Shy Albatross

H5 BIRD FLU SPECIES PLAN – PREPAREDNESS, EVIDENCE AND MANAGEMENT OPTIONS REVIEW

Acknowledgement of Country

In recognition of the deep history and culture of these islands, we acknowledge the traditional custodians of this country and recognise all Tasmanian Aboriginal people's continuing connection to Land, Sea, Waterways, Sky and Culture and pay our deepest respects to Elders past and present.

Document

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Review plan

This H5 bird flu preparedness and response background scoping document was reviewed in August 2026 after the detection of H5 bird flu in Tasmania. This is a living document, and updates will be made as required to reflect new information.

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Image credit front cover: Marine Conservation Program (MCP), Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania (NRE Tas).

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Executive summary

This document outlines the risk of H5 bird flu to shy albatross (*Thalassarche cauta*). It outlines additional threats, current conservation actions, key sites, and high-level preparedness and response options to support species conservation prior to, and during, an outbreak of H5 bird flu in Tasmania. to support species conservation prior to, and during, an outbreak of H5 bird flu in Tasmania. As H5 bird flu is highly dynamic, potential management activities are context-dependent and may require ongoing review and/or feasibility assessment prior to being implemented.

Purpose

This work identifies potential preparedness and response options focused on actions to support species conservation, for priority species and sites both ahead of, and in the event of, an outbreak of H5 bird flu. It aligns with the National Management Agreement (H5 HPAI in Wildlife; H5 NMA) in scope. The shy albatross is considered vulnerable to potential impacts of H5 bird flu, having high conservation value and high risk of H5 bird flu exposure due to species ecology. It received a national risk score of "very high" in a Department of Climate Change, Energy the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) analysis of species susceptibility to H5 bird flu in Australian wildlife.

Objectives

1. **To inform preparedness, response and recovery phases:** Catalogue potential actions to boost priority species resilience, to offset impacts of an incursion of H5 bird flu to Tasmania.
2. **To identify actions during an Incident Response:** Identify high level options to manage and document H5 bird flu conservation impacts on priority species and where possible, align with national cost sharing arrangements.
3. **Identify barriers to continuity of conservation activities** and make recommendations to resolve them.

Shy albatross risk snapshot

- The Tasmanian (breeding) endemic shy albatross is listed as 'Vulnerable' under the Tasmania's *Threatened Species Protection Act 1995* and 'Endangered' under the Commonwealth Government's *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999.*
- Seabirds are also known to be highly susceptible to the virus. Shy albatross share several behavioural and ecological attributes of species with the highest observed mortality rates documented in a case study of an H5 bird flu outbreak in Canadian islands (noting that observed mortality rates were also strongly influenced by outbreak timing in relation to breeding season; McPhail *et al.* 2024). These include nesting in close proximity to conspecifics (and other susceptible seabird species e.g. short-tailed shearwaters, Australasian gannets), remaining at nests continuously during egg incubation and the chick

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guard stage, and foraging at hotspots (e.g., bait balls and behind fishing boats) where they likely interact with other seabird species.

- A proportion of the population (fledglings and possibly young adults) are known to have extended foraging distribution to the coast of southern Africa, where H5 bird flu is present.
- As of March 2026, H5 bird flu has been detected in at least 18 Procellariiformes species (albatrosses, petrels and shearwaters) according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. This includes the waved albatross (*Phoebastria irrorata*), black-browed albatross (*Thalassarche melanophris*), sooty albatross (*Phoebetria fusca*) and wandering albatross (*Diomedea exulans*).
- Shy albatross breeding is restricted to three remote Tasmanian islands (Albatross Island, the Mewstone and Pedra Branca). The life history strategy of shy albatross (long-lived, low reproductive output) will slow population recovery after an H5 bird flu outbreak, especially if there is substantial adult mortality.

General threats and conservation actions in Tasmania

Current and potential key threats (excluding H5 bird flu)

- Injuries or mortalities from interactions with fishing operations.
- Potential interactions with proposed offshore wind farms, including collision risk.
- Competition with fisheries for marine resources.
- Marine pollution and plastic ingestion.
- Parasites and diseases e.g. tick-borne phlebovirus (Hunter Island Group virus I) and an avian poxvirus.
- Competition for nest space (specific to the Pedra Branca population where there is also a large population of the Australasian gannet (*Morus serrator*)).
- Potential human disturbance within colonies (managed through access restrictions to breeding islands).
- Paucity of nesting material at some locations.
- Climate change via modification of distribution and abundance of prey species, alteration of breeding and feeding habitats, extreme weather events impacting breeding, and exacerbation of scale and severity of other threats.

