H5 Bird Flu and long-nosed fur seals in South Australia

Government of South Australia
Department for Environment and Water

The long-nosed fur seal (*Arctocephalus forsteri)* is the most common seal species in Australian waters and is widely distributed throughout southern Australia, including along much of South Australia's coastline. They hold important cultural, scientific, educational and tourism values.

Long-nosed fur seals occupy a variety of coastal and marine habitats, such as offshore islands, rocky shorelines, reefs and mainland haul-out sites, where they breed, rest, and socialise. Important breeding colonies occur at Cape Gantheaume and Cape du Couedic on Kangaroo Island, and the Neptune Islands Group, where the majority of the state's pups are born.

Adult males can reach 2.5 metres in length and weigh 120-180 kg, while females are smaller, reaching 1.5 metres and 30-50 kg. Females generally give birth to a single pup over summer following a gestation period of around 12 months. Pups remain dependent on their mothers for around 9-12 months before weaning.

Conservation significance

Long-nosed fur seals are important predators in southern Australian marine ecosystems and contribute to the health and balance of marine food webs.

Severe population declines caused by commercial sealing occurred during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, yet long-nosed fur seal populations have since recovered substantially across Australia. The species is now protected under national and state legislation. In South Australia, populations are currently considered stable and increasing at many colonies.



South Australian long-nosed fur seal sites



Susceptibility to H5 bird flu

H5 bird flu is a viral disease that primarily affects birds, but can also infect mammals, including seals and sea lions. Overseas, H5 bird flu has been detected in several pinniped (seal) species and has caused significant wildlife mortality events.

Long-nosed fur seals may be particularly susceptible to disease outbreaks as they breed in large, dense colonies where many animals, including dependent pups, gather in close proximity. Their breeding sites often in coastal environments are frequented by a range of wildlife susceptible to H5 bird flu, including seabirds, creating potential pathways for disease exposure and transmission.

Although the species' recovery from historical sealing demonstrates a strong capacity for recovery, a large proportion of pups are born at a small number of major breeding colonies. As a result, significant mortality at these sites could affect population resilience, recruitment, and ecosystem function.

The species breeding and behavioural characteristics, combined with the species' ecological importance and widespread distribution, make the long-nosed fur seal an important focus for H5 bird flu preparedness, surveillance and response planning.

Management and resilience-building actions

Government agencies, researchers, and conservation partners are working together to enhance preparedness for H5 bird flu and strengthen the resilience of long-nosed fur seal populations. Current activities include:

- monitoring breeding colonies, haul-out sites and population health
- investigating sicknesses and mortality events
- marine debris removal and disentanglement programs
- managing marine parks and protected areas
- supporting responsible tourism and fisheries management programs

Additional conservation, preparedness and recovery actions that may further strengthen the species' resilience to H5 bird flu include:

- enhanced remote surveillance and non-invasive monitoring technologies
- targeted H5 bird flu surveillance at priority colonies
- strengthened biosecurity within colonies
- restricting non-essential visitation during high-risk periods
- increased seabird surveillance near colonies
- colony prioritisation frameworks for response planning
- improved carcass response capability for carcass collection and logistics
- assessment of vaccination and insurance population feasibility.

Effective preparedness, response and recovery actions can help maintain healthy and resilient long-nosed fur seal populations, protect key breeding colonies and habitats, support ecosystem function and sustainable wildlife tourism, and improve response capability during disease events in the event of an H5 bird flu outbreak.



Access the latest information at www.birdflu.gov.au

or for South Australian specific information at www.birdflu.sa.gov.au

Licensed under Creative Commons. Attribution 3.0 Australia License www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au
Copyright Owner: Crown in right of the State of South Australia 2026. FIS 1136181.

Disclaimer

While every reasonable effort has been made to verify the information in this document use of the information contained is at your sole risk. The department recommends that you independently verify the information before taking any action.
The development of this plan was supported by the Australian government.

Government of South Australia
Department for Environment and Water