

MEDIA RELEASE

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Deakin University research maps bird flu pathways to Australia

A new Deakin University research project is looking into how birds might bring avian influenza and other diseases into Australia.

Deakin University environmental science expert Dr Rohan Clarke has been involved in a major study of migratory birds moving from South-East Asia and Papua New Guinea to northern Australia, with the aim of tracking how disease spreads.

Dr Clarke has made several field trips to the Torres Strait to take samples from birds and study their migration patterns. He said this is the obvious pathway of any disease like bird flu moving into the country as Australian islands are situated just 3kms from the Papua New Guinea coastline.

"Clearly this border is the major bio-security threat for Australia and if anything is likely to come into country, this is the path the disease is likely to come through," he said.

Dr Clarke's research project is looking at rates and spread of avian malaria amongst birds in the region, with the aim of using this information to predict the way other diseases might travel throughout birds in Australia.

"Avian malaria is a common bird affliction. Although it is similar to human malaria it doesn't affect people," he said.

During several trips to the Torres Strait the research team has gathered 900 samples from different bird species, which will now be subject to molecular screening. However Dr Clarke said that blood-smears done on location show a high prevalence of malaria infection – about 30 per cent – making it an ideal study in disease transmission.

Dr Clarke said the Torres Strait is a major migration pathway for bush birds in Australia – those smaller birds which live in foliage.

"We are talking hundreds and thousands of birds moving back and forward across the strait each year.

"We can use this information to see how bird diseases might move around different areas and it has implications for our understanding of how bird flu might spread.

"If we are to get any major disease incursions into Australia, it is likely to come through this pathway," Dr Clarke said.

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Dr Rohan Clarke is a research fellow in the School of Life and Environmental Sciences at Deakin University. Pictures are available of the team working in the Torres Strait.

Dr Clarke is available for interview and can be contacted on (03) 92517609 or 0408 947 001.

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