

Bird flu and Gamebirds: standing advice

Introduction

The serious and notifiable disease Avian Influenza (bird flu) continues to be found in wild birds and some kept flocks in many parts of the world, including from time to time the UK. In response to this ongoing threat, government has come together with countryside and shooting organisations to issue the following important standing advice to all involved with gamebirds.

NOTE: This is generic standing advice covering the whole of the UK, is produced by industry, for industry, and is endorsed by Government. In the event of a change in risk or a disease incursion, additional outbreak-specific information will be published on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk) and the websites for [Scottish Government](https://www.scotland.gov.uk), [Welsh Government](https://www.wales.gov.uk) and the [Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](https://www.defra.gov.uk) in Northern Ireland.

The disease:

Avian Influenza (AI), also known as bird flu, is a disease that affects gamebirds, chickens, ducks, geese and other captive birds. It can also occur in many species of wild birds.

Bird flu is present in many parts of the world and occurs in different forms or strains, each described by 'H' and 'N' numbers, eg.H5N8. All forms are contagious and can be spread between birds by direct contact or via bird droppings or contaminated environment, equipment and clothing. (Bird flu does not readily spread through the air). Some forms are highly pathogenic ('high path'), causing higher mortality. Others are low pathogenic ('low path') varieties, which can spread through bird populations but often do not kill any. Clinical signs can vary between species of bird and some species (for example ducks and geese) may show minimal clinical signs. 'Low path' varieties can sometimes mutate into 'high path' forms.

Bird flu, or avian flu, is an infectious type of influenza that spreads among birds. In rare cases, it can affect humans. There are lots of different strains of bird flu virus. Most of them don't infect humans. But there are 4 strains that have caused concern in recent years (H5N1; H7N9; H5N6 and H5N8). Although they don't infect people easily and aren't usually spread from human to human, several people have been infected around the world, leading to a number of deaths. This is one of the main reasons why governments are working so hard to control bird flu and reduce its spread. Further information on the public health risk can be found [here](#).

Bird flu is not generally found in domestic poultry or kept birds but from time to time we do get outbreaks, the disease often being introduced by wild birds. Bird flu could also be introduced via imported birds, meat or other infected material (fomites). The UK authorities are very strict in controlling the latter, however disease arriving with wild birds is hard to

predict and impossible to prevent, although steps can be taken to help prevent its transmission to kept birds. Because of its seriousness, from an animal health, animal welfare, potential for human epidemic and potential economic impact, bird flu is a 'notifiable disease' in the UK (like foot and mouth disease or rabies). It is an offence not to report a suspected case.

The moment bird flu is confirmed in the UK, emergency control measures will be put in place by Governments in an attempt to eradicate the outbreak and prevent further spread. Currently, the way this is done is set out in domestic law, administered in the UK by the separate governments of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. But because disease recognises no boundaries, in practice, the UK authorities all work on disease management and eradication in a closely coordinated way. Incursions of bird flu into the UK have historically been uncommon but are now increasing in frequency, just as they have in other parts of the world. In recent years there has been at least one UK outbreak every year. In the winter in 2020/21 there were 26 confirmed outbreaks in kept flocks (two of these were in commercial game rearing premises). Bird flu was also found in 315 wild birds at 73 locations in 42 different counties. Experts do not expect this frequency of outbreaks to decline.

The potential impacts of bird flu on the UK's poultry industries, international trade, on bird collections and on wildlife and shooting are far reaching. It is not just the disease itself but also the essential legal measures to eradicate it that could affect these activities, so everyone involved needs to read and heed this information very carefully.

By taking the right precautions now, affected persons will not only be protecting their own birds and interests, they will also be contributing to a nationwide effort to safeguard all bird-related businesses, particularly those in their local area.

The law:

To reduce the risk of bird flu spreading, whenever there is an outbreak in the UK, disease controls are put in place as appropriate. These can take many forms depending on the strain of the disease (the H and N numbers), whether it is a "Highly Pathogenic" or 'Low Pathogenic' variety and also whether the outbreak is in kept or wild birds. Details of the measures taken in the event of an outbreak can be found in the [Notifiable Avian Disease Control Strategy](#) (and the [Notifiable Epizootic Avian Disease Control Strategy](#) for Northern Ireland) and are summarised below.

If AI occurs in kept birds of any species, whether it is in a commercial or non-commercial flock, the Infected Premises (IP) is immediately put under restriction. No birds, animals, people, equipment or poultry products can move on or off the premises without a licence issued by government disease control officers and all kept birds remaining on the premises are culled. Compensation at [standard rates](#) is paid on any healthy birds compulsorily culled. There is no compensation for sick birds, birds that have died or for any other costs related to bird flu, whatever they are or how incurred, nor for consequential losses.

