

# Bird flu outbreak spreads across West African migratory route

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

An avian influenza outbreak has been detected in the West African nations of Senegal and The Gambia.

Caused by the highly pathogenic H5N1 bird flu, conservationists working in the area are now worried that without more funding to

contain the [virus](#) it will spread further among the millions of birds that move through the region as they migrate between southern Africa and northern Europe.

Already, [reports from Senegal](#) suggest that at least 1,552 dead wild birds have been found, while [in The Gambia](#) at least 500 dead seabirds have been recorded at Tanji Bird Reserve. The birds found dead [have reportedly included](#) great white pelicans, great cormorants, gray-headed gulls, royal terns and the West African crested tern.

In addition to this, hundreds of cases of bird flu have been found in poultry, which has led to the culling of tens of thousands of chickens.

Teams of conservationists in Senegal and The Gambia have been trying to tackle the [outbreak](#) in a bid to contain its spread. Their efforts have included collecting as many dead wild birds as possible and burying them. But there is a fear that because the wetlands and coastal marshes where the infected birds have been found are on migratory routes, it might lead to further outbreaks in Europe.

Sacha Dench is the founder of the charity Conservation Without Borders who have been working to contain the outbreak in The Gambia. She told the Guardian, "It's migration season, so these outbreaks threaten birds and poultry all the way from Africa to Europe and the UK."

"Rapid reaction is critical. So having staff on the ground with the resources that enable them to act is essential. Investing in monitoring activities in developing countries would save a lot of birds we love, and could save [the poultry farming] industry a lot of money."

## **What is the East Atlantic Flyway?**

The East Atlantic Flyway is one of eight major migratory routes used by

birds, such as waders and shorebirds, to move around the world between breeding and wintering grounds.

It connects northern Europe both to North America in the east but also to the warmer climates of Africa to the south, with the southern route tracing the Atlantic coastline of Africa from Morocco all the way down to South Africa. It is estimated that some 90 million birds use the flyway going in both directions.

As the birds make their epic migrations, they frequently stop off at wetlands and marshes along the way to replenish their energy and take in the sights. This means that to conserve [migratory birds](#), their habitat needs to be protected right along this migratory corridor so they always have enough places to feed and rest.

But it also means that the flyway can become a significant highway for highly transmissible diseases, such as the current bird flu outbreak. This isn't the first time that this has occurred, with an upsurge of avian influenza in the early 2000s also spreading along this route, while in 2022 there was confirmation that birds infected with a European strain of the virus were carrying it into North America.

## **A global spread**

The reports coming from West Africa are simply the latest in a string of bird flu outbreaks that have been spreading around the world during the past year, from the seabird colonies of Scotland to the coasts of Peru. It is estimated that some 200 million birds have died as a result of the [bird flu](#) pandemic.

While this is clearly devastating for the wild populations of birds, there are also some concerns that it could also threaten human health. The virus has already been observed jumping into mammalian hosts, causing

the deaths of thousands of sealions in South America, but to date there have only been a few cases reported in people.

"This is more than conservation, this is management of a global pandemic," says Sacha. "And we should at least be offering assistance to those with less resources on the migration flyways that the UK sits right at the center of."

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Provided by Natural History Museum

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