

Bird Flu Is Spreading In and From Asia

by Marcia Merry Baker and Colin Lowry

Shown are major potential migratory routes for avian influenza (H5N1) along waterfowl flyways that span Eurasia, into Africa and Oceania; and also, where the presence of the flu strain has been confirmed as of Aug. 3, since the 2003 outbreaks began in Indo-China. Wild ducks, geese and swans (Anatidae waterbirds) head north (in the Spring) for breeding grounds in the wetlands, and south for non-breeding (in the Fall) over the Winter. The birds can fly up to 1,000 miles a day. Thus, their patterns constitute transmission belts to spread the virus among domesticated birds and pigs through which, if the virus mutates to an efficient human-to-human form, the conditions for a pandemic will be created. Such transmission has been confirmed, thus far, in Indonesia.

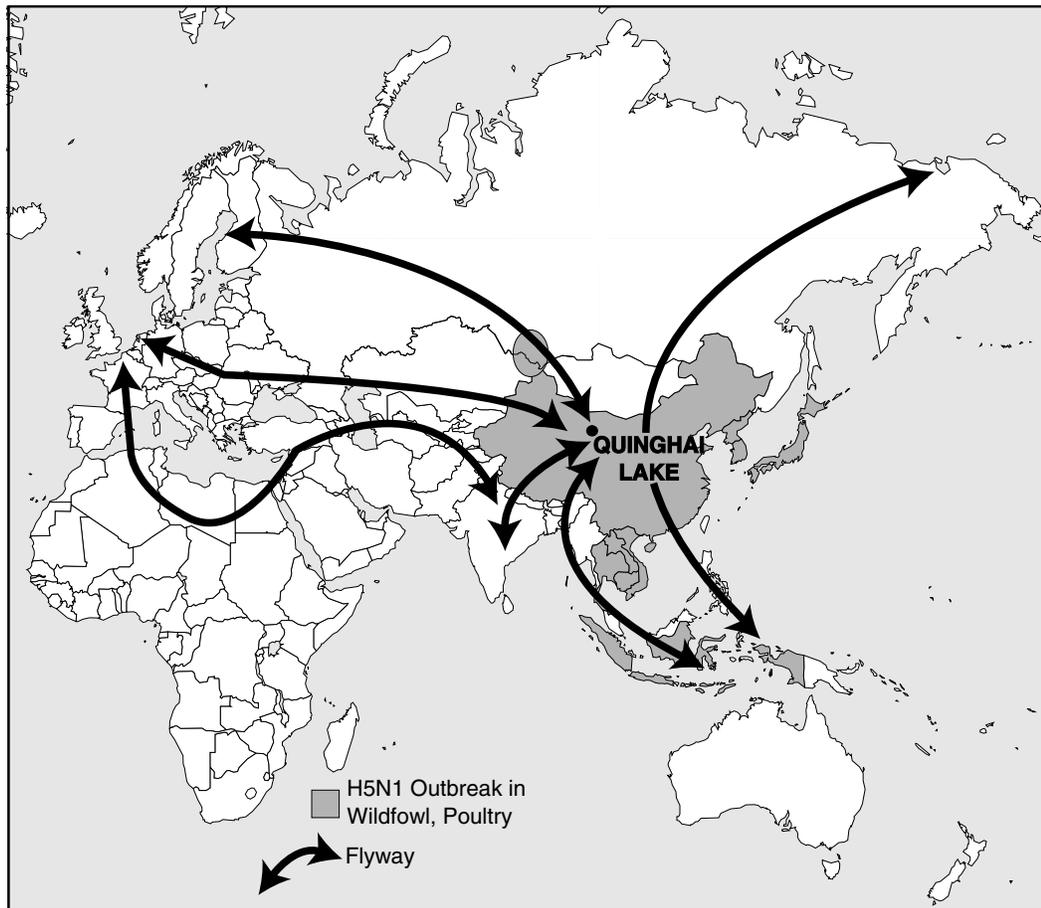
Since 2003, some 140 million poultry have been culled in Southeast Asia, and parts of China, in an attempt to retard the spread of the disease. The avian flu virus has expanded its host species to include cats, and captive tigers in Thailand. There have been at least 57 deaths from avian flu among the 111 human cases since the epidemic began in 2003.

Qinghai Lake in central China is a cross-over point for migrations; at least 189 bird types are known to breed or rest here. The 60-mile saltwater lake hosts hundreds of thousands of birds. In May, at the Qinghai Lake Bird Reservation, H5N1 killed 5,000 wildfowl—mostly geese, but also cormorants, gulls, and other birds. Avian flu is not usually lethal to wild birds, which can carry it without showing any symptoms. This shows the virus may be mutating. The H5N1 virus is very stable in the environment, and can survive for three days in water pools, and up to a few months in piles of manure and dirt on poultry farms, making efforts at isolation more difficult.

In July, H5N1 was confirmed in Novosibirsk and Altai provinces of Russia, in the Ob River wetlands region. Then in early August, it was confirmed next door in Kazakstan, at Pavlodar, on the Irtysh River.

Thus, the avian flu is proceeding toward Europe, and expected in India in the near future.

Avian Flu Proceeds Along Eurasian Waterfowl Flyways—Confirmed Outbreaks as of Aug. 1, 2005



Source: World Food Programme, European Commission.