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Agenda Item:	ATCM 13, CEP 10a
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Original:	English
Submitted:	23 May 2025

## **2024-25 Update: IAATO Marine Operator Response to High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza**



# IAATO Marine Operator Response to High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza

## Summary

Since 2021, High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza H5N1 (HPAI) outbreaks around the world have resulted in the death of hundreds of thousands of seabirds and marine mammals. At ATCM XLV (2023), COMNAP, IAATO, and SCAR jointly alerted the CEP about the likely arrival of this disease to Antarctica through natural wildlife migration, and ongoing work to identify suspected cases and eliminate risk associated with direct human activity (IP101 *Heightened Risk of Avian Influenza in the Antarctic Treaty Area*). The first confirmed cases in the Antarctic Treaty area were jointly reported by the National Antarctic Programs of Argentina and Spain on 24 February 2024. In this paper, IAATO provides Treaty Party representatives with an update on specific information about IAATO's response to the evolving HPAI situation in Antarctica. It includes details of enhanced biosecurity procedures and an outline of new and enhanced materials and tools that IAATO provided to its members to assist in developing specific Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to help educate visitors and those working in the field alike.

## Introduction

Alerted by the 2022 HPAI outbreak in the northern hemisphere, IAATO, SCAR and COMNAP began working closely together on HPAI response and monitoring before the 2022-23 season. This has been strengthened in subsequent seasons with additional communications and protocols developed by the three organisations.

At ATCM 46 (2024), COMNAP, IAATO, and SCAR jointly submitted WP047 *Update on High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza in Antarctica* to update the community on the ongoing work to identify suspected cases and to eliminate risk associated with direct human impact. An update has also been provided in ATCM 47 (2025) WP050 *Update on High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza in Antarctica 2024/25*.

IP035 provides Parties with an update on specific information about IAATO's marine Operator response to the evolving HPAI situation in Antarctica and the risk of other wildlife diseases. IAATO's responses are done in ongoing collaboration with COMNAP and SCAR to strengthen understanding and response to HPAI in Antarctica.

IAATO Members are united in their commitment to operate in the Antarctic Treaty area safely and hold environmental responsibility at the heart of all expeditions.

## 1. IAATO Reporting Procedures

### 1.1 Coordinated Communication

Following any concerning reports from the field, clear and rapid communication to all Peninsula Stakeholders continued to be a priority during the 2024-25 season.

To address this priority, IAATO continued to administer a Peninsula Stakeholder HPAI WhatsApp group to share information on suspected cases with National Competent Authorities or National Antarctic Programs that wished to join the group. IAATO was also a member of the Ross Sea Region HPAI Group, administered by New Zealand.

### 1.2 IAATO HPAI Wildlife Assessment Protocol

IAATO continued from the previous seasons the HPAI Wildlife Assessment Protocol with its membership to facilitate the review of suspected cases in the field in consultation with experts from the SCAR Antarctic Wildlife Health Network - Action Group (AWHN). The Protocol included:

#### **Pre-Landing Assessment**

- Assessing visitor sites for signs of HPAI and other wildlife diseases in wildlife colonies for at least 30 minutes before commencing any landing.
- Operators are always prepared to cancel a visit or leave a site if behavioural/mortality signs of HPAI or other wildlife diseases are detected.

#### **Reporting**

- The IAATO Operator contacts the IAATO Secretariat about a concern and shares evidence gathered, which may include photographs, video and written observations. This may have been gathered during the initial scouting prior to landing or at a later time when visiting the site.
- The IAATO Secretariat contacts SCAR immediately to share and discuss the information received.

#### **Expert Consultation**

- SCAR shares the reported information from IAATO with its internal experts as needed, whether for mammals or birds. In some cases, other stakeholder experts familiar with the site are enlisted.
- Depending on feedback from SCAR and other experts, sites may be closed until further assessment can be performed by collecting additional evidence or testing by relevant experts from the scientific community.

#### **Rapid Response**

- Depending on the number of affected animals/birds, distribution on site, and previous reports from a site, the following actions may happen:
  - The site is closed for landings for 48 hours (temporary closure) while further assessment and information-gathering continue.
  - The site remains open with caution, with a request for further assessment as soon as possible.
  - For any mass mortality event, the site is immediately closed and will remain so for at least one month, and until expert assessment can be done.
- All IAATO vessels are notified of sites of concern, and increased vigilance and reporting are requested.

## **2. IAATO Enhanced Biosecurity Procedures**

In addition to IAATO's robust biosecurity procedures already in place to protect Antarctica from the introduction or spread of pathogens and non-native species, IAATO continued to emphasise enhanced biosecurity protocols around HPAI and wildlife diseases during the 2024-25 season.

These included:

- Assessing visitor sites for signs of HPAI in wildlife colonies for at least 30 minutes before commencing any landing.
- Being prepared to cancel a visit or leave a site if any behavioural signs of HPAI are detected.
- A minimum distance of 5 metres/15 feet must be maintained from Antarctic wildlife.

