



## **First report of suspected cases of High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza (HPAI) in the Antarctic Treaty Area**

*Joint statement from the Council of Managers of National Antarctic Programs (COMNAP), International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO), Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR) and the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR).*

Following visual observations on 22 December 2023 by winter-over team members from the national Antarctic program of Argentina, we can announce that Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) is suspected in Antarctic Skuas (*Stercorarius antárctica*) in the Antarctic Treaty Area near Argentina's Orcadas Station. In late October, cases of HPAI were confirmed in Brown Skua and Southern Fulmar but those animals were in the Sub-Antarctic islands and therefore not considered as being the first cases in the Antarctic.

Since October, we have been monitoring the situation carefully and visual observations strongly indicate HPAI in the Antarctic Treaty area today.

Confirmation of the cases through testing will be difficult as there are very few personnel in the area and limited sample collection and testing capabilities.

This is the first suspected occurrence of HPAI H5N1 in the Antarctic Treaty Area. A published risk assessment led by the SCAR Antarctic Wildlife Health Network (AWHN) had indicated there was a heightened risk that HPAI would present in Antarctic species this austral summer and a recent OFFLU statement confirmed and updated the risk. Because of that heightened risk, COMNAP, IAATO and SCAR have been working together to prepare for the virus's arrival through natural migration of species.

Relevant authorities are also working to ensure that protocols are in place to prevent transmission to humans in that region, and to prevent the spread of the virus to other areas/species in Antarctica through human activity.

Avian influenza, known colloquially as 'bird flu' is caused by a virus that primarily effects birds but can also infect mammals including, in very rare instances, humans.

Bird flu has been around a long time, primarily affecting poultry, with first outbreaks in wild birds reported in 1961.<sup>1</sup> There are low pathogenic avian influenza (LPAI) viruses that wildlife species are infected with but that cause no clinical signs of disease.

There is a range of avian influenza subtypes. Of concern are subtypes H5 and H7, which may become highly pathogenic in poultry and then escape into wild bird populations. These highly pathogenic subtypes can cause up to 100% mortality in bird colonies.

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<sup>1</sup> W.B. Becker, "The isolation and classification of Tern virus: Influenza Virus A/Tern/South Africa/1961", *J. Hyg., Camb.* (1966), **64**, 309.

Genetic assessment of the virus obtained from the Sub-Antarctic cases indicated spread from South America, likely through movement of migratory birds.<sup>2</sup> There are clear indications that the virus was brought to the Antarctic through natural migration and not through direct human activity or interactions with the birds.

HPAI H5N1 is the strain of HPAI that is currently causing unparalleled mortality of wild birds and mammals worldwide and threatening population levels for some species already under multiple anthropogenic pressures.<sup>3</sup>

Professor Antonio Quesada, COMNAP Chairman and Head of Spain's national Antarctic program said, "We continue to be vigilant, looking for visual signs that birds in other areas of Antarctica might have the virus. The programs have a range of tools in place to assist us to monitor the situation and to communicate through our Antarctic regional networks as the global situation evolves and as the Antarctic situation changes".

To date, globally, there are no sustained cases of human-to-human transmission and the current risk to humans in Antarctica remains low, especially with the protocols in place.<sup>4</sup> We continue to seek advice from the SCAR/COMNAP Joint Expert Group on Human Biology and Medicine to inform guidance for those operating in Antarctica.

The Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (UN FAO) has noted that before 2005 when HPAI viruses spilled significantly from poultry into wild birds, HPAI in free-ranging wildlife was highly unusual. Now a new phase in the epidemiology of HPAI in wild birds has been entered and this better adapted virus is expected to continue to spread and cause further negative conservation impacts around the world.<sup>5</sup> Wild birds are both victims and vectors of the virus originating from within a poultry setting. In the sub-Antarctic, suspected cases in Elephant seals are under investigation.

We have been preparing for and readied those who travel to Antarctica for the impact HPAI would have on Antarctic species. In mid-2022, COMNAP began collaboration with IAATO and SCAR on the heightened risk of HPAI, specifically to clade 2.3.4.4b (HPAI H5N1) and CCAMLR Secretariat representatives joined in the discussions in recent months.

Given the virus' rapid spread through the northern hemisphere in 2021, its spread south into South America and South Africa in 2022, and the increase in cases in seabirds resulting in mass mortality events to date<sup>6</sup> the SCAR AWHN carried out a risk assessment for Antarctic and sub-Antarctic geographical areas and for wildlife groups published as "A Risk Assessment of HPAI in the Southern Ocean"<sup>7</sup>.

Dr Meagan Dewar, leader of the SCAR Antarctic Wildlife Health Network

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<sup>2</sup> A. Bennison, et al, Preprint: <https://doi.org/10.1101/2023.11.23.568045>.

<sup>3</sup> Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Scientific Task Force on Avian Influenza and Wild Birds statement on: H5N1 High pathogenicity avian influenza in wild birds - Unprecedented conservation impacts and urgent needs, July 2023, <https://www.fao.org/3/cc6936en/cc6936en.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Joint COMNAP/SCAR Expert Group on Human Biology and Medicine, Avian Influenza: A summary of "The Risk of Avian Influenza in the Southern Ocean: A practical guide for operators interacting with wildlife. With additional supporting information and guidance regarding impact of Avian Influenza in Humans", June 2023, <https://www.comnap.ag/s/Post-JEG-review-Avian-Influenza-A-summary-of-The-Risk-of-Avian-Influenza-in-the-Southern-Ocean-A-pra.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> FAO, July 2023.

<sup>6</sup> See SCAR, IAATO, COMNAP ATCM XLV (2022) IP101 "Heightened Risk of Avian Influenza in the Antarctic Treaty Area", 28 April 2023.

<sup>7</sup> M. Dewar, M. Wille, et al, Preprint; <https://doi.org/10.32942/osf.io/8jrbu>.

(<https://scar.org/library-data/avian-flu>) and one of the co-authors of the SCAR risk assessment said, “The risk assessment gave us an early indication that gulls and skuas had the highest group vulnerability score for birds, and that fur seals and sea lions had the highest vulnerability score for mammals. The analysis indicated a heightened risk that HPAI would present in Antarctic species in 2023 or 2024 in the Antarctic Peninsula region and that is exactly what we are seeing.”

We will continue to monitor the situation in Antarctica and release information as and when it becomes available.

-Statement ends-

Further information:

Follow the **latest COMNAP guidance** at: <https://www.comnap.aq/heightened-risk-of-hpai-in-antarctica>.

Follow the **latest information from the SCAR Antarctic Wildlife Health Working Group** at: <https://scar.org/library-data/avian-flu>.

Follow the **latest global information** at: <https://www.woah.org/en/disease/avian-influenza/>.

For enquiries regarding COMNAP’s work on heightened risk from HPAI in the Antarctic, contact the COMNAP Executive Secretary at [sec@comnap.aq](mailto:sec@comnap.aq).