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# Bird flu threat takes a toll

## With Migratory Birds Set To Fly In, Bhopal Lab Needs More Staff, Funds

By Chandrika Mago/TNN

**New Delhi:** The country's only high-security animal disease laboratory in Bhopal is beginning to feel the strain. It's the only facility which has been testing for H5N1, the deadly bird flu strain that has crippled poultry farms across Asia, but it needs more scientists and funds to survive a heightened threat perception and the thousands of samples expected to flow in over the next few months.

Over the past five years, it has tested over 19,000 serum and tissue samples for deadly bird flu strains. It found a non-pathogenic strain but all samples were free of the highly-pathogenic avian influenza virus, says lab chief H K Pradhan. In September alone, it tested about a thousand samples.

The real test is just coming up. Screening has to be stepped up since migratory birds have emerged as a possible new threat this year — they need to be watched and tested for the virus. The



**IMMIGRATION CHECK:** Over the past five years, the laboratory in Bhopal has tested over 19,000 serum and tissue samples for deadly bird flu strains.

birds have started flying in for their winter halt to India, uncaring that their Indian minders are still to figure out what to do.

Pradhan accepts he may need more people to step up sampling. He believes a couple of mobile biocontainment labs should be bought so Bhopal only gets referral samples. Each lab would cost about Rs 2 crore.

This apart, there is the question of catching the free bird. Animal husbandry commissioner S K Bandhopadhyay says they are asking the Bombay Natural History Society and Wetlands International to track the different species and help trap migratory birds randomly so experts can take samples.

Bandhopadhyay, coordi-

nating the tie-ups between Centre, states and NGOs, says they want representative samples from water bodies and a record of the species coming in. Since birds don't arrive in one go, they may need samples every two months, if possible. They have asked for intensive sampling of poultry farms around water bodies.

They don't plan to focus

sampling on any one migratory bird species since they don't know which bird, if any, may carry the virus.

Certainly, Bar-headed Geese — found infected in China — will be on a special watchlist.

Amid all this, Pradhan says his lab has screened over 270 wild bird samples from sanctuaries, mainly Tamil Nadu.

These may or may not be migratory birds but they are wild birds — any virus present would spread to other birds, he reasons.

What remains through all this is the threat. FAO says, India, on one of the major migratory routes, has the potential to become a new endemic area of bird flu infection. In two years, H5N1 has killed over 60 people across Asia and more than 140 million domestic poultry have died or been slaughtered to contain the infection. This year, bird flu is suspected to have killed thousands of wild birds in China, Russia, Mongolia and Kazakhstan.