



Photo: Doug Gimesy

Avian botulism

General information

Avian botulism is a paralytic disease that affects wild and captive bird populations, most commonly waterbirds such as ducks, swans, ibis, geese and pelicans.

Botulism is caused by the ingestion of a neurotoxin produced by the bacterium *Clostridium botulinum* (*C. botulinum*).

Avian botulism can occur anywhere in the world, however warm conditions, and shallow and stagnant waterways produce favourable conditions for *C. botulinum*.

Signs and symptoms

Avian botulism presents as weakness and paralysis in affected birds. It is common to see many affected birds at a single site of outbreak. Birds affected by botulism are often found in locations near a water source such as wetlands and man-made lakes. This may include parklands and homes within a short flying distance of these waterbodies.

Waterbirds may be unable to keep their head up and out of water resulting in drowning. Other birds may exhibit a dragging of one or both wings, an inability to walk or fly, or poor posture while standing.

This leads to progressive muscular weakness and respiratory arrest if left untreated, and ultimately fatality.



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Rehabilitation for affected wildlife

Rehabilitation of individual animals is possible under certain conditions.

Early detection of botulism and removal of the animal from the site to avoid continual ingestion of the toxin is paramount.

Sick birds can be aided by providing specialised supportive care until they recover from the paralysis.

Health and safety

Wildlife Victoria recommends members of the public do not try to handle or relocate any animals suspected to have contracted avian botulism.

Any movement or management of animals affected by botulism should be handled by an experienced wildlife rescuer and with the correct personal protective equipment.

Wildlife Victoria recommends rescuers and carers wear gloves. Masks are advised where botulism is suspected but not confirmed, to help protect from other possible airborne causes of bird illness.

Who to contact

Wildlife Victoria can assist with collecting impacted wildlife and transporting them for veterinary assessment and ongoing care management. If avian botulism is suspected, please contact Wildlife Victoria's 24/7 Emergency Response Service on 03 8400 7300.

Wildlife Victoria works with the following departments and organisations to help manage outbreaks across Victoria:

Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA)

Parks Victoria

Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions (DJPR)

Melbourne Water

Regional Water Authorities

Local councils

Melbourne University

Zoos Victoria