Current conservation and monitoring actions (excluding H5 bird flu)

Current conservation and monitoring actions for shy albatross as of November 2025 (see also the Commonwealth's National Recovery Plan for Albatrosses and Petrels 2022):

- Long-term population monitoring programs are in place for all three breeding populations (see *Appendix 2. Long term shy albatross monitoring program summary*).
- PWS weed management on Albatross Island, June-Sept 2026.

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- Fisheries management (e.g. The Commonwealth's Seabird Bycatch Operational Guidelines for Commonwealth Fisheries October 2018 and Threat Abatement Plan for the Incidental Catch (or Bycatch) of Seabirds During Oceanic Longline Fishing Operations 2018 as well as the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels 2018).
- Shy albatross tracking work has also been undertaken, relative to funding for specific projects, over a 30-year period.

Key sites

Key sites for shy albatross are documented in Table 1 and shown in Figure 1. Approval must be sought from landholders prior to entering land. Note: during an H5 bird flu outbreak, site access may be restricted.

Table 1. Key sites for the shy albatross, including rationale, tenure and responsible agency.

Site	Rationale	Tenure
Albatross Island	Breeding site	Nature Reserve (Albatross Island Nature Reserve) (PWS)
Mewstone and Pedra Branca	Breeding sites	National Park (Southwest National Park), Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (PWS)

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Figure 1. Shy albatross breeding colonies showing Albatross Island (North), The Mewstone (SW) and Pedra Branca (SE).

Interested parties

Table 2. Key groups and organisations and their interests in the H5 bird flu response for shy albatross. Note: not intended to be an exhaustive list and may be revised, refined, or expanded in future iterations.

Who	Interest
Tasmanian Aboriginal people	The traditional custodians of lutruwita / Tasmania.
NRE Tas	Species specialists and carriage of long-term shy albatross monitoring and research program. Land managers for Albatross Island, Pedra Branca and Mewstone.
Research and funding partners	Research and collaboration on specific projects.
Permit holders	Changes to permits / permit requirements may affect planned work (NRE Tas staff permits, scientific permits).
Albatross and Petrel Recovery Team (APRT)	The APRT coordinates and oversees the implementation of the Commonwealth's National Recovery Plan for Albatrosses and Petrels (2022), through the cooperation of federal and state government representatives, non-government contributors, experts and researchers, and community groups and members.
The Agreement on the Conservation of Albatross and Petrels (ACAP)	The ACAP coordinates international activities to mitigate known threats to albatross and petrel populations. Have published the ACAP Guidelines for working with albatrosses and petrels during the high pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI) H5Nx panzootic – November 2024 (Serafini *et al.* 2024).
Reporting requirements	Australian Bird and Bat Banding Scheme (ABBBS).

Population size and trajectory

Current understanding of the size and trajectory of the shy albatross population on Albatross Island is likely to be sensitive enough to detect population-level impacts of H5 bird flu at that site. Population estimates are obtained from aerial photography for the Mewstone and Pedra Branca populations. These provide a lower-level resolution monitoring compared to on-ground counts undertaken on Albatross Island and therefore, a reduced ability to detect population level-impacts, depending on the scale of impact.

Understanding of background mortality

Based on the long-term banding study at Albatross Island, adult survival rates have been estimated and, therefore, there is an understanding of background mortality rates in shy albatross. Dead adults are rarely observed on Albatross Island during the breeding season.

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Seasonal considerations

It is important to factor seasonal considerations into response planning. Time of year in relation to breeding season will be highly influential on the severity of H5 bird flu impacts on a wildlife population, especially for colonial breeding species, where individuals congregate to breed (see McPhail *et al.* 2024, Bennison *et al.* 2024). Sex-specific differences in mortality documented in some species (e.g., in harbour seals (Lair *et al.* 2024), snowy albatross (Bennison *et al.* 2024)), are possibly related to differences in activities (potentially including diets) between the sexes at the time of outbreaks, and may impact the recoverability of a population.

