

Avian Influenza

Avian influenza is a viral disease that infects birds – some species seem far less susceptible to contracting it – and can be classified into two categories. Low pathogenic avian influenza (LPAI), which causes no or minimal signs of disease, is commonly found in wild ducks and geese and in domestic poultry. The second category, highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI), is extremely infectious, not treatable and can cause high mortality rates in infected species.

Need to Know

- Avian influenza, or bird flu, can infect wild and domestic birds, as well as other animals.
- The strain known as highly pathogenic avian influenza, referred to as HPAI, is worldwide, highly infectious, untreatable and potentially lethal to infected animals.
- HPAI has been detected in wild birds across much of the U.S. this year. The disease has particularly affected waterfowl (ducks and geese) and scavenging species such as vultures and bald eagles. In Georgia, wild bird species found with HPAI – specifically, the H5N1 2.3.4.4b strain – include black vultures, bald eagles, lesser scaup, gadwall and American wigeon. Most cases confirmed in the state involved birds in coastal counties.
- The risk of HPAI being transmitted to people is low. As of June 1, only one human infection from the current virus (H5N1) has been documented in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That person was involved in culling poultry presumed with H5N1 in Colorado.

What DNR Is Doing

The circulation of avian influenza viruses in wild birds is normal and the detection of HPAI was not unexpected. This is why routine annual surveillance and sampling of wild birds has been done for many years. Georgia DNR is coordinating with other state and federal agencies to monitor, investigate and document cases of HPAI during the current outbreak to inform local response as necessary.

How You Can Help

- **Avoid** handling sick or dead birds ([more on CDC recommendations](#)).
- **Report** dead or sick bald eagles or vultures when seen in unusually high numbers in a single location to DNR at **(478) 994-1438**. DNR strongly recommends observing such incidents only from a distance to reduce risk of transmitting the disease.
- **Keep** pets away from sick or dead birds (note: transmission to pets is rare).

The Georgia Department of Agriculture (agr.georgia.gov) provides guidance regarding commercial poultry operations and backyard flocks. Issues involving poultry should be promptly reported to the Georgia Avian Influenza Hotline, (770) 766-6850 or gapoultrylab.org/avian-influenza-hotline.

For concerns about a potential human infection or exposure, please contact your public health department.

Frequently Asked Questions

- **What are the signs of HPAI?** Infected birds in some species may be asymptomatic – showing no signs of being sick – while others may show clinical signs ranging from lethargy to severe neurologic effects such as circling, tremors and seizures. Often birds are found dead with no signs of trauma or other causes.

- **How does HPAI spread?** Infected birds can shed HPAI through saliva, nasal secretions and feces. Feces are a common mode of transmission for wild birds. Animals can become infected when they are around other HPAI-infected animals or come in contact with contaminated surfaces. For more: <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/avianflu/avian-in-birds.htm>.
- **What type of birds can HPAI affect?** HPAI can infect wild birds including waterfowl (ducks, geese, swans, gulls and terns), shorebirds (storks, plovers and sandpipers), raptors (eagles, hawks) and scavengers (vultures, crows). Domestic poultry such as chickens, turkeys and ducks are also susceptible. Songbirds are generally at lower risk for hosting avian influenza; however, it cannot be ruled out that a “bird-feeder” species can carry or transmit the pathogen.
- **How did the reports of HPAI start in Georgia?** Routine surveillance is conducted annually in the state to detect avian influenza in wild birds. In 2022, the state’s first case of HPAI was found in a hunter-harvested duck from Hart County. More cases of HPAI were later detected in ducks found dead on the coast and in bald eagles. The most recent case in wild birds in Georgia involved vultures.
- **What is Georgia doing to reduce the risk of HPAI spreading?** DNR and other state and federal agencies are coordinating closely to monitor, investigate and document cases of HPAI. It is important to remember that avian influenza viruses normally circulate in wild bird populations at some level during most years.
- **Should the public call about *all* sick or dead wild birds?** No. The public should contact the DNR Wildlife Resources Division (478-994-1438) if they discover unusually high numbers of sick or dead bald eagles or vultures in a single location. The agency also strongly recommends that such incidents be observed only from a distance to reduce the risk of transmitting the disease.
- **How should I dispose of a dead bird?** Avoid handling sick or dead birds ([more on CDC recommendations](#)). However, if you must dispose of a dead bird, wear disposable gloves or place an inverted plastic bag over your hand to avoid direct contact when picking up the carcass.
- **Can HPAI spread to humans and pets?** It is possible but very rare. Only one human infection from the current virus (H5N1) has been documented in the U.S., according to the CDC. Keep pets (including pet birds) away from sick or dead birds.
- **How should I maintain bird feeders and feeding areas in my yard?** Research suggests that avian flu is unlikely to become widespread in songbirds except for scavenging species such as crows and possibly in areas where transmission risks are higher, such as near infected poultry facilities or gatherings of infected waterfowl. However, regularly cleaning feeders, feeding areas and birdbaths can help reduce the risk of many diseases that do affect songbirds.
 - Clean feeders weekly with a 10% bleach solution (one part bleach mixed with nine parts water). Rinse with water and allow to air dry thoroughly. Always wear protective gloves while cleaning feeders, feeding areas and birdbaths, and wash carefully afterward.
 - Rake up bird seed, hulls and fecal matter beneath feeders two or more times a week. Wear a mask to avoid inhaling fungal spores stirred up by raking.
 - Empty and clean bird baths every two days when bird visitation is heavy.

Learn more at <https://georgiawildlife.com/clean-feeders-save-birds>.

Sources include: Georgia Department of Agriculture, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, CDC