

BIRD FLU AND GAMEBIRDS

As the serious and notifiable disease H5N8 bird flu continues to be found in wild birds and some kept flocks in the UK, government has come together with countryside and shooting organisations to issue the following important information to all involved with gamebirds.

THE OUTBREAK

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

A severe strain of the disease, H5N8, has recently been found in wild and captive birds throughout Europe, including the UK. A full [report](#), including maps, is regularly updated.

The H5N8 strain is highly pathogenic and can be passed from wild birds to kept flocks, causing birds to fall ill and die. It can be transmitted directly from bird to bird or via the environment, for example in bird droppings or on people and equipment.

Risks to human health from H5N8 are very low and bird flu does not pose a food safety risk.

However, the potential impacts of bird flu on the UK's poultry industries, on bird collections and not least on wildlife and shooting are hard to exaggerate. It is not just the disease itself but also the essential legal measures taken to eradicate it that could affect your activities so you need to read and heed this information very carefully.

By taking the right actions now, you will not only be protecting your own birds and interests, you will also be contributing to a nationwide effort to safeguard all bird-related businesses, particularly those located in your area.

THE LAW

To reduce the risk of bird flu spreading further, there is currently a legal requirement throughout the UK for all captive birds, including gamebirds, to be housed or otherwise kept separate from wild birds. (See '*Separating Gamebirds from Wild Birds*' below for details).

There is also a UK-wide ban on Bird Gatherings. These are mainly bird shows and auctions but they include any situation where birds come together from several places and then, shortly afterwards, either go back where they came from or go on to other destinations. (See '*Catching Up*' below for more on how this affects gamebirds.).

Around the outbreaks in captive flocks there are additional restrictions, usually out to 10km from the infected premises and often lasting many weeks. These include restrictions on the

movement of birds, bird products and people and also an automatic ban on all gamebird releasing. Licences can sometimes be obtained for movements but never for releasing.

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 are expected to register in Northern Ireland). This applies even if your premises are only stocked for part of the year. You can register in [England](#), in [Scotland](#), in [Wales](#), or in [Northern Ireland](#).

Full details of all the legal restrictions in place are constantly updated on the Gov.uk website in [England](#), in [Scotland](#), in [Wales](#) or in [Northern Ireland](#) which also includes a wealth of other information about the disease and its implications.

BIOSECURITY

Next to staying within the law, the over-riding consideration at this time is biosecurity. Cleanliness, disinfection and attention to detail when moving and mixing birds are always important in gamebird management but never more so than now. If you keep gamebirds, look for any biosecurity risks in what you do and address them.

Keep species apart, especially ducks, and avoid penning any birds close to open water. Separate different gamebird production stages, for example keeping laying birds away from hatching and rearing facilities. Minimise human and vehicle contact between such functions and ensure that any people or items moving between them are biosecure. Use footbaths containing government-approved disinfectant products which should also be used for all other disinfection tasks, (in [GB](#) or in [Northern Ireland](#))

Ask your vet for advice. Brief 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.

SEPARATING GAMEBIRDS FROM WILD BIRDS

The legal requirement to house kept birds or to otherwise separate them from wild birds will remain in place throughout Great Britain until at least 28th February 2017. A similar requirement is in place in Northern Ireland and the end date is under review. Government accepts that housing is not always possible, either because of welfare considerations or for practical reasons, such as a lack of suitable facilities. Where housing is not possible, the legal requirement is to take 'reasonable and practical measures' to separate all kept gamebirds from wild birds. This could involve putting roof-netting over any outdoor pens, for example,

or using scaring to keep wild birds away, coupled with covering feeders and drinkers to make access by wild birds more difficult. Whatever you do must be effective or you could find yourself in breach of the law. Local Authorities have been briefed on these requirements and on enforcement.

There is more about biosecurity and separating kept birds from wild birds in this government document in [England](#), in [Scotland](#), in [Wales](#) and in [Northern Ireland](#)

CATCHING-UP

Catching-up gamebirds from the wild when we know there is H5N8 out there clearly needs to be done with great care. Bird flu is often associated with wetlands and wildfowl species and it would be most unwise to catch up any ducks at this time.

