

The H5N1 Strain of Avian Influenza and the waterways network: your questions answered

Introduction

British Waterways (BW) has produced the following guidance to help the public and its staff fully understand any risks associated with the H5N1 strain of Avian Influenza. We have been working closely with ADAS, an expert consultancy, to develop the contingency plans that have been put in place. BW's guidance is based on scientific advice and currently underpins the following three simple facts:

- 1. The H5N1 strain of Avian Influenza has been confirmed in the UK bird population on four occasions in the last three years, but**
- 2. There are no known cases anywhere in the world of transmission of the H5N1 strain between wild birds and humans.**
- 3. It is safe to continue to use, work and enjoy the waterways network.**

The sections below are split into categories of questions to help you quickly understand the current scientific guidance available for visitors and staff of the waterways.

Frequently Asked Questions – General

1. Is it safe to visit waterways?

Yes. While strains of Avian Influenza, commonly referred to as Bird Flu, have always been present within birds in the UK, the strain that is causing some concern, H5N1, has been identified in four cases in the UK. One isolated case on the East coast of Scotland in 2006, in one commercial bird flock in Suffolk, England in February 2007, in a free range commercial bird flock, also in Suffolk, England in November 2007 and in a number of mute swans, in Dorset in January 2008. It has not been found anywhere else in the UK's wild bird and domestic flocks, despite greater vigilance and increased testing of dead birds over the last two years.

The concerns centre on the possibility that the H5N1 strain could infect people at a future date and ultimately become transmissible between human beings. However, it's very important to remember that worldwide there have only been a few cases of humans contracting the H5N1 strain of Avian Influenza and these have always been in circumstances where those affected have spent prolonged periods of time in close contact with domesticated birds such as chickens and turkeys. There have been no cases worldwide of humans contracting Avian Influenza (H5N1 strain) from the wild bird population.

If the current circumstances change in any way British Waterways will rapidly revise this scientifically-based guidance. In the meantime common sense precautions such as good hygienic practices e.g. washing your hands and

cleaning mud from shoes and boots when leaving an area frequented by birds, is all that's necessary.

2. What is Avian Influenza?

Avian Influenza, or "bird flu", is a contagious disease caused by viruses that normally infect only birds and, less commonly, pigs. Whilst all bird species are thought to be susceptible to infection, domestic poultry flocks are especially vulnerable to infections that can rapidly cause epidemics in poultry. The global outbreak in 2005 involved the H5N1 strain of the disease, which has shown the trait to cross into humans and other mammals but only from commercially bred or domestic birds.

The H5N1 strain of Avian Influenza has been identified in wild birds in certain parts of the European Union, in an isolated case on the East coast of Scotland in 2006 and in a number of mute swans in Dorset in January 2008. Transmission of the disease from wild birds to humans has never been recorded. Human to human transmission of H5N1 has also never been recorded. There is a theoretical risk that the virus could eventually change to become much more readily transmissible between humans, potentially giving rise to a human influenza pandemic. The existing scientific evidence suggests that the risk of this happening is low, but cannot be discounted.

3. What is BW doing to limit the spread of Avian Influenza?

British Waterways is working closely with ADAS and Defra to minimise any impact on the waterways network from outbreaks of the H5N1 strain of Avian Influenza in the UK.

While strains of Avian Influenza have always been present within birds in the UK, the H5N1 strain has only been found in the wild bird population in one isolated case on the East coast of Scotland in 2006 and a number of mute swans in Dorset in January 2008. The strain has also been found in two flocks of commercial birds in Suffolk, England in February and November 2007. The disease currently does not affect any other part of the UK. BW has taken expert advice on the potential risks to waterways visitors and any impact to the safe operation of its waterway network that this and future outbreaks would have. BW's information is based on scientific advice and is being constantly reviewed to ensure it reflects current circumstances.

BW has well-prepared contingency plans that will ensure the organisation does all it can to prevent the virus from spreading and that people continue to enjoy the waterways safely.

