Date: 18 February 2018  
Attention: Veterinary Practices

Request for assistance with wild seabirds with suspected Avian Influenza

The H5N8 strain of highly pathogenic avian influenza is continuing to affect several seabird species along the South African coastline. During December 2017 the majority of the affected sea birds were Swift Terns. Since the beginning of January other tern species and sea birds including a small number of the endangered African penguins have tested positive. This is the same strain that affected the poultry industry late last year and continues to affect the ostrich industry and other species of wild birds.

We would like to request the assistance of private veterinarians during this outbreak. Veterinary practices can help by reporting any bird suspect to be affected by the disease to their local state veterinarian. Please inform your nearest rehabilitation centre about potentially infected birds as we may be able to assist in a preliminary diagnosis.

In order to protect the birds undergoing rehabilitation, we may not be able to accept certain species if they show signs of being infected. In such cases we are relying on the kindness of other veterinary practices to humanely euthanize affected birds, report them correctly and safely dispose of the remains. If you are able to assist us in this way, please let SANCCOB know. Having a database of practices that are willing to accept wild birds will also reduce the burden on our colleagues who routinely treat domestic birds and so cannot risk contact with potential carriers of Avian Influenza.

Please refer to the relevant sections in the supplementary information below for symptoms associated with Avian Influenza, Risks, Dealing with affected birds, Protective gear, Notification and Reporting and Sample Collection.

Thank you for your continued support though this outbreak. I hope that with continued collaboration, open communication and swift responses we can continue to tackle this disease. We will endeavour to keep everyone informed of any changes as we become aware of them.

Yours sincerely

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Avian Influenza (H5N8) in Seabirds

Summary
African Penguins have recently tested positive for the H5N8 strain of Avian Influenza (Bird Flu). This is the same strain that had a devastating effect on the local poultry industry in 2017 and continues to affect wild birds, including terns. Affected birds show neurological signs such as twitching, difficulty breathing, and may have bright green guano. Suspected birds should be reported to the nearest seabird rehabilitation centre and handled with caution to reduce the chance of spreading the disease to domestic poultry and other birds.

Introduction
Since the outbreak of this virus in South Africa in 2017, we have been monitoring new cases for signs of the disease. In early January 2018 it was diagnosed in Swift Terns and later confirmed in another tern species. Recently, three African penguins were admitted to SANCCOB Table View with similar symptoms and have been confirmed by PCR to have avian influenza.

We are not yet sure how this will affect the wild population of African Penguins. At present the number of penguins showing signs of the disease in the wild is small. Only six have been reported to SANCCOB since the beginning of the year and not all have been confirmed to have had the disease. However, only one of the affected birds has survived and is being treated at the African Penguin and Seabird Sanctuary a suspect bird is being treated at SANCCOB under quarantine.

We urge conservation authorities and colony managers to be vigilant and to report any suspicious cases in any wild bird. Anyone receiving any reports of penguins or other seabirds behaving unusually should immediately contact their nearest seabird rehabilitation facility, except in the case of affected terns, these can be taken to a private or state vet for euthanasia.

Any animal welfare or rehabilitation centre which receives birds with suspected avian influenza are urged to isolate these birds promptly to avoid the spread of disease to other birds and domestic poultry. Strict biosecurity measures should be employed when dealing with suspected cases and all such centres which may see potentially affected birds are urged to prepare for such cases by preparing a biosecurity protocol to use when a suspected bird is presented.

The virus can be spread by any affected bird as well as equipment that has had contact with an affected bird.
Symptoms
Affected birds are weak. They may show neurological signs such as: tremors, seizures, loss of balance, swimming in circles or head twitches. Respiratory signs such as: foam around the mouth, fluid running from the nostrils or mouth, difficulty breathing or sticky mucous in the mouth may be present. Many affected birds have bright green diarrhoea. Cloudy eyes are a symptom often seen in other species with bird flu.

Any birds showing these symptoms should be isolated from other birds as soon as possible.

Risk
The disease is highly contagious to birds. The virus is excreted in the guano of infected birds and discharges from the mouth, nostrils and eyes. Any birds carrying bird flu can spread the disease to other birds. Any person, vehicle or equipment that comes into contact with an affected bird can potentially carry the virus. Although the virus dies quickly in the environment, it can survive in damp areas and pieces of organic matter such as guano or mud.

This strain of bird flu does not affect people. Testing of people in contact with infected chickens in South Africa in 2017 has supported this fact, already reported overseas. At present the conservation risk to wild bird populations is considered low. Although individual birds have died from the disease, the number of dead birds is low compared to the total population. The natural population is continually exposed to the virus from other wild birds and so no intervention is recommended to control the disease in the natural population. Managers of bird colonies are urged to remain vigilant and report any unusual deaths in the colonies.

The major risk of the disease is to domestic birds, especially domestic poultry which are very susceptible. Under no circumstances should anyone who owns or works with domestic poultry come into contact with any bird suspected of carrying avian influenza. No person who has worked with a suspected bird should visit any areas where domestic poultry are kept for at least two weeks. Special care should also be taken with other captive birds or birds undergoing rehabilitation.