The Government gamebird codes dating from 2009 and supported by all the shooting and countryside organisations state, *“In order to minimise the risk of disease transmission and promote welfare, laying stock should, wherever possible, be maintained as a closed breeding flock. Where adult laying birds have to be brought in, particularly from the wild, all possible action should be taken to check the provenance and health of the birds.”*

Gathered-up birds should be kept physically isolated in a biosecure area, preferably housed and completely separated from wild birds. They should be kept as far apart as possible from the main flock, and monitored regularly, for at least two weeks before introduction to the main flock. All persons entering the area where these birds are kept should practice high levels of biosecurity ideally by wearing footwear restricted to area or at the very least removing all soiling and disinfecting their boots on leaving. Any deaths or signs of disease should be subject to veterinary investigation.

Where caught up gamebirds go to a single destination and remain there for breeding, any risk of a bird flu outbreak is contained at that one site. This form of catching-up remains legal. It is illegal to catch-up birds which are then to be moved on from their initial destination on to one or more other locations as the risk of spread is much greater and government interpret this latter activity as a ‘Bird Gathering’ and thus it is currently banned under the emergency measures.

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, all catching up after 1 February is illegal under the Game Act of 1831 and the Game Preservation Act (Northern Ireland) 1928. In Scotland a further 28 days from the end of the shooting season is allowed.

MOVING GAMEBIRDS

The animal transport regulations permit only healthy gamebirds to be moved. Maximum journey times are also specified and all consignments must be accompanied by an Animal Transport Certificate. The current outbreak restrictions also prevent captive gamebirds from being moved within or from the 10km control zones around kept bird outbreaks, except under licence. Elsewhere, good biosecurity implies moving gamebirds around as little as possible while the outbreak lasts. All journeys must be undertaken with great care. Transport 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 to prevent the spread of notifiable diseases such as bird flu. Typically, no export of eggs or birds are allowed from premises within 10km of a confirmed outbreak in kept birds. Those who source game from abroad should keep an eye on the extent of such restrictions in Europe via the document link in '*The Outbreak*' section above.

LAYING AND REARING PENS

The setting up and use of gamebird laying pens and rearing systems is allowed within the current restrictions provided they meet the requirement to take reasonable and practical measures to separate all kept gamebirds from wild birds (see '*Separating Gamebirds from Wild Birds*' above).

GAMEBIRD RELEASING

The national restrictions associated with controlling bird flu do not currently affect gamebird releasing but within the 10km control zones around kept bird outbreaks, no gamebird releasing is allowed, not even under licence. So far, we have been fortunate that there has not been a bird flu outbreak within the UK during the main period for releasing gamebirds but we cannot know what will happen later in 2017.

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 is automatically stopped within the control area to reduce the risk of moving infected birds around. The current outbreak is not H5N1.

There is, however, a current possibility – albeit remote - that shot wild birds could be infected with H5N8. It clearly makes sense, therefore, to avoid actions that could spread

infection from shot 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 birds well away from any kept flocks. Likewise, wash hands and clothing well after handling shot birds and before any contact with kept flocks. Public Health England has issued more [advice](#) on this.

Gundogs are not at any particular risk from the current H5N8 outbreak but as a precaution do not allow dogs eat any dead wild birds and do not feed uncooked shot birds to animals. Well-cooked shot birds can be safely consumed by humans and animals alike.

PLANNING AHEAD

Forecasting the future of the current outbreak is fraught with difficulty. Typically, outbreaks of bird flu eventually die out, just like other diseases. Once spring migration of wild birds is over, the risk of spread via wild birds may decrease. The weather can be influential too, although we have seen summer outbreaks in the past. But the extent of the current outbreak is causing veterinary experts to predict that the disease will certainly be present in Europe and probably the UK for several months to come. Gamebird keepers therefore need to think ahead as to how their future activities might be affected.

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 10km control zones where gamebird movements would be restricted and releasing banned.

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 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 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

Finally, remember that bird flu is by law a notifiable disease. Know the signs, which include loss of appetite, swollen heads, respiratory problems and multiple unexpected deaths. Involve your vet and if you suspect bird flu call the Defra helpline immediately on 03000 200 301 in England, 0300 303 8268 in Wales or 0300 200 7840 in Northern Ireland. In [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 keep vigilant and report any concerns. That way we can all help to eradicate bird flu, so that the UK can get back to being a disease-free country once more and all our important activities can return to normal again as soon as possible. Thank you.

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