

Bird Flu in Boston

By Ariane Komyati

Currently, it seems like national news stories are endless right now. One pressing concern for many Americans is avian influenza, or “bird flu.” Its impact may be noticeable in grocery stores, where egg prices have gone up, and many retailers have limited the number of egg cartons shoppers can purchase.

Bird flu is a flu virus that mainly affects birds (but can sometimes infect humans) causing severe illness. These outbreaks are concerning due to the fact it can increase human infection risk, harm wildlife, and impact the food supply. The H5N1 strain of bird flu is currently spreading among wild and domestic birds, as well as cows, across the United States. This current bird flu outbreak is the largest Massachusetts has ever seen - affecting towns and cities all across the state, including Boston.

Bird flu symptoms in birds can vary based on the virus strain and bird species. Common signs of infection in birds include coughing, sneezing, nasal discharge, tremors, vomiting, seizures, and head tilting.

Nature enthusiasts and birders have noticed the effects of bird flu in their neighborhood parks. West Roxbury resident and wildlife photographer Mary Ellen McMahon noticed two dead canadian geese at Millennium Park, and another dead goose at Leverett Pond. She reported the sightings to Mass Wildlife.

Local wildlife photographer Nancy Johnson photographs birds and wildlife along the Emerald Necklace throughout the year. She noticed dead birds along the Charles River and Leverett Pond in December, and the amount of deceased birds have steadily increased over the past two months. Johnson noted that a muskrat was found deceased on Jamaica Pond last weekend. “There was also a report of a dead Great Blue Heron, which was reported by a Boston Park Ranger,” she added.

Members of the Facebook group “Boston Nature Group” recently discussed the death of a beloved mute swan cygnet, nicknamed “Marble,” at Jamaica Pond (it remains unconfirmed whether bird flu was the cause.) Johnson had been photographing Marble since the swan hatched and was heartbroken by his passing. “He hatched on May 9th, 2024 and died on February 16th, 2025,” she said. Marble was the only surviving cygnet of eight, and had missing webbing in his feet due to an attack from a snapping turtle. “To come as far as he did, then pass away due to bird flu, was really hard on a community that watched him grow,” she explained.

Johnson observed that Marble was fed by people daily, which disrupted his natural instinct to migrate from Jamaica Pond once it iced over. She explained that feeding wild birds draws large numbers into close contact, increasing the risk of disease transmission as they gather around the human food. “The most important message to the public now would be to stop feeding the wild birds. There are still people on Leverett Pond feeding adult mute swans. It has to stop,” Johnson stated. “What we can do now is respect the wildlife, not feed them, stay at a safe distance and report any sick or deceased birds.”

Last month, The Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, and Massachusetts Department of Public Health stated that the bird flu is “widespread” in MA and is likely present in places without confirmed positives. In late January, officials estimated that 500 to 1,000 wild bird deaths had been reported, mostly in Boston and the South Shore. “Confirmatory testing is done by the National Veterinary Services Lab. It can take several months to receive confirmatory results,” explained Nicole McSweeney, the Assistant Director of Outreach and Education for Mass Wildlife.

MassWildlife encourages the public to report sightings of five or more sick or dead wild birds in one location, or any number of raptors—such as eagles, hawks, and owls. Reports can be submitted at mass.gov/reportbirds. “MassWildlife receives and reviews these reports. Prompt reporting of sick and dead birds by the public will expedite testing and diagnosis in cooperation with state and federal partners,” McSweeney explained.

McSweeney advised that the public should strictly avoid any contact with wildlife, especially any sick or dead birds or other animals. Owners should take precautions to protect their animals from the bird flu. Dogs should always be leashed and kept away from wild animals and cat owners are advised to keep their pets indoors.

Dr. Bisola Ojikutu, the Commissioner of Public Health for the City of Boston, explained that bird flu rarely infects humans. “Humans who have prolonged close contact with sick or dead birds are the most at risk of becoming infected,” she stated. Human exposure to bird flu typically occurs through direct contact with infected birds—alive or dead—or exposure to their saliva, mucus, or

droppings. Those working with cows, chickens, and turkeys for farming or food production also face a higher risk.

Currently, the risk of contracting bird flu remains low for the general public in Boston. As of **Feb xxx**, there are currently zero human cases of H5N1 among Boston residents. “Boston residents with questions or concerns about HPAI can call 3-1-1 to be connected with appropriate Parks and Recreation, Animal Control, and Health Commission representatives,” Ojikutu explained.

For up to date information about bird flu in MA, visit mass.gov/info-details/avian-flu.

For national data, visit cdc.gov/bird-flu/situation-summary/index.html.