

Avian Influenza Update

Avian Influenza has hit the headlines this summer with its dramatic impacts, particularly on seabirds, but as winter approaches, thoughts now turn to wintering wildfowl and waders and how you can help report cases as part of your counts.

Teresa Frost WeBS Manager

Volunteers marked dead Barnacle Geese around the Solway to avoid double counting whilst estimating the impact of avian flu



MARKED BARNACLE GOOSE CORPSES BY KANE BRIDLES

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza, variously referred to as bird flu, avian flu or HPAI, has been a recurring issue in UK waterbirds since 2006. However, the strain that began circulating in autumn 2021 appears to be the most contagious to date. Testing for HPAI in the UK aims to establish its spread, and whilst it does not therefore reflect the overall mortality in either domestic

or wild birds, the number of recent domestic bird cases in the UK far surpasses that in any other year, and instead of cases only occurring during the winter, outbreaks have continued throughout the year.

A step change appears to have happened in wild birds too. The most dramatic impact of the disease in winter 2021/22 was on the Svalbard Barnacle Goose population wintering

on the Solway estuary, where GSMP observers and local birders began to draw attention to unusual numbers of corpses on the shoreline. Attempts were made to estimate mortality, avoiding double-counting by spray painting corpses as they were counted, but many more dead birds were likely to have been never found. Population counts are carried out monthly and there was a noticeable impact on the

numbers present later in the season. The results of the studies, plus this coming winter's census, will be key to discovering how badly the population was depleted by the disease.

During early summer, attention turned to seabirds with the disease confirmed to be present in several species and many colonies experiencing mass mortality. Great Skua and Gannet, species for which we host globally significant breeding populations, were particularly hard hit. Dead seabirds are continuing to be washed up on beaches. However, as autumn arrives and our skies again begin to fill with swirling waders, and wildfowl that had dispersed to breed gather together once more, there is apprehension about how bad this


winter might be for waterbirds, despite hopes that the outbreaks may fade as immunity increases.

Waterbirds and seabirds are thought to be particularly exposed to the disease, as their aquatic environments aid the spread and persistence of the virus. Scavengers such as birds of prey that may feed on diseased birds have also been affected. It is possible that there is some bias towards testing more easily noticed larger birds – any bird species could potentially have the disease, and mammals such as seals can also be infected. Gulls are of particular interest as potential 'vectors' between seabird colonies and other marine, freshwater and farmland habitats.

The WeBS and GSMP partner organisations have all been leading

work to combat this new conservation risk to our waterbirds, and the usual monitoring data you collect have already been immensely valuable in informing research and developing impact mitigation plans for both wild and domestic birds. It is important to keep reporting dead birds to the authorities to support testing and assessment of the spread of the virus. The latest advice and links to relevant government information can be found at www.bto.org/avian-flu. However, we are now also asking you to tell us via your WeBS Online submissions if you suspect HPAI at your site, to help researchers build up a more detailed picture of mortality and where the biggest impacts are.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- **Keep counting** and help us fill any gaps in coverage – the regular monthly counts of live birds collected by WeBS and GSMP will be the primary way we will be able to identify population trends and thus which species and sites have been hardest hit. **It is more important to properly count live birds than look for dead ones.**
- **If you suspect bird flu in a dead bird or observe symptoms in live birds** present (e.g. twisting of the head, tremoring, respiratory distress, loss of balance) **report to the Defra (03459 33 55 77) or DAERA (0300 200 7840) helplines.** This is particularly important if bird flu has not yet been recorded near to your suspected case.
- **To help assess mortality, add a note of suspected cases to your WeBS/GSMP count.** Add to the relevant species comment by clicking on the  symbol. Mention "flu" so we can find the comment. Give the number, age if possible, and if the bird was dead or sick, e.g. "3 sick adults showing flu-like symptoms", "2 adults and 1 young bird dead, bird flu possible" or "10 birds dead, avian flu suspected as known to be present at site".
- It is important that only live birds are marked as present when you submit your counts, so if there were no live birds of the relevant species present, instead add your record in the 'Extra Details' comments box at the top. Please specify the species if adding to the extra details comment box, e.g. "2 dead Mute Swan, bird flu suspected, no live birds present".
- Note it is possible to optionally record seabirds and birds of prey in WeBS Online as well as waterbirds, either in the "Other Common Species" tab if they have previously been recorded, or by adding as a new species. You can add avian flu comments for these other species.
- Whilst this is a disease of birds, there is zoonotic potential to cause disease in humans. **Do not touch dead birds.**
- **Report dead birds to site managers, landowners or councils** as appropriate, who may decide to collect carcasses with appropriate PPE.
- If you can do so safely without touching the dead bird, check for rings and report to www.ring.ac – this too will help enable research into the scale of mortality and which populations are most adversely affected.