contaminated environments are at greater risk of infection. See personal safety advice below for how to handle dead birds to mitigate disease risk for humans.

The Department of Health recommends following these guidelines to reduce your risk of catching H5 bird flu when disposing of dead wildlife.

- Disposal of dead wildlife should be done with the minimum required number of appropriately trained people with appropriate health and safety measures.
- Strict attention should be paid to measures which reduce risks to those involved in the collection and disposal operations, such as through appropriate use of personal protective equipment (PPE) as outlined in the personal safety advice section below.
- Maintain a comprehensive list of in-field responder names and contact information for rapid public health follow-up, if needed.
- If relevant, follow any DEECA instructions to notify local health authorities about dead wildlife management activities.
- Clean and disinfect/decontaminate personnel and equipment on site.

See also personal safety advice below for how to handle dead birds to mitigate disease risk for humans.

More information can be found at Communicable Disease Network Australia (CDNA) national guidelines for avian influenza: protecting people who work with birds and wildlife and WOAHA Avian influenza and wildlife: Risk management for people working with wild birds.

Personal safety

When collecting and disposing of dead wild birds, those undertaking the activity should protect themselves and minimise risk of spreading the disease to new environments through the following practices:

- do not touch the dead wild birds with bare hands
- wear a face mask (a P2/N95 respirator is preferred, or a disposable surgical face mask if P2/N95 is not available), protective eyewear (goggles preferred, or face shield), long-sleeved clothing, disposable gloves or gloves that can be disinfected and shoes that can be cleaned before moving any dead wild birds
- double bag the dead wild birds:
 - use tongs, a shovel or other appropriate equipment to handle the dead wild birds and place them in a plastic bag and tie it off (alternatively, use an inverted bag to pick up the bird and turn the bag back on itself)
 - the first bag is then to be placed in a second leak proof plastic bag, ensuring not to contaminate the outside of the outer bag
 - remove any disposable gloves and place them in the second bag
 - tie and close the second bag and dispose of it in the municipal or general waste bin
- wash any clothing or clean and disinfect any equipment or materials that may have touched the bird

- clean and disinfect any materials and equipment used
- wash hands with soap and hot water or use an alcohol-based hand rub (60-80% ethanol) before and after handling dead wild birds.

Further details about how to clean and disinfect equipment and clothing are available on Agriculture Victoria's [Information for farm visitors webpage](#).

If you are not able to follow these guidelines or wish to take extra precautionary steps, you should consider avoiding close contact with pet birds and poultry for 48 hours after handling dead wildlife which might have H5 bird flu.

Background

Avian influenza is a viral disease of birds that is found globally. The avian influenza virus strains are described as low pathogenicity avian influenza (LPAI) or high pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI). Most LPAI strains of the bird flu virus cause minimal disease in wild birds and poultry. However, some LPAI strains can evolve into HPAI strains when they spread among poultry. The recent H7 bird flu is an example of a HPAI strain that impacted a number of commercial poultry farms in Victoria.

The H5N1 strain of bird flu (commonly called H5 bird flu) is a serious and highly contagious strain spreading globally, causing widescale death of poultry as well as wild birds and a range of native wildlife (such as seals and dolphins).

H5 bird flu differs from other avian influenza strains as it is more infectious and can cause mass mortality in a large number of wild birds. There is no effective treatment for H5 bird flu and the prognosis for birds and some mammals affected with the disease is poor.

As H5 bird flu is highly infectious and can be spread by the movement of birds, people and equipment, biosecurity practices are crucial to minimise further disease spread. Land managers should follow the biosecurity requirements and steps outlined in this document if required to dispose of dead birds.