- If visitors are approached by wildlife, they must take appropriate action to ensure the advised minimum distance of 5 metres/15 feet is maintained where it can be safely done.
- Not sitting, kneeling, squatting, crouching, or lying down on the ground or snow, or leaving any equipment on the ground or snow, close to animal activity such as nests or breeding adults, pathways, haul-out sites or faecal matter.
- Between regions, full decontamination/biosecurity protocol must be followed for guests, staff, crew, daily-use equipment, and any small boats or auxiliary craft (kayaks, etc.).

These enhanced mandatory biosecurity measures were made available to operators and field staff through IAATO's annually updated *IAATO Biosecurity Instructions* and *2024-25 Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza and Other Wildlife Diseases Handbook*. During the season, any updated protocols based on new information were communicated rapidly to those in the field.

### 3. IAATO Tools for Members

To assist operators in developing HPAI-specific SOPs, and to help educate those in the field and visitors alike, IAATO provided new and enhanced materials and tools to its members for the 2024-25 season.

#### 3.1 Town Halls and Webinars

In addition to the HPAI Town Hall at the 2024 IAATO Annual Meeting in Annapolis, Maryland, USA, before the 2024-25 season, IAATO also hosted several virtual town hall meetings and webinars on the topic of avian influenza for its members and their field staff and crew. These internal virtual events, supported by virologists and HPAI experts from the SCAR AWHN, helped deliver accurate and timely information about HPAI and allowed members to ask questions. These sessions also helped identify where more clarity on protocols or updates of tools was needed before 2024-25 operations.

#### 3.2 *IAATO Considerations for Operators carrying authorised/permited scientists during high-risk of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza outbreaks in the Antarctic and sub-Antarctic.*

This document contains important information and guidance for IAATO Operators to consider before carrying scientists into the field who intend to work near wildlife, including for HPAI sample collection. This document also includes guidance on using Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems (RPAS) for Scientific Surveys During Disease Outbreaks in Antarctica and sub-Antarctic regions.

#### 3.3 *Avian Influenza Protocols – Guest Information 2024-25*

This information was created to assist in managing guest expectations by providing need-to-know ~~basic~~ information and context about protocols for the season. The document could be downloaded and shared with guests before their expedition or printed and displayed in common areas during voyages.

#### 3.4 *Avian Influenza Guidelines Poster*

The infographic poster was updated to enhance visual understanding of protocols. It could be displayed on vessels or in field camps and/or sent as a PDF to guests before the expedition (See Attachment 1).

#### 3.5 *Avian Influenza Supplementary Briefing Video*

To enhance the Mandatory Antarctic Briefing with HPAI-specific material, a video about the why and how of avian influenza protocols was created to be shared with guests.

#### 3.6 *Field Operations Manual*

All the information mentioned above and other pertinent information from external agencies was available to those working in the field for easy access and download in the IAATO Field Operations Manual (FOM - Section 2). For more information on the IAATO FOM, please see ATCM 46 (2024) IP106 *IAATO Field Operations Manual*.

### *3.7 Short Overnight Stay Site List (Distributed in the Field Operations Manual (FOM))*

With HPAI in mind, to assist operators in selecting sites for short overnight stays, the IAATO Field Operations Committee updated the existing site list. This helped identify sites with little to no wildlife where short overnight stays could be undertaken with less biosecurity risk.

### *3.8 IAATO Observations*

During the 19 observations performed during the 2024-25 season, adherence to enhanced HPAI protocols was confirmed.

### *3.9 24/7 Coverage for Reporting*

IAATO maintains an emergency line that is accessible to operators 24/7 throughout the season. Additionally, in season, operationally specific email inboxes are monitored during working hours seven days a week to address any questions or HPAI concerns. Because of this consistent monitoring, reports concerning HPAI could be communicated swiftly to operators and those in the field, regardless of day or time.

## **Preparation for Antarctic Season 2025-26**

IAATO's Antarctic season ended on April 5, 2025. As part of the association's regular season wrap-up, IAATO looked at lessons gleaned from the season and how best to support operators in continuing to execute safe and environmentally responsible expeditions, particularly in light of HPAI.

IAATO will continue to collaborate closely with SCAR and COMNAP as the Antarctic Community prepares for the 2025-26 season.

For the upcoming season, the following actions are anticipated:

- Utilising expert information and advice, IAATO will continue to hone materials and tools for the 2025-26 season, utilising its Committees and Working Groups for review and improvements.
- IAATO will continue to host town halls and webinars, the latter of which will be added to the [iaato.org](https://iaato.org) webinar library and available to those unable to be present or for review.
- IAATO will look to support meaningful science where appropriate, in line with IAATO's Five-Year Strategic Plan, particularly concerning further research around HPAI.