Zones are imposed around the IP, typically circular. Within these zones, various activities are banned or restricted although some may be allowed only under a specific licence. For High path strains there is usually a Protection Zone (PZ) out to 3km from the IP and a further Surveillance Zone (SZ) out to 10km. Within these zones, movements of birds and bird products are prevented except under licence and gamebird releasing is specifically banned. For low path strains a single 1km restricted zone is normally declared. These zones remain in place until the outbreak is declared over, although they can be amalgamated before then. Disease control zones are published online, including the Declarations which specify the controls and restrictions applicable within those areas. The situation can change quickly as disease is confirmed with activities permissible changing overnight. People are encouraged to familiarise themselves with these pages and check regularly to see how or if they are affected by the outbreak.

Other legal restrictions may be put in place at national level covering the home countries individually, or the UK as a whole. For example, bird gatherings may not be permitted or there may be a country-wide AI Prevention Zone (AIPZ) within which all bird keepers may be required to adhere to specific, heightened biosecurity measures and sometimes to house all birds. There can also be restrictions on activities such as shooting, although these are rare. They are more likely to affect game rearing premises.

During an outbreak, the control areas and the various restrictions within them can rapidly change, especially if there is more than one outbreak in the UK at the same time. It is essential that all bird keepers stay up to date with the specific information posted on government websites.

Irrespective of whether bird flu is present in the UK, there is a longstanding legal requirement to register with the Government if you keep a total of 50 or more gamebirds or other poultry (all bird keepers with flocks of any size are required to register in Northern Ireland). This applies even if your premises are only stocked for part of the year. You can register via these links in [England](#), in [Scotland](#), in [Wales](#), or in [Northern Ireland](#). You are also required to notify APHA or DAERA within one month of any significant change in your details. (e.g. average number birds kept, change of contact details or change in trading name.) Keepers with less than 50 birds are encouraged to register voluntarily as this will aid disease control efforts during an outbreak and allow direct communication, if necessary. In this context gamebirds in release pens for the purpose of release into the wild qualify as kept birds.

Biosecurity:

To prevent outbreaks and minimise risk of onward spread before and after infection is recognised, the over-riding consideration is better biosecurity. Particular attention should be paid to thorough cleaning and disinfection of clothing, footwear, vehicles and equipment when moving and mixing birds. Such things are always important in gamebird management but never more so than during periods of heightened risk or during an AI outbreak. The key points are to keep species apart, especially separating poultry or gamebirds from waterfowl, and avoid penning any birds close to open water. Separate production stages, for example by keeping laying birds away from hatching and rearing

facilities. Minimise human and vehicle contact between such groups and ensure that any people or items moving between them are cleansed and disinfected. It is good practise to have separate equipment and personal protective equipment at each location. Use footbaths containing government-approved disinfectant products, which should also be used for all other disinfection tasks (in [GB](#) or in [Northern Ireland](#)). These footbaths should have a lid to prevent rainwater diluting the disinfectant and the contents should be regularly replaced with fresh material. It is good practice to also supply a brush to ensure footwear is properly cleansed and disinfected. Ask your vet for advice. Inform and train staff thoroughly and restrict access by non-essential visitors. Be scrupulous with your record keeping as to where birds, people and equipment have come from and gone to. Keep food and water clean and, as far as possible, inaccessible to wild birds. Biosecurity is not just a physical barrier, it's a way of thinking too; work it out and take appropriate action now.

Specific advice on aspects of gamebird management

Catching-up:

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, all catching up of gamebirds after 1 February is illegal under the Game Act of 1831 and the Game Preservation Act (Northern Ireland) 1928. In these countries, catching up is only lawful during the shooting season of the species in question. In Scotland, catching up of gamebirds becomes illegal after 28 February. Once caught up, previously wild birds are classed as poultry and will be subject to the same movement controls and restrictions as other kept birds.

Moving gamebirds:

During a bird flu outbreak, the only areas where gamebird movements are likely to be banned will be the 10 km control zones around actual outbreaks in kept flocks. Invariably, no birds may be moved within, from or to these zones without a specific licence issued by the authorities managing the outbreak.

Elsewhere, kept gamebirds can usually be moved and the normal laws apply. In summary, the Animal Transport Regulations permit only healthy gamebirds to be moved. Maximum journey times are specified and all consignments must be accompanied by an Animal Transport Certificate. Good biosecurity includes moving gamebirds around as little as possible, especially while any bird flu outbreak lasts. All journeys must be undertaken with great care. Transport and containers must be cleaned and disinfected between consignments, as the law requires, and accurate records of all gamebird movements must be kept.

Imports and exports of gamebirds to and from the UK (alive or dead) are covered by additional rules and can be stopped by Order during an AI outbreak, here or abroad, to prevent the spread of notifiable diseases such as bird flu. Typically, no exports of eggs or birds are allowed from premises in Europe that are within 10 km of a confirmed outbreak in kept birds. Those who source game from abroad should consider this vulnerability and keep an eye on the extent of such restrictions during any outbreak.

