

Bulletin 108

AVIAN INFLUENZA AND WADERS

The current outbreak of a highly pathogenic strain of H5N1 avian influenza is a major concern for human health and for bird conservation, especially for species that flock, such as many waders. Already, 5–10% of the world population of the Bar-headed Goose *Anser indicus* has perished in an outbreak in western China. Other species, such as gulls and cormorants, were also found dead. It is unlikely that all bird species are equally susceptible to the virus but it may only be a matter of time before waders are affected in the same way.

When this sort of thing happens, there is sometimes a danger that some ill-informed politician will want to prove his or her decisiveness and do something that is completely inappropriate, such as ordering the large-scale culling of wild birds. Fortunately, most governments have accepted the view of the World Health Organisation and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations that culling wild birds is unlikely to stop the spread of the disease and is extremely difficult to implement. Although that is right, it does not really go far enough because culling is more likely to increase the risk of spreading the disease than contain it. First, the slaughter of large numbers of birds in a limited area creates unused habitat to which others will be attracted, thus promoting additional movement and potentially spreading the virus further. Second, culling may lead to the dispersal of infected individuals. Third, culls may cause stress to healthy birds, making them more prone to infection. Unfortunately such considerations do not appear to have occurred to a farmer in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, who paid local people to eliminate all birds from the vicinity of his poultry farm.

Despite newspaper stories that migrant geese would quickly bring H5N1 from Siberia to Western Europe, the risk that long-distance migrants might carry the virus thousands of kilometres appears to be very low; simply because most infected birds would probably not survive long enough to fly very far. For wild birds to spread this strain of the virus they would have to be able to carry it without showing symptoms. To date, there is no hard evidence of asymptomatic carriage of highly pathogenic H5N1 by wild birds. However, this has

been shown experimentally in domestic ducks, so the possibility cannot be entirely dismissed.

It is becoming clear that other transmission routes, especially the illegal trade in poultry and cage-birds, are the most likely means by which the virus may be dispersed. Improving biosecurity in the poultry industry and in the pet/wild bird trade is clearly important. Infected poultry flocks should be slaughtered immediately and the movement of poultry strictly regulated and reduced wherever possible. Similarly all transport of birds in connection with the pet industry across national boundaries should be prohibited until the danger has passed.

Through vigilance, wader researchers could play a useful role in containing the current outbreak. Any inexplicable die-off of waders should be reported quickly to the appropriate agricultural or health authorities. Care should be taken to avoid close contact with dead or dying birds and the consequent risk of infection. However, it may be particularly valuable to check birds for rings/bands as they could indicate the origin of the virus, as well as providing other valuable ecological information.

Wader experts throughout the world have much to contribute in the way of advice to help government agencies avoid making inappropriate decisions. Birds may die for all sorts of reasons unconnected with avian influenza so it is important that the authorities receive guidance and know when they need to react. For readers of this journal, an understanding of the patterns of bird migration and a broad knowledge of migratory pathways is second nature. For example, *islandica* Black-tailed Godwits are never going to bring H5N1 to the UK from Eastern Europe! This may be obvious to us, but not so clear to others. Therefore we can help ensure that governments and the public take sensible precautions in the light of sound knowledge. We can also play our part in bringing some sanity to public discussion of this important issue in the media, particularly the newspapers.

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