

Zoo takes precautions to protect birds after avian influenza confirmed in state
Birds most at risk temporarily moved indoors and off public view

SEATTLE—Due to confirmed cases of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in wild birds in western Washington, Woodland Park Zoo is taking immediate measures to protect its birds most at risk from exposure to avian influenza. To date, HPAI cases have not been seen at the zoo.

Avian influenza is a viral infection caused by strains of influenza virus A that is carried and shed by wild aquatic birds, which typically have mild or no symptoms. Most of these viral strains cause mild disease in birds, but some are more virulent and are associated with severe disease and fatalities in poultry, raptors, scavenger birds and some aquatic birds. It is transmitted through bird droppings from and by predation of infected wild birds.

The current HPAI outbreak has caused a high number of bird mortalities and has already affected the majority of the United States. It was first detected this year in the eastern part of the country and has moved steadily westward driven by spring bird migration. Just this month HPAI was detected in Washington state for the first time.

Focusing on avian species with the highest risk of exposure to wild birds, the zoo has moved highly susceptible avian species to indoor or protected housing. These birds include raptors, peacocks, penguins, flamingos, cranes, chickens and related species, and waterfowl such as ducks, geese and swans. Where it is not feasible to relocate these birds indoors, tarps or temporary roofing have been applied to enclosures. Walk-through aviaries will remain closed to visitors until further notice to decrease the risk to the birds inside.

“Because avian influenza is transmitted by contact with infected wild birds or with their fecal matter, moving our birds inside and away from any other birds is the safest control measure we can take,” said Dr. Tim Storms, director of animal health at Woodland Park Zoo. “This is an alarming disease for birds with a high mortality rate which requires proactive measures.

In addition to several empty bird exhibits and closed walk-through aviaries, the zoo will also suspend up-close contact with its ambassador birds such as owls, hawks, and other raptors both on and off zoo grounds. Wildlife Theater, which recently resumed for the summer, will exclude free flying of birds in its daily programming.

The Tropical Rain Forest building, which recently reopened after a closure of two years, will be closed again because of its walk-through aviary, which also serves as a corridor for visitors to exit the building.

Signs will be in place so visitors will understand why some bird exhibits are empty. “We know many of our visitors will be disappointed they won’t be able to see birds that are most at risk of avian flu, especially our popular penguins and flamingos,” said Sheri Horiszny, chief operations officer at Woodland Park Zoo. “We are confident our visitors and members will understand we have our animals’ best interests in mind and understand our decision to keep our birds indoors and protect them from the highly contagious and potentially deadly avian influenza. We have many other captivating animals for visitors to enjoy such as our new sloth bear cubs, otters, big cats and young, playful gorillas.”

Woodland Park Zoo has an internal team in place to monitor official government health department information and updates, and remains in close contact with Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Washington state veterinarian and other regional zoos. The zoo’s avian influenza response plan includes increased biosecurity measures and



vigilance for zoo *and* wild birds showing any symptoms consistent with avian influenza, with evaluation by the zoo's veterinary department.

"No one knows our animals better than our animal care and veterinary staff," said Nancy Hawkes, director of animal care at Woodland Park Zoo. "Our exceptional animal welfare program includes long established routines in which our staff carefully monitor the health and behavior of each of our animals, multiple times a day. Our animal keepers are expert at detecting the slightest behavioral or physical change that may indicate an animal is ill."

As part of participating in the state's avian influenza surveillance programs, Storms said the zoo's animal health team will be conducting HPAI testing on any zoo or wild birds showing clinical signs or found dead. Any of the zoo's birds that test positive will be isolated at the zoo's hospital and any suspected avian influenza cases or mortalities will be reported to regulatory agencies. "We will remain in close contact with our veterinary networks to best protect our birds and keep them safe and healthy," added Storms.

HPAI currently does not present an immediate public health concern. According to the Centers for Disease Control, the risk of human infection with HPAI is very low.

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