PhotoCredit: Andreas, M.

Bird flu: a wake-up call for animals and human-safety

BY XARENI PACHECO EHRHARDT

January 2025

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the emergence of the H5N1 avian influenza virus became a cause for concern as a potential pandemic risk. Over the past four years, a (panzootic) highly lethal strain of avian influenza has rapidly spread across Europe, Africa, and Asia, causing significant bird mortality. Its devastating impact extended to the United States, where it triggered the worst bird flu outbreak in history. Last year, the virus reached South America, making its way down the Pacific coast, and causing massive deaths among wild birds and marine mammals. A report from OFFLU, a global network of flu experts, revealed that Peru and Chile reported over 500,000 dead seabirds and 25,000 dead sea lions.

Reports of millions of wild animals dead, in different continents, belonging to countless species—penguins, otters, ducks, dolphins, owls, warn of potentially catastrophic consequences for Antarctic wildlife, as over 100 million birds and numerous marine mammals inhabit the region. Species like the emperor penguin and Antarctic fur seal, which gather in large colonies, could be particularly vulnerable.

According to Thijs Kuiken from Erasmus University Rotterdam, there exist certain species exclusive to the Antarctic and sub-Antarctic islands. These species are found in limited numbers, ranging from hundreds to thousands. An alarming concern arises if the virus manages to infiltrate these populations, as their very existence would be jeopardised. The threat of extinction looms over these unique species, highlighting the urgent need for protective measures.

PhotoCredit: Oikeutta eläimille 2023/We Animals

The widespread transmission of H5N1 in both domestic and wild populations poses a significant threat to public health. It's quite alarming to note that the H5N1 virus managed to infiltrate the mammal population, making its way into a mink farm in Spain in October 2022. Mink farming, a practice very similar to poultry farms, involves confining numerous wild animals in dreadful conditions, and inadvertently provided an ideal breeding ground for this virus. The cramped and stressful environment in these farms created a perfect setup for the virus to thrive. Researchers, in a report detailing the outbreak, also issued a grave warning, highlighting the potential danger of minks becoming a catalyst for the transmission of the virus between birds, mammals, and even humans.

In 2024, farmers around the world culled millions of commercial and backyard chickens, as well as pet birds, due to outbreaks of avian influenza. Chickens are killed using various methods, such as asphyxiation in gas chambers, spraying them with firefighting foam, shutting down barn ventilation, cervical dislocation, or firearms. Although these methods are described as “humane,” there is nothing truly humane about the practice of animal culling. In the same year, avian flu cases were tragically detected in U.S. cattle, including 67 known cases of highly pathogenic avian influenza in humans who contracted the virus from infected cattle or poultry. This includes the first recorded fatality linked to contact with backyard-farmed chickens. As scientists continue to monitor mutations that could enable easier human transmission, experts are also raising concerns about the potential risks for domestic cats and dogs. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recently reported cases of illness and death in 13 domestic cats, potentially linked to uncooked pet food.

Meanwhile, on a duck farm, nearly 100,000 ducks were mercilessly culled following an outbreak of avian influenza in January 2025. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) stress the importance of ongoing surveillance to address such risks. While predicting future pandemics remains a complex challenge, these outbreaks underline the need for vigilance.

Cockfighting—a cruel blood spectacle in which specially bred roosters are forced to fight to the death—poses a significant risk in the context of zoonotic and highly pathogenic diseases. The well-documented poultry-to-poultry transmission of viruses like avian influenza and virulent Newcastle disease highlights cockfighting as a major risk factor. For instance, between 2000 and 2010, cockfighting activities in Southern Asia were directly linked to the spread of H5N1 bird flu among poultry, as well as severe and sometimes fatal zoonotic infections in humans. Breeding farms for fighting roosters often house birds outdoors, increasing contact with infected wild birds and facilitating disease spread. Additionally, cockfighting operations frequently evade disease control measures. Smuggling birds, concealing them from veterinary surveillance, and avoiding diagnosis and treatment are integral to their operations. The interstate and international shipment of millions of fighting birds further amplifies the risk of spreading infections on a global scale. Such practices not only perpetuate animal cruelty but also jeopardize public health and the global economy, underscoring the urgent need for stricter enforcement and broader awareness of these intertwined issues.

Chickens, unfortunately, endure unimaginable suffering in the animal industry, making them one of the most mistreated creatures on Earth. The insatiable appetite for chicken meat in United States, and many other countries, not only benefits enormous multinational corporations but also leads to grave consequences for animal welfare, the environment, and public health. The alarming outbreak of avian flu should serve as a wake-up call, urging us to seriously reconsider our current food system. In the past year, a staggering number of over 140 million birds have tragically lost their lives due to the relentless onslaught of bird flu. The United States, United Kingdom, and European Union have poured hundreds of millions of pounds into combating this devastating disease. However, amidst this battle, a growing number of experts are questioning the ethical implications of the constant culling of infected and non-infected birds. They argue that this approach is morally flawed and must be re-evaluated. The toll this epidemic has taken on avian populations is truly disheartening, and it is high time we reconsider our eating habits by transitioning to a plant-based diet and finding a more compassionate and effective solution to this crisis.

PhotoCredit: Jo-Anne McArthur 2024/We Animals

References:

Abbasi, J. (2023). Bird Flu Has Begun to Spread in Mammals—Here's What's Important to Know. JAMA, 329(8), 619-621.

Islam, M. A., Al Marzan, A., Bhattacharya, P., Khan, A., & Haque, M. A. (2023). Bird flu threat: An urgent call to take action to control the global spread. Journal of Infection and Public Health, S1876-0341.

Klaassen, M., & Wille, M. (2023). The plight and role of wild birds in the current bird flu panzootic. Nature Ecology & Evolution, 1-2.

Mahase, E. (2023). H5N1: Do we need to worry about the latest bird flu outbreaks?. BMJ: British Medical Journal (Online), 380, p401.

Bartels, M (2024) See how a deadly bird flu season impacted wildlife on remote Antarctic Islands, SCIAM https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/can-antarctic-wildlife-survive-another-deadly-bird-flu-season/

Keen, J., et al (2025) USDA bungles bird flu crisis, compounding animal deaths and threatening human health https://centerforahumaneeconomy.org/2025/01/08/bird-flu-crisis-bungled-by-usda?ms=EM_NBI_AWA_20250115_FR_FIGHT_WaynePacelle_NA_NA_FIGHT&emci=c6634472-97d3-ef11-88d0-0022482a9d92&emdi=cb634472-97d3-ef11-88d0-0022482a9d92&ceid=12399679

Le Page, M. (2023) Bird flu has reached Antarctica and could have a devastating effect, New Scientist, https://www.newscientist.com/article/2399252-bird-flu-has-reached-antarctica-and-could-have-a-devastating-effect/

Roucaute, D. (2025) Avian flu: scientists monitor mutations that could facilitate human transmission, Le Monde, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/environment/article/2025/01/20/avian-flu-scientists-monitor-mutations-that-could-facilitate-human-transmission_6737201_114.html#

RTL News (2023) https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/buitenland/artikel/5414798/vogelgriep-bird-eiland-massale-sterfte-op-antarctica-voorspeld