



## MEDIA RELEASE

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# Bird Flu Threatens Australia's Mammals — The Australian Mammal Society Calls for Urgent, Transparent, Collaborative Responses

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**14 July 2026** — The Australian Mammal Society (AMS) calls for governments to release wildlife risk assessments and response plans for H5N1 avian influenza, as this deadly strain of the virus begins to spread across the country — including the first confirmed case in a resident Australian seabird.

Recent detections in Western Australia, South Australia and New South Wales follow mass mortality already recorded among southern elephant seals on Heard and McDonald Islands over the 2025–26 breeding season — greater than 76% of baby seals are thought to have died. This is an early warning that the disease has the capacity to devastate populations of both Australia's birds and mammals.

The impacts to birds are of critical concern, but despite its name, “bird flu” is far from a bird-only problem. Globally, H5N1 has infected more than 100 mammal species including seals, sea lions, dolphins, bears, marsupial opossums, cats, dogs and cattle, killing millions of wild animals and livestock since 2021.

*“Australia is the last continent to be impacted by this deadly strain of bird flu — we have a rare chance to learn from the devastation seen elsewhere and to prepare as well as possible to minimise the harm to wildlife, agriculture and society more broadly. Governments must invest whatever is needed to prevent the worst potential outcomes, including species extinctions”*

*- Professor Euan Ritchie, President of the Australian Mammal Society.*

More than 85% of Australia's mammals occur nowhere else on Earth, many are endangered, and at least 40 species have already been driven to extinction since European colonisation. AMS warns H5N1 adds a major new threat on top of habitat destruction, invasive species, and climate change — with the potential to undo decades of hard-won conservation gains.

Particular concern surrounds quolls, Tasmanian devils, dingoes, fur seal, sea-lion and dolphin species, platypus, and the rakali, along with numerous other threatened mammal and bird species. Even species not traditionally seen as at-risk — including quokkas and other macropods — could be exposed through scavenging on infected carcasses. Because mammals underpin food webs as predators, scavengers, seed dispersers and ecosystem engineers, AMS warns that significant die-offs could trigger cascading impacts across entire ecosystems.

*“This isn't just about single species; many mammal species help to keep ecosystems healthy. Losing key species can set off consequences that ripple through the environment.”*

*- Dr Emily Scicluna, Conservation Officer of the Australian Mammal Society*

The Australian Mammal Society acknowledges and applauds the substantial work already underway by governments, biosecurity agencies, scientists and wildlife carers. We call on the response to be more coordinated, transparent and inclusive — including with First Nations ranger groups, who have

managed and monitored Country for millennia and are uniquely placed to support surveillance across vast areas of the continent.

**The Australian Mammal Society is calling on all Australian governments to:**

- Urgently release national and state/territory wildlife risk assessments and H5N1 response plans for public scrutiny, and to identify key gaps in the current response efforts
- Boost engagement with mammal and wildlife management and disease experts, First Nations peoples and conservation practitioners
- Invest in enhanced surveillance and ongoing monitoring for high-risk mammal species and regions
- Fund emergency response, rescue, rehabilitation and captive breeding plans for threatened species
- Expand research into susceptibility, transmission and vaccine options and requirements for priority wildlife species
- Support wildlife veterinarians, carers and rehabilitation facilities on the front line of any outbreaks
- Run public education campaigns on the risks to wildlife, pets and people, and how to safely report and respond to sick or dead animals
- Suspend high-risk activities, such as duck and quail hunting, until the emerging threat of H5N1 is better understood and managed

The Australian Mammal Society stands ready to work alongside governments, First Nations peoples, researchers, wildlife managers and community groups to protect Australia's unique mammal fauna.

*"Protecting our mammals from H5N1 isn't just about preventing disease. It's about preventing further extinctions and preserving wildlife found nowhere else on Earth."*

*- Dr Kita Ashman, Conservation Officer of the Australian Mammal Society*

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**About the Australian Mammal Society**

The Australian Mammal Society is the peak scientific body representing researchers, conservationists and practitioners working to understand and protect Australasia's mammals. Further details

<https://australianmammals.org.au/>.

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