4. What have you told your staff?

With expert consultancy advice British Waterways has produced a briefing note for its staff. It contains scientifically-based guidance and advice and reflects current circumstances. It also gives guidance on the handling of any dead birds found by or reported to BW.

Our staff have also been provided with copies of this document, **The H5N1 Strain of Avian Influenza and the waterways network: your questions**

answered, to help them deal with public enquiries. It too is based on scientific advice and will be rapidly revised and replaced if current circumstances change.

5. What has BW done to inform waterways' visitors and customers and keep them up to date?

With expert consultancy advice British Waterways has produced this document, **The H5N1 Strain of Avian Influenza and the waterways network: your questions answered**. It is based on scientific advice and will be rapidly revised and replaced if current circumstances change.

It is available from all BW offices, as a download from www.britishwaterways.co.uk and by calling 01923 201120. It can also be obtained from leaflet holders at various places across the 2,000-mile network.

Our staff welcome comments and enquiries about this document and about the H5N1 strain of Avian Influenza in general.

6. Who else are you working with on this issue?

British Waterways is working with ADAS, an expert consultancy who worked closely with BW during the Foot & Mouth Disease outbreak in 2001. ADAS is working closely with all relevant government departments.

BW is also working closely with a wide range of waterways stakeholders to keep them properly informed of the current situation.

7. Is Scotland still managed by Defra in this instance, and if not, whom is British Waterways Scotland working with?

The Scottish Executive is the authority responsible for dealing with outbreaks of the H5N1 strain of Avian Influenza in Scotland. It has its own contingency plan. This is similar to the Defra plan for England and Wales. The Help Line number is the same as it is for England & Wales - **08459 33 55 77**.

8. What is BW's role in monitoring wildfowl health?

We have over 800 bank-side staff who in their day-to-day duties remain vigilant to outbreaks of the H5N1 strain of Avian Influenza in the UK's wild bird population. By working closely with an expert consultancy and with Defra, British Waterways has contingency plans in place to deal with any further outbreaks.

We are also asking our many waterways visitors to remain vigilant and inform either a member of BW's staff or contact the Defra Helpline on **08459 33 55 77** if they discover one or more dead water fowl.

9. What should I do if I find a dead bird?

In the event that you find one or more dead birds you should report the location to a member of British Waterways staff. We will ensure that appropriate action is taken. You should not disturb the carcass.

If it is not possible to contact British Waterways immediately you should call the Defra Help line on **08459 33 55 77**. You will be asked for details of the nature

and location of your find. Details of local BW offices can be found at www.britishwaterways.co.uk or by calling **01923 201120**.

10. Why are the zones different this time, compared to the Suffolk events?

The Control Area and Monitoring Area imposed in this outbreak are, as far as the implications for BW are concerned, the same as the Protection and Surveillance Zones in previous outbreaks. The different names are just a recognition that some of the biosecurity and containment measures used for commercial or domestic poultry in Protection and Surveillance Zones cannot be readily applied to wild birds.

Waterways Visitors & Customers - Frequently Asked Questions

1. I walk my dog along the towpath, am I at risk?

While strains of Avian Influenza have always been present within birds in the UK, the H5N1 strain has only been found in the wild bird population in one isolated case on the East coast of Scotland in 2006 and a number of mute swans in Dorset in January 2008. The strain has also been found in two flocks of commercial birds in Suffolk, England in February and November 2007, but currently does not affect any other part of the UK. It's also important to remember that there is no evidence that any type of Avian Influenza has ever passed from birds to dogs or any known cases in the world of transmission of the H5N1 strain between wild birds and humans.

Responsible dog ownership includes keeping your dog on a lead when walking in public places such as towpaths, and we encourage all dog owners to continue to do this while out enjoying the waterways network.

Of course, it's always a good idea to give your dog's paws a good wash after being out and about, and common sense precautions such as washing your hands and cleaning mud from boots and shoes should be followed, just as you usually would.