How to deal with a live penguin or other seabird with suspected Avian Influenza
1. Put on appropriate protective clothing to prevent contaminating your clothing. Long disposable gloves and a disposable apron are recommended. Protective clothing can be sourced from a veterinary wholesaler such as Lakato: 021 944 6900.
2. Collect the bird and place it in a SANCCOB transport box without a towel. The box can be lined with newspaper instead.
3. Isolate the bird in a protected area and prevent other people from causing it undue stress: prevent people from looking into the box where it has been placed, keep noise to a minimum, keep movement of the box to a minimum.
4. Inform a seabird rehabilitation facility that you have a suspected bird, record the exact location where it has been found, the time and date found, what its symptoms were and if it was in contact with other birds.
5. SANCCOB can help to arrange transport for live seabirds, except terns, to the nearest SANCCOB centre and will inform the state veterinary services if necessary.
6. Any equipment, clothing or vehicle that has come into contact with a suspected bird should be cleaned with disinfectant such as F10 or Virkon.
Dead birds should be collected if unusual numbers are noted in seabird colonies or elsewhere. However, the benefit of collecting dead birds must be weighed against the disturbance caused by human interference. When a dead bird is collected it should be picked up using disposable gloves or newspaper and transported in 3 plastic bags inside one another. The outside bag should be sprayed with disinfectant. Carcasses can be disposed of by burial, composting or incineration and are the responsibility of the management authority overseeing the area where they were found. Areas with a pre-existing agreement with SANCCOB for wild bird disease surveillance can still send carcasses to SANCCOB unless carcass numbers are unusually high.

**Suggested protective gear**

Long disposable gloves and a disposable apron should be worn when handling potentially infected birds. For added protection, face masks can be worn over the nose and mouth. There is a small risk that the virus may become infectious to humans, so caution is advised.

**Transport**

Potentially infected birds should be transported in an old SANCCOB transport box according the SANCCOB transport SOPs. The box used to transport the bird should be disposed of after being used and the car cleaned with disinfectant before being used to transport other birds.

**Notification and Reporting**

Avian Influenza is a controlled disease and suspected cases should be reported to your local state vet. Please report all live seabird cases (except terns) to SANCCOB (Office hours +27 21 557 6155, After Hours +27 78 638 3731) or another seabird rehabilitation centre. If birds are sent to SANCCOB then we will submit a report to the state vets.

Report all dead birds or terns euthanized by another vet to your local state vet: Western Cape state vet contact information can be found at:

http://www.elsenburg.com/services-and-programmes/veterinary-services-0#s=Animal-Health-and-Disease-Control

The state vets will inform you if samples need to be taken to confirm the disease and therefore, if the carcass needs to be refrigerated or can be disposed of.

**Tern cases** (all species showing signs that are suspicious of avian influenza) should be reported to Belinda Peyrot at the Stellenbosch Provincial Veterinary Laboratory: (belindap@elsenburg.com/ 021 887 0324). She is collecting fresh samples for viral isolation. Affected live terns can be taken to the Stellenbosch Provincial Labs for euthanasia and testing, or they can be euthanized by a veterinarian and the carcass or tissue samples taken to the lab. A list of vets who have volunteered to help with euthanizing sick terns can be obtained from the reception at SANCCOB 021 557 6155. If you know of a veterinary practice that is willing to assist our efforts by volunteering to euthanize affected birds please send their information to SANCCOB to be added to the database.

It is important to correctly identify the species of bird affected. Photographs of can be sent to SANCCOB for identification by email or WhatsApp +27 78 638 3731. Photographs of dead birds should be taken from above and below, with the wings stretched out and tail spread also, include the head and beak). The location where the bird was found is also important. An exact GPS location or street address is far better than a suburb or only the street name.
Each organization should keep a database of the following information for all suspected cases: Date found, exact location found, if the bird was found alive or dead, if alive: What symptoms was it showing, if dead: what state of decay was it found in, what was done with the bird, were samples sent to confirm avian influenza, if so what samples and what were the results. To avoid confusion each bird should be assigned a number which should be reported on any samples submitted to the lab.

Sample collection
For those rehabilitation centres, local or state vets that are taking samples, please take note of the following:

To confirm Avian Influenza tracheal and cloacal swabs can be taken from live birds. Sterile cotton swabs with plastic handles are recommended. Samples can be stored in the original sterile swab tube or placed into viral transport medium. They should be transported to a lab as quickly as possible and kept cool and protected from UV light, but not frozen.

If a dead bird is tested, brain swabs should also be taken as well as approximately five grams of pooled fresh organ samples. Tissue samples of the spleen, kidney, liver, lung, trachea and brain, in a sterile container, chilled. If a post-mortem cannot be done, whole carcasses can be kept refrigerated. Please do NOT freeze the sample. Put an ice pack in the sample box for transport.

List of contact numbers for Seabird Rehabilitation Centres:

Western Cape:
Cape Town and surrounds: SANCCOB - Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds 021 557 6155 (reception), 078 638 3731 (after hours)
Overstrand and surrounds: APPS - African Penguin & Seabird Sanctuary 0725987117
Mossel Bay and surrounds: SAPREC - Seabird and Penguin Rehabilitation Centre: 0823643382
Plettenberg Bay and surrounds: Tenikwa 0824861515

Eastern Cape:
Port Elizabeth and surrounds: SANCCOB 041 583 1830