

# **Avian flu feared in Canadian polar bears**

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Scientists fear Canadian ***polar bears*** may be threat-ened by the spread of avian flu after officials confirmed the disease killed a ***bear*** in Alaska.

“There’s a very high likelihood that it is (in Canadian ***bears***),” said Andrew Derocher, a leading ***polar bear*** biologist at the University of Alberta.

“It’s there. We just aren’t looking for it.”

Last month, officials with the U.S. Department of Agriculture confirmed the H5N1 strain of avian flu killed a ***polar bear***, found in October near the Alaskan town of Utqiagvik about 500 kilometres from the Yukon border. ***Polar bears*** range hundreds of kilometres and the dead ***bear*** was part of a population shared by both countries.

The virus first showed up in Yukon more than a year ago in a red fox, said territorial veterinarian Jane Harms.

“This strain of avian flu seems to have the ability to infect and cause disease in mammals of a variety of types,” she said. “The fact this virus can cause disease and death in ***polar bears***, as well as other species, is of concern.”

It’s not clear yet how far the virus has spread among Arctic mammals. Alaska has found it in red foxes, a black ***bear*** and a Kodiak ***bear***.

Harms said it seems so far it is being spread when mammals eat infected birds.

“In most cases, wild mammals are being infected by scavenging tissues of infected birds. It does not seem to be transmitted mammal to mammal.”

But Derocher said climate change is likely increasing the ***bears***’ exposure, as diminishing sea ice keeps them on shore longer and forces them to subsist on prey such as dead birds. Those extended shorebound periods of relative scarcity also weaken the ***bears***.

“Immune system function goes down. With weakened immune systems, they’re more likely to succumb.”

As well, ***polar bears*** are more vulnerable to viruses than other ***bears***, said John Whiteman, chief researcher at ***Polar Bears*** International and professor at Old Dominion University in Virginia. While evolving for the Arctic, they lost much of their genetic “library” of possible pathogens and how to resist them.

“If you can recognize a lot of pathogens, you’re in better shape to fight them off,” said Whiteman. “***Polar bears*** don’t recognize a lot of pathogens.”

Climate change has stirred the pot on viruses around the world, he said.

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