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SANCCOB press release - Avian influenza affects colonies of endangered Cape cormorants

A serious outbreak of high pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI) is currently affecting endangered Cape cormorants along the coast of the Western Cape. In the worst-affected colonies, hundreds of birds have already died from the disease. HPAI is a highly contagious viral disease of birds with no curative or preventative treatment.

SANCCOB, the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, CapeNature, SANParks, West Coast District Municipality, Bergrivier Local Municipality, the Robben Island Museum, Western Cape Veterinary Services, BirdLife South Africa, Dyer Island Conservation Trust, The Owl Orphanage St. Helena Bay, Dwarskersbos Snake Rescue, and local veterinarians are collaborating to monitor and manage the situation.

The H5N1 strain of HPAI virus was detected in wild birds in the Western Cape in May 2021, mainly affecting gulls. The first Cape cormorants were only diagnosed with this disease in mid-September and cases have increased very rapidly over the last week. The colonies that have been affected the worst are those on Dyer Island and near Velddrif. Careful surveillance is being done wherever Cape cormorants congregate.

Mitigation measures in progress include the safe removal of carcasses and sick birds. Treating affected birds is futile and poses a serious risk of disease spread. Therefore, sick birds are euthanized.

The signs of avian influenza in seabirds can range from tame behaviour or weakness to muscle twitches and seizures. Abnormal numbers of sick birds can be reported to your local conservation authority or state veterinarian. Avian influenza poses a very low health risk to humans, but people can carry the virus on their hands and clothes. Therefore, do not handle suspected cases if you will have contact with other birds. If handling is necessary, wear disposable gloves and face protection.

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