

## **Avian Influenza Training for Caribbean Nations**

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Bird flu, or avian influenza (AI) has long been prevalent in some bird populations, with periodic outbreaks throughout the world. The recently identified highly pathogenic H5N1 strain of avian influenza, or HPAI-H5N1, has spread quickly through Asia, Africa, and Europe causing mass deaths of poultry and some wild bird populations. What makes this particularly volatile strain of HPAI most troublesome is that it can be passed from bird to mammal, meaning humans can contract AI from birds, and unfortunately this has occurred in many locations where HPAI-H5N1 has been identified.

To combat the possible outbreak of HPAI-H5N1 within the Caribbean region, a co-operative group of regional and international organizations participated in a 5-day avian influenza workshop in Jamaica in November 2006. The purpose of this workshop was to increase the knowledge and understanding of the need for surveillance of wild birds, specifically migratory waterbirds, for AI. The effort was spearheaded by the Wildlife Conservation Society's GAINS (Global Influenza Network for Surveillance) group and funded by USAID and the Center for Disease Control (CDC). Staff from United Nations FAO, GAINS, and Environmental Protection in the Caribbean (EPIC) trained both wildlife biologists and veterinarians from throughout the Caribbean including, the Bahamas, Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, St. Lucia,

Barbados, Grenada, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago. Similar AI workshops were conducted world-wide by GAINS, the United Nations FAO, and local agencies, to provide training in wild bird avian influenza surveillance.

The course in Jamaica began with two days of lectures on highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) epidemiology, pathogenicity, bird surveying/sampling techniques, and necropsy techniques. This was followed by two days of field activities where the group captured birds for AI sampling, focusing on waterfowl and shorebirds, the species most likely to carry AI, and ended with a single day of training in the lab where participants learned hands-on necropsy techniques.

Researchers and banders working with *Anseriformes* (ducks, swans, and geese) and *Charadriiformes* (gulls, terns, and waders) are the priority people to train due to the historical prevalence of low pathogenic AI in these species and wildlife mortalities from H5N1-HPAI. Within the context of this workshop, the trainers were able to get a broader view of what type of work agencies in the region are conducting. From the course, we hope that trained biologists will work with the governmental veterinary services by helping to conduct avian wildlife surveillance for AI, as well as other potential diseases.

In the long term, this trained group of professionals could provide feedback on unusual mortality in wildlife if on-going monitoring programs are in place. This could lead to a combined wildlife disease outbreak investigation coordinated through the in-country veterinary services. Finally, if an H5N1-HPAI outbreak occurs in the Caribbean, trained

people would be able to assist the veterinary services in conducting an outbreak investigation. The veterinary services would focus on the poultry aspects, quarantine, and stamping out, while the wildlife personnel would focus on conducting surveys of wild birds at the farm site, potential routes of transmission between poultry and wildlife, and other wildlife aspects of an outbreak investigation.

EPIC has taken the lead in seeking funding to carry out further training in the region as well as to lay the groundwork for increased avian surveillance in the Caribbean. Within that context, EPIC is seeking partner groups within the region who are willing to host avian wildlife surveillance trainings as well as those agencies interested in participating in an avian surveillance program. For further information on participating in trainings or monitoring programs, contact Adam Brown at [abrown@epicislands.org](mailto:abrown@epicislands.org). For additional information on avian influenza and what is happening with H5N1 worldwide, visit [www.gains.org](http://www.gains.org).