An H5 bird flu outbreak between July and May is likely to have the highest impact on shy albatross. Shy albatross can breed every year and are present at colonies year-round, although there is a drop in adult attendance in June following the end of the breeding season. Females lay their single egg between late August to early October, with peak egg-laying occurring in September. Chicks hatch from early December onwards after a 10-week egg-incubation period. Fledging occurs from late March through to May, with peak fledging occurring in late April (National Recovery Plan for Albatrosses and Petrels 2022 and references therein). Shy albatross remain at their nest continuously during the egg incubation and chick guarding stage and nest in close proximity to conspecifics (another individual of the same species), attributes which have been observed in species with the highest observed mortality rates documented in a case study of an H5 bird flu outbreak in Canadian islands (see McPhail *et al.* 2024). Note: juveniles begin to return to colonies at three years of age (National Recovery Plan for Albatrosses and Petrels 2022 and references therein).

H5 bird flu impact management options

The below tables outline options, to understand and guide management of conservation impacts from an H5 bird flu outbreak in shy albatross. The options considered may directly reduce disease impact, boost species resilience, or reduce information gaps to better support future conservation planning and action. As H5 bird flu is highly dynamic, management activities are context dependent. Accordingly, options identified in the tables below may be replaced or refined or otherwise require further feasibility assessments, research and efficacy testing prior to being implemented. Serafini *et al.* (2024) provide considerations relevant to shy albatross during an incident response.

Resilience boosting / preparedness options

Resilience boosting activities identified for shy albatross include: supporting activities to reduce at-sea interactions with commercial industries and infrastructure resulting in juvenile or adult mortality (e.g. reducing bycatch mortality in Commonwealth and State fisheries; interactions with infrastructure, including aquaculture; potential interactions with offshore windfarm infrastructure (emerging industry)); and consideration of measures which may increase breeding success on Albatross Island (installation of artificial nests, provision of nest material, ectoparasite controls and heat mitigation).

Post-incursion disease response options

Table 3. Potential H5 bird flu incident response activities for shy albatross. Note some activities may require permits or other authorisation. Stakeholder engagement as needed in support of knowledge sharing and implementing the below.

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Activity category	Potential action	Considerations
Detection and impact monitoring to confirm H5 bird flu infection in the species, determine initial impacts and subsequent actions, monitor impact throughout outbreak.	On ground surveys by experienced specialists to sample carcasses / monitor impacts. Aerial surveys to monitor broad-scale impacts. Monitor using remote technologies.	• Automated software for rapid image processing using machine learning methods (images are currently checked visually) has been initiated, although requires further development. • Monitoring frequency TBD. • Survey methods tailored to site.
Modifications to regular monitoring / enhanced biosecurity measures to minimise disruption to ongoing conservation monitoring programs to avoid information blackout (balancing reducing human assisted spread and negative impacts of disturbance).	Minimise disruption to ongoing long-term monitoring of shy albatross in Tasmania.	• Ongoing monitoring is necessary to understand the potential H5 impacts / potential efficacy of response activities. E.g., ACAP Guidelines (Serafini *et al.* 2024), Bennison *et al.* 2024
Modifications to research to avoid information blackout (balancing reducing human assisted spread and negative impacts of disturbance).	Consider altering / pausing non-H5 bird flu related scientific research activities	• Cost/benefits of research; proximity to breeding season.

Options that require further investigation

Table 4. Potential H5 bird flu incident response activities shy albatross that require further investigation.

Activity category	Considerations
Vaccination to temporarily reduce mortality in vaccinated sub-population.	Ongoing monitoring of developments in vaccine availability and policy settings, and evaluating potential vaccination options for shy albatrosses, including where vaccination may be operationally feasible, permissible under regulatory requirements and likely to provide a conservation benefit.

Considered but not applicable or recommended

Table 5. Potential H5 bird flu incident response activities considered but not applicable or recommended for shy albatross.

Activity category	Considerations
Access restriction at key sites to reduce general impacts to wildlife fitness caused by human disturbance / reduce human assisted spread.	**Not applicable** as key sites are only accessed under permit.

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Carcass collection to reduce viral load in the environment and limit disease spread within focal species.	**Not recommended.** Carcass removal is unlikely to be feasible at remote sites. Breeding colonies of surface-nesting seabirds or pinniped haul-outs are likely vulnerable to disturbance associated with carcass removal Serafini *et al.* (2024).
Ex situ population management to provide individual animals with reprieve from disease front.	**Not feasible.** The shy albatross does not have an existing ex-situ population, and an appropriate facility does not exist in Tasmania. Seabirds are typically not suitable candidates for ex situ management.

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