



Australian Government

First Nations totem species potentially impacted by H5 bird flu (national perspective)

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This information has been developed to help inform local messaging, it can be adapted for use in your state or territory.

Cultural significance of species varies between Nations, language groups, and regions. The examples below reflect broad themes and should not be interpreted as applying universally across all First Nations communities.

If you see sick or dead birds or other animals, do not touch them.

Avoid contact.

Record what you see.

Report multiple sick or dead birds or other animals to the **Emergency Animal Disease Hotline** on **1800 675 888** from anywhere in Australia.

You can also report sick or dead birds to someone you trust, such as local community or ranger groups.



H5 bird flu in Australia

Australia has confirmed detections of H5 bird flu in wildlife including some marine mammals. This virus is a serious, highly contagious strain of bird flu that mainly affects birds but can also infect other animals.

Mammals

Globally, this strain of H5 bird flu has been detected in mammals following spread from infected birds. Overseas, infections in wild mammals have occurred most often in scavenging species such as foxes, and marine mammals that interact with seabirds, such as seals, dolphins and sea lions.

Seabirds and shorebirds

H5 bird flu has been detected in wild seabirds internationally and in Australia, with confirmed detections in species such as greater crested terns. Colonial nesting behaviour may increase spread risk.

Seabirds and shorebirds are important indicators of the health of Sea Country and coastal ecosystems.

Migratory shorebirds are often associated with stories of movement, connection between Countries, and changing seasons.

Aboriginal totem species potentially impacted by H5 bird flu:

- greater crested tern
- gull species
- petrels
- shearwaters
- oystercatchers
- eastern curlew.

Birds of prey

These birds are considered high risk due to scavenging and predation on infected birds and carcasses. Often viewed as powerful ancestral beings and messengers. Associated with creation stories, Lore, leadership, and spiritual protection. Eagle totems occur across many Aboriginal Nations and are among the most widespread bird totems nationally.

Aboriginal totem species potentially impacted by H5 bird flu:

- wedge-tailed eagle
- white-bellied sea eagle
- little eagle
- whistling kite
- black kite.

Terrestrial birds

Potentially vulnerable to infection through contact with infected birds or contaminated environments.

Emus are among the most culturally significant animals in Australia, featuring prominently in creation stories and represented in the 'Emu in the Sky' constellation. Bustards remain an important customary food source in parts of northern and central Australia. Cassowaries are culturally significant rainforest species for many Aboriginal groups of Far North Queensland.

Aboriginal totem species potentially impacted by H5 bird flu:

- emu
- southern cassowary
- bush stone-curlew
- bustard (Australian plains turkey).

Scavengers

Elevated risk through scavenging infected carcasses. Frequently appear in Dreaming stories as creators, teachers, or cultural Lore figures. Hold important roles in kinship and cultural education.

Aboriginal totem species potentially impacted by H5 bird flu:

- Australian raven (already impacted)
- torresian crow.

Parrots and cockatoos

Susceptibility varies by species, but wide ranging movement could increase exposure opportunities. Common clan totems across many parts of Australia. Feathers are used in ceremonial and artistic practices. Often associated with communication, family connections, and environmental indicators.

Aboriginal totem species potentially impacted by H5 bird flu:

- sulphur-crested cockatoo
- galah
- pink cockatoo
- red-tailed black cockatoo
- rainbow lorikeet.

Wetland and river birds

Potentially vulnerable because of congregation in wetlands used by migratory birds. Brolgas are especially important in northern Australia, featuring in dances, ceremonies, and creation stories. Wetland birds embody connections between people and freshwater Country. Their arrival and breeding cycles help signal seasonal changes.

Aboriginal totem species potentially impacted by H5 bird flu:

- brolga
- jabiru (black-necked stork)
- herons
- egrets
- ibis.

Waterfowl

Overseas outbreaks have caused significant deaths in waterfowl populations.

Waterfowl are major bush food resources across northern and southern Australia. Eggs, meat, feathers, and associated wetlands have cultural, economic, and ceremonial importance. Many waterbirds feature in songlines, clan identities, and seasonal harvesting practices.

Aboriginal totem species potentially impacted by H5 bird flu:

- magpie goose
- black swan
- pacific black duck
- grey teal
- plumed whistling duck.



Torres Strait and coastal species

Seabird colonies are particularly vulnerable to rapid spread if H5 bird flu enters breeding sites. Important to Torres Strait Islander cultures as navigational indicators and symbols of connection to sea Country. Closely linked with traditional ecological knowledge and maritime identity.

Torres Strait and coastal species potentially impacted by H5 bird flu:

- frigatebirds
- boobies
- noddies
- tropicbirds.

Woodland and forest birds

Generally lower risk than waterbirds but may become exposed through environmental spread pathways. Prominent in local totem systems and oral traditions. Often regarded as messengers, custodians, or indicators of environmental change. Contribute to cultural teaching about behaviour, seasons, and landscape stewardship.

Aboriginal totem species potentially impacted by H5 bird flu:

- kookaburra
- kingfisher species
- lyrebird
- Australian magpie.

Resources

DCCEEW: *H5 Bird Flu and Native Species*
[dcceew.gov.au]

DAFF: *Bird Flu (Avian Influenza)* [agriculture.gov.au]

Wildlife Health Australia: *H5 Bird Flu Resource Centre*
[wildlifehealthaustralia.com.au]

Australian Indigenous Astronomy Project (for emu cultural significance) [[Home – Aus.Astronomy](http://Home-Aus.Astronomy)]

Bush Heritage Australia (for brolga cultural context)
[bushheritage.org.au]

Relevant Indigenous Protected Area (IPA), ranger group, and language centre publications from the regions where the species occur.

Indigenous artwork © Amy Allerton, contemporary Aboriginal Artist of the Gumbaynggirr, Bundjalung and Gamilaroi nations.

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Contact the Department at NBCEN@aff.gov.au



Find out more

Information and resources about H5 bird flu are available at **birdflu.gov.au**.

**Emergency Animal
Disease hotline:**

1800 675 888