Overwintering gamebirds:

Gamebirds held captive through the winter for breeding may become subject to an 'Order' (regional or national) to house all kept birds or to otherwise keep them separate from wild birds. For species like pheasants and ducks, these Orders can present particular challenges. The authorities recognise that it is often impractical to house birds that are of a wild disposition and used to being kept outside in very large pens. It can also be impractical to roof net such pens so as to keep out wild birds, especially in winter when any weight of snow can easily collapse the entire structure unless large gauge netting is used. You should however look at the feasibility of netting over-wintering pens and be prepared to bring birds into roof-netted breeding pens earlier than usual. Over wintered game birds have historically been exempt from being "housed" indoors or under nets but continuation of this exemption cannot be guaranteed and proactive measures to prevent contact with wild birds will be required.

If an Avian Influenza Prevention Zone (AIPZ) is put in place you will be required to take measures to deter wild waterfowl from accessing over-wintering pens. Locate pens away from waterfowl concentrations and deploy appropriate scaring techniques (examples include regular human presence, kites, flutter tape, flashing lights, lasers, bird wires, audible scarers and scarecrows). You will also be required to prevent access to ponds, lakes or standing bodies of water.

If feeding released game (classed as wild birds) you should not feed them close to overwintering gamebirds.

Laying and rearing pens:

Usually, spring laying pens and summer rearing fields are roof netted and so they are likely to meet mandatory housing or requirements to otherwise keep birds separate from wild birds, as outlined by an AI Prevention Zone – but you must check the specific requirements of the declared zone in order to ensure you are compliant. This is especially important because such regulations can differ between the home countries in extent and detail, so gamebird keepers need to be aware of any rules pertaining to their location.

Gamebird releasing:

Within the 10 km control zones that are typically imposed around kept bird outbreaks, no gamebird releasing is allowed, not even under licence. The gamebird sector has been fortunate that there has rarely been a bird flu outbreak within the UK during the main period for releasing gamebirds but we cannot presume that this will always be the case.

Shooting:

Shooting, whether of gamebirds or other species, is normally unaffected by the controls on bird flu outbreaks. An exception is if the outbreak is of the very serious H5N1 type in wild birds, when all shooting may be stopped only within the control zones to reduce the risk of

moving infected birds around. Anyone attending a shoot should follow good personal biosecurity and should regularly cleanse and disinfect clothing, footwear and vehicles – this is particularly important if they have any contact with game birds, poultry or other captive birds.

There is, however, a possibility – albeit remote - that wild birds shot or culled in pest and predator control could be infected with bird flu at any time of the year, so it clearly makes sense to avoid actions that could spread infection from killed wild birds into any kept birds, whatever their species. Do not use the same vehicles and storage facilities for shot and live birds without thorough cleansing and disinfection in between. Keep all shot or culled birds well away from any kept flocks. Likewise, wash or sanitise hands and wash clothing well after handling dead birds and before any contact with kept flocks to minimise spreading infection.

Gundogs are not at any particular risk from bird flu but as a precaution do not allow dogs to eat any dead wild birds and do not feed uncooked shot or culled birds to animals. Well cooked birds can be safely consumed by humans and animals alike. Dogs are known to have contracted certain strains of flu and we cannot categorically say they would never get it.

The United Kingdom Health Security Agency and home countries health agencies have issued more [advice](#) on human health and sensible precautions during bird flu outbreaks.

Planning ahead:

Bird flu outbreaks can devastate kept flocks of birds and the industries dependent on them, including gamebird production and shooting. The only way to reduce the risks is to think ahead and plan for all possible eventualities. This is called contingency planning, and everyone involved with gamebirds needs to undertake it.

It is important not just to consider the impact of your own birds catching bird flu but also what would happen if there were outbreaks nearby or further afield. For example, you might find yourself within one of the 10 km control zones where gamebird movements would be restricted and releasing banned. This should be built into your business continuity and contingency planning.

Consider also your supply chains; where do your eggs, chicks or poults come from and what would happen if those producers, or their suppliers, found themselves under similar restriction at a critical time? Is there anything you can do now to reduce such risks and to plan ahead? Do you need to source new items, such as roof netting, in order to comply with current or potential future requirements to separate birds? If you run a business, what do your contracts with suppliers and customers say about what happens in the event of disease or control-based restrictions? Have you considered insurance?

Everyone's circumstances will be different, and we cannot give specific advice on such matters here but we do urge you to give very careful consideration to all the information in this document and the ways in which it could affect you, now or in the future.

Vigilance:

If you find dead wild waterfowl (swans, geese or ducks) or other dead wild birds, such as gulls or birds of prey, you should report them to the Defra helpline (03459 33 55 77). **Do not touch or pick up** any dead or visibly sick birds that you find. For further information see GOV.UK [advice to the public](#). In Northern Ireland you should call the DAERA Helpline (0300 200 7840).

Finally, remember that bird flu is by law a notifiable disease. Know the signs of bird flu in kept birds, which include loss of appetite, swollen heads, respiratory problems and multiple unexpected deaths. Involve your vet and if you suspect bird flu, call APHA immediately:

England: 03000 200 301

Wales: 0300 303 8268

Northern Ireland: 0300 200 7840

Scotland: please call your [local APHA office](#)

Bird flu and its consequences certainly impact game management and shooting but it is also true that game managers and shooters are in a good position to detect and report outbreaks. Please be vigilant and report any concerns. Thank you.

14th November 2021



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