



What is avian influenza?

Avian Influenza (AI), often referred to as “bird flu,” is a virus type that occurs naturally among wild aquatic birds (ducks, geese, swans, gulls, terns, and shorebirds). AI viruses are classified into two groups based on their ability to produce disease in poultry, including a highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) and a low pathogenic avian influenza (LPAI). HPAI viruses are very contagious through saliva, nasal secretions, feces, and contaminated surfaces.

Avian influenza in Washington

The first cases of HPAI in wild birds in the U.S. were in Washington’s Whatcom County in 2014. The virus (H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b), through a completely separate event, began to spread across the country again in March 2022, starting in the eastern U.S. In Washington, WDFW has confirmed hundreds of cases of HPAI in wild birds since then. There are undoubtedly many more positive cases as WDFW does not have capacity to test thousands of sick or dead birds reported to the Department, but it is important to note that the majority of waterfowl (ducks, geese, and swans) live after infection.

Past HPAI virus outbreaks tended to disappear when the weather warmed up and birds dispersed from large flocks. HPAI H5N1 2.3.4.4b is different in that it has remained on our landscape throughout the seasons since March 2022.

Since 2023, WDFW has confirmed cases of H5N1 in not just birds, but striped skunks and a bobcat in northeast Washington, harbor seals in Puget Sound, raccoons in various areas, and two cougars in Western Washington.

Reporting sick or dead birds

If you encounter a sick or dead bird, do not touch or transport it to a wildlife rehabilitator or your home to nurse it. Touching and moving sick wildlife spreads viruses and disease. Instead, report it at wdfw.wa.gov/birdflu.

For more information on highly pathogenic avian influenza, go to wdfw.wa.gov/birdflu or scan the QR code





A WDFW staffer collects dead birds following an HPAI outbreak on Rat Island in Western Washington.

Carcass disposal

In most cases, WDFW does not have resources for staff to pick up dead birds reported by members of the public. If you encounter a dead bird, do not touch it with bare hands. Wear an N95 mask and disposable gloves, double bag it, and place it deep into your garbage can where scavenging animals can't find it. You can also incinerate carcasses.

HPAI and human health

HPAI viruses are not easily transmissible from birds to people, but without proper hygiene, or if in prolonged contact with a sick/infected animal, the risk increases. While it is unlikely that hunters or people feeding wild birds will contract HPAI, hygiene measures are recommended to prevent virus spread:

- Wear disposable gloves when cleaning harvested birds or bird feeders.
- Do not dispose of processed carcasses in the field where they can be eaten by raptors.* Bag them and place in the garbage, bury, or incinerate them.
- Clean and disinfect all equipment (boots, clothes, vehicles, firearms) to prevent the spread of diseases.
- Do not harvest or handle wild birds that are obviously sick or found dead.
- Do not eat, drink, or smoke while cleaning game.
- Wash hands with soap and water or alcohol wipes immediately after handling game or cleaning bird feeders.
- Wash tools and work surfaces used to clean game birds with soap and water, then disinfect with a 10 percent solution of household bleach.
- Separate raw meat, and anything it touches, from cooked or ready-to-eat foods to avoid contamination.
- Cook game birds thoroughly. Meat should reach an internal temperature of 155 to 165 degrees Fahrenheit to kill disease organisms and parasites.

If concerned, people who come into close contact with sick birds should contact their local health department.

Protecting domestic animals from HPAI

The Washington State Department of Agriculture has extensive information on protecting domestic fowl and other animals from transmission of HPAI viruses at agr.wa.gov/birdflu.

* A reminder to hunters that you must still follow identification requirements in transport. Harvested carcasses must include either a fully-feathered head or wing under [WAC 220-413-090](http://wac.wa.gov/220-413-090).