

## **Avian Flu – more focus needed on poultry movements, says RSPB**

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“The ways in which Avian Flu is spreading remain unclear. The media have focused relentlessly on wild birds as the main cause of spread. Wild birds may have played a role in some cases, for instance the outbreaks around the Black Sea are consistent with the timing and direction of migration from Siberia. Very little is known about the numbers of wild birds that have been infected with the virus (which originated in poultry). More research is urgently needed into how long wild birds can survive post-infection, how far they can move in this period and how long they remain infectious for.

Many outbreaks are not consistent with wild bird movements. The transfer of the disease from China to Siberia is an obvious example. The movement of poultry and poultry products and captive wild birds for trade are known causes of transfer and few doubt that unrestricted poultry movements (legal and illegal) have played a major role in the spread of the disease, particularly in south-east Asia. Far more attention needs to be given to these routes if the disease is to be controlled.

Whether or not wild birds are involved, the only way to control the disease is continued surveillance, improved bio-security, good public information and swift action to contain an outbreak through efficient culls of poultry in the vicinity. All the major authorities, including the FAO, the WHO and the British Government have stated publicly that culls of wild birds would be unfeasible and may make the situation worse.

The RSPB is working with BirdLife International, the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, the British Trust for Ornithology, Defra and others to evaluate the risk on an on-going basis.

We are participating in the Government's surveillance programme to monitor waterbirds for the infection. So far, of over 1,300 samples from individual wild birds tested in the UK, not one was found to have H5N1, the strain of avian influenza currently causing concern. RSPB site managers have put in over 2,000 hours of surveillance on 63 wetland reserves and not found a single bird sick with avian influenza.

One mallard in Scotland was found to have a low-pathogenicity type of bird flu but this was entirely to be expected and is not a concern. Low pathogenicity strains are very common, many birds carry them, but they pose no threat to human health and usually cause no disease in the birds.”