

THREAT TO THE PEAFAWL: INDIA'S NATIONAL BIRD

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INTRODUCTION

More than 44 Indian peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*) died in the Tumakuru district of Karnataka between April 16 and 21, 2026. The incidence was first reported on April 16, and over the span of a week, 44 peacocks (adult and sub adults) were found dead under mysterious circumstances. At the first instance it was thought to be due to heat stress, as Karnataka was in the grip of severe heat wave. But surprisingly it appeared to be very alarming when the samples of trachea, cloacal swabs, and viscera collected from the dead peacocks sent to ICAR-National Institute of High Security Animal Diseases in Bhopal confirmed H5N1 avian influenza, clade 2.3.4.4b as the cause of death on 28 April 2026¹. H5N1 avian influenza, is a strain of bird flu that has been causing several outbreaks across the world since last few years.

Animal health, human health and ecosystem health components of One health have come into action mode and all necessary measures have been taken to prevent the infection from spreading, and a containment zone has been declared within a 10km radius of the affected areas. All poultry farms within the zone have been alerted and sensitized as per protocol.

Healthcare facilities in the district have been instructed to continue surveillance of ILI/SARI (Influenza-Like Illness/Severe Acute Respiratory Infection) cases and maintain adequate stocks of PPE, triple-layer medical masks, oseltamivir, viral transport medium, and throat swab kits. Preventive measures by forest department have been ordered across all the forests areas including zoos and bird sanctuaries to check migration of birds.

The Indian peafowl has been declared the National Bird of India in 1963 and receives

the highest legal protection as a Schedule-I species under Wildlife Protection Act 1972².

Despite protected status, peafowl populations has been experiencing high mortality in both protected and non-forest areas.

Their deaths suggest that the virus is no longer confined to migratory waterfowl but may be present in environments where wildlife, poultry and humans intersect. The incidence shows a gap between wildlife health and poultry surveillance.³⁻⁴ Lack of coordination between forest department, animal husbandry department and health department after mortality reported. Forest department handled Schedule-1 species whereas, Animal husbandry department tackled disease control. Lack of joint SOPs for wild bird HPAI created confusion in sampling, PPE use and disposal. This lead to delayed diagnosis.

The peacocks deaths are not for the first time. There has been deaths of peacocks since 2010 all over the nation predominantly Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka with infectious and non infectious causes. Infectious cause included Avian Tuberculosis, Fowl cholera, HPAI H5N8. Non infectious cause included pesticide poisoning, electrocution and road kills.

In Karnataka itself way back in August 2024, 20 peacocks died near water body in Tumakuru after consuming seeds treated with pesticides. Consecutively in August 2025, 19 peacocks died in Tumakuru by dephenylmetalaxyl fungicide poisoning. Agro chemicals do not cause poisoning to birds, but compromise immune system making outbreaks like H5N1 more lethal.

WHAT IS H5N1?

H5N1, also known as avian influenza, is a subtype of the highly pathogenic influenza virus that infects wild birds and domestic poultry and mammals, including humans in rare instances if there is close contact with infected animals or contaminated environments. (WHO). The April, 2026 Tumakuru incidence is the largest documented HPAI mortality in free-ranging Indian peafowl. Globally, peafowl show high susceptibility to H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b⁵.

WHY PEAFAWL?

Nowadays Peacocks no longer live in deep forests. They habitat near villages, feed in maize fields and drink from farm ponds act as sentinel species The peacock is the only wild animal that can be seen wild. Peafowl are ground foraging Gallinaceous bird. The synanthropic behavior, bring them into close contact with poultry and humans in agricultural landscapes.

HOW TO PREVENT?

The preventive measures include immediate reporting of deaths that helps in early detection of cause of death and to adopt preventive measures, keeping water troughs away from crops help peacocks to survive heat waves without entering into farms, control of stray dogs, as 40% attacks are only due to dogs, plantation of native scrubs as peacocks avoid dense plantations.. Developing joint SOPs for forest, animal husbandry department and training field veterinarians in wildlife investigations for one health surveillance. Field level rapid diagnostics are required to be provided for wildlife

ROLE OF ONE HEALTH

One health that includes human animals and ecosystem health are one system .One health means agriculture, forest and health departments should come together to tackle with such problems. Formation of habitat buffers, pesticide regulation, one health surveillance screening of droppings near by poultry belts for H5N1,creation of awareness among forest workers about the outbreaks in wild to report death to nearest veterinary officer instead burying carcasses are few of the major steps that can be taken in collaboration with health, agriculture and forest departments under one health system.

CONCLUSIONS

The April 2026 H5N1 outbreak in Tumakuru demonstrates that peafowl deaths are not just a conservation issue but a veterinary public health alert. It is an indication of viral circulation in the environment including water bodies and shared ecological spaces. It warns risk to poultry farms, farm workers and public health. Wildlife health, environmental shifts, and human safety are closely related. This incidence underscores the role of wildlife mortality as an early warning system for zoonotic avian influenza and highlights the need for integrated wildlife livestock disease surveillance, ensuring diagnostic access at state level, and creating legal flexibility for emergency disease response, developing joint SOPs for forest, animal husbandry department and training field veterinarians in wildlife investigations for one health surveillance. Under One Health approach, protecting animal health at the wildlife interface is the only way to protect human health.

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