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## Wild bird infections

Since the isolation of avian influenza virus from common terns in South Africa at the beginning of the 1960s, various studies have greatly added to our knowledge of this virus in wild birds.

The situation assumed a much greater significance following the isolation of HPAI H5N1 in wild birds in Hong Kong and its subsequent spread into Africa and Eurasia.

## Host range

The hosts for avian influenza range from wild waterfowl (geese, ducks, swans etc) to species like dunlins, redshanks and sandpipers, to terns, guillemots and gulls, to doves, pheasants, partridges, crows, warblers and woodpeckers, to name but a few. The information on species susceptibility is limited. Species differences occur regarding the ability to infect, the duration of viral shedding and the predominant route of shedding.

## AI reservoirs

It is now well accepted that avian influenza viruses that infect mammals and birds originate from wild bird reservoirs. Wild bird reservoirs are multispecies systems that provide the means for maintaining influenza viruses. Reservoirs can change as the virus moves to and evolves in new host populations.

Sometimes reservoirs can overlap. For example, although mallards are an important component of the wild duck reservoir they are also the most important species associated with the maintenance of avian influenza and this species often co-habits with many species of dabbling ducks. Several have suggested that the maintenance of avian influenza viruses in ducks may depend upon interactions between subpopulations of resident, local and long range migrants.

## Variation of viral populations

There is evidence that H13 and H16 subtypes of avian influenza are maintained in gull populations. Spatial and temporal variations in prevalence occur reasonably consistently in duck, gull and shorebird populations.

Such variations can be associated with wintering or breeding areas, local species composition and behaviour, as well as different environmental drivers affecting bird distribution. For example, an association has been seen between viral peaks in late summer and early autumn and the pre-migratory gatherings of large numbers of susceptible birds that hatched that year.

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