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Press release

Bird flu update: Zoo Berlin remains closed

No further positive cases detected so far | Some test results still pending

Zoo Berlin has one of the largest collections of birds in Europe. After a case of avian influenza was confirmed here on Friday, 18 November, the Zoo Berlin management immediately initiated quarantine measures. One of those measures was to close the entire Zoo grounds to visitors. The process also began of taking samples from all the birds kept at Zoo Berlin. Now that almost all the test results have been analysed, Germany's oldest zoo can give an initial assessment of the current situation. The good news is that no other positive cases were detected in the first round of testing. However, Zoo Berlin will remain closed for the time being.

Initially, tests were conducted on all the birds (86) that had been in direct contact with the infected hamerkop that died. After that, the birds that had been in indirect contact were tested (235). Next, samples were taken from all the remaining birds. The first round of testing has not yet revealed any further cases of avian influenza, but the final results are still pending. Additional rounds of testing will be required before conclusions can be drawn about the source of the infection and what further steps to take. Article 12(1.a) of EU Commission Delegated Regulation 2020/687 rules that when a positive case of avian influenza is established "all animals of listed species kept in the affected establishment shall be killed as soon as possible." At Zoo Berlin, that wouldn't just mean the chickens, geese and ducks, but also more exotic species like the African penguins, James's flamingos and hyacinth macaws. "For now, we are just pleased that the infected hamerkop appears to have been an isolated case," says Zoo and Tierpark Director Dr Andreas Knieriem. But he stressed the seriousness of the Zoo's situation, explaining that "current EU legislation leaves us with little room for manoeuvre. Before we can address the topic of reopening, we have to focus on averting a very real disaster for our birds and the Zoo as a whole. We are currently working flat out to try to gain an exemption for the unique collection of birds at Zoo Berlin."

Among the 1,200 feathered inhabitants are many species that are critically endangered or at risk of extinction, such as the kagu, Vietnamese pheasant, North Island brown kiwi, southern rockhopper penguin and the Bali myna. These birds are all part of European Endangered Species Programmes and form important reserve populations. Zoo Berlin also breeds various birds for reintroduction into the wild, including the bearded vulture, northern bald ibis,



and ferruginous duck. The loss of these birds at Zoo Berlin would therefore constitute a severe blow to conservation efforts.

Avian influenza is a highly contagious viral disease. It primarily spreads through direct contact but can also be transmitted indirectly, for example via contaminated footwear, clothing, or animal bedding and nesting material. Most bird species – especially domestic turkeys and chickens – are susceptible to infection, but the disease rarely occurs in wild birds. “Of course, bird flu is a problem we have long been aware of, but this is the first-ever case among our own collection and still came as a great shock,” says Zoological Director Christian Kern. “In previous years, we moved our birds to their indoor habitats as soon as a case was discovered in the vicinity of the Zoo.”

In February and March of this year, 26 cases of avian flu were recorded among wild birds found dead in Berlin. But this is the first detected case this winter in Berlin or the surrounding state of Brandenburg. “Our top priority must be to prevent the spread of the disease to other bird populations,” says Dr Torsten Nöldner, spokesman for animal welfare with the Senate Department for the Environment, Mobility, Consumer Protection and Climate Action.

The disease control measures put in place by the veterinary and food supervisory authority of the Berlin Mitte district include:

- Zoo Berlin will remain closed to visitors until further notice. The Zoo is currently only accessible to authorised personnel whose presence is required, for example, to feed and take care of the animals.
- The staff members looking after the birds at Zoo Berlin have received comprehensive training and are wearing protective clothing to prevent the spread of the disease.
- All birds are being kept indoors and no animals are permitted to enter or leave the Zoo at the current time.
- A risk analysis has been initiated of the overall situation at Zoo Berlin. An epidemiologist from the Friedrich Löffler Institute (Federal Research Institute for Animal Health) and other external experts are on hand to advise the Zoo Berlin team.
- All the birds are being tested regularly.

Maria Elena Kaschubatz, a veterinarian with the local authority has confirmed that “the official measures put in place should minimise the spread of the disease, stop susceptible animals



being put at risk, and quickly get the situation under control. It is in everyone's interest that each and every detail is adhered to with the utmost care and discipline."

It will only be possible to ease the restrictions if the further tests on all Zoo Berlin's birds reveal no more positive cases. It currently seems likely that the Zoo will have to remain closed until the end of the year. However, any further positive test results would lead to a reassessment of the situation. Both the Aquarium and the Tierpark remain open.

Background

With the spread of avian influenza across Central Europe in recent years, some time ago Zoo and Tierpark Berlin began randomly testing deceased birds for the disease, also known as avian flu or bird flu. A hamerkop that died at Zoo Berlin on 13 November was shown to have been carrying the virus. Extensive quarantine measures were immediately introduced, and almost all the birds at the Zoo were moved into their indoor habitats or aviaries. To date, global instances of humans and other types of animals becoming infected with the H5N1 virus have been rare and isolated. However, there is a risk of introducing the virus into other bird populations. In consultation with the local authorities, Zoo Berlin will therefore remain closed to visitors until further notice.

Direct help for Zoo Berlin

Coming hot on the heels of the Covid-19 pandemic, the energy crisis, and the rising cost of animal feed, the outbreak of bird flu is one more problem in a series of challenges that Zoo Berlin has faced in the past couple of years. The team is working tirelessly to cope with the situation and ensure all its animals are fed and well cared for. As a non-profit organization, Zoo Berlin relies on entrance fees and donations and would therefore be very grateful for any support during these difficult times: <https://www.zoo-berlin.de/en/donate/donations>

Tip: Animal sponsorships and ticket vouchers make great gifts that bring Christmas cheer to both the lucky recipients and the Zoo's animals. They can also be purchased online.