2. Can I still feed the ducks?

Yes. There's no reason to stop feeding the ducks, geese and swans that are such a popular attraction when visiting the waterways. Many wild birds rely on food given to them by visitors to the waterways. The H5N1 strain of avian influenza has only been found in the wild bird population in one isolated case on the East coast of Scotland in 2006 and a number of mute swans in Dorset in January 2008. The strain has also been found in two flocks of commercial birds in Suffolk, England in February and November 2007, but currently does not affect any other part of the UK.

There are no known cases anywhere in the world of transmission of the H5N1 strain between wild birds and humans and common sense precautions such as washing your hands properly and cleaning mud from boots and shoes is all that's necessary. If circumstances should change in the future we will publish fresh information based on sound scientific advice.

3. Can I still go fishing near wildfowl?

Yes, it's perfectly okay to continue to enjoy fishing on your local canal or river. The H5N1 strain of avian influenza has only been found in the wild bird population in one isolated case on the East coast of Scotland in 2006 and a number of mute swans in Dorset in January 2008. The strain has also been found in two flocks of commercial birds in Suffolk, England in February and November 2007, but currently does not affect any other part of the UK. Also, there are no known cases anywhere in the world of transmission of the H5N1 strain between wild birds and humans.

As always, common sense suggests that washing your hands before eating a snack while out fishing, along with cleaning mud and dirt from fishing tackle and your boots or shoes once you've finished, are all good ideas.

4. I cycle along the towpath, am I at risk?

No. The H5N1 strain of avian influenza has only been found in the wild bird population in one isolated case on the East coast of Scotland in 2006 and a number of mute swans in Dorset in January 2008. The strain has also been found in two flocks of commercial birds in Suffolk, England in February and November 2007, but currently does not affect any other part of the UK. Also, there are no known cases anywhere in the world of transmission of the H5N1 strain between wild birds and humans.

It is perfectly safe to continue using towpaths for cycling. If circumstances should change in the future we will publish fresh information based on sound scientific advice.

5. I live on a boat, am I at risk?

No. The H5N1 strain of avian influenza has only been found in the wild bird population in one isolated case on the East coast of Scotland in 2006 and a number of mute swans in Dorset in January 2008. The strain has also been found in two flocks of commercial birds in Suffolk, England in February and November 2007, but currently does not affect any other part of the UK. There are no known cases anywhere in the world of the H5N1 strain of Avian Influenza being transmitted to humans from wild birds. It is however always sensible to wash your hands thoroughly after handling any part of the exterior of the boat or equipment such as ropes, mooring pins and waterway structures.

Many different types of virus are naturally found in mud and dirt that is found on the towpath and which you'll always find on your footwear. Boots and shoes should be cleaned frequently. When doing this it's a good idea to wear disposable gloves and always wash your hands thoroughly afterwards.

Our information is based on scientific advice and is being constantly reviewed to ensure it reflects current circumstances. BW will contact you again if circumstances change in the future.

6. Wildfowl leave a considerable amount of faeces on the towpath where I visit my local waterway. Should I stay away from that area?

There is no need to stay away from towpath areas where ducks, geese and swans climb out of the water and leave a mess behind, but simple hygiene precautions should be followed.

Many different types of virus are naturally found in mud and dirt that is on the towpath and which you'll always find on your footwear. Boots and shoes should be cleaned frequently. When doing this it's a good idea to wear disposable gloves and always to wash your hands thoroughly afterwards.

Our information is based on scientific advice and is being constantly reviewed to ensure it reflects current circumstances. BW will contact you again if circumstances change in the future.

7. I hang bird feeders on my boat, should I take these down?

Feeding wild birds is fine. Of course, it's sensible to wash your hands thoroughly after filling and cleaning bird feeders, or if you come into contact with bird droppings.

Summary

BW's information is based on scientific advice and currently underpins the following three simple facts:

- **The H5N1 strain of Avian Influenza has been confirmed in the UK bird population on four occasions in the last three years, but**
- **There are no known cases anywhere in the world of transmission of the H5N1 strain between wild birds and humans.**
- **It is safe to continue to use, work and enjoy the waterways network.**

Our advice is being constantly reviewed to ensure it reflects current circumstances. This information will be updated and reissued as appropriate.