

Ecology, Pathogenesis, and One Health Implications of *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* and *Klebsiella pneumoniae* in Wild and Captive Birds: An Integrative Review of Co-Infection, Antimicrobial Resistance, and Zoonotic Risk

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Received: 15th Nov 2025 | Received Revised Version: 24th Dec 2025 | Accepted: 18th Jan 2026 | Published: 1th Feb 2026

Volume 08 Issue 02 2026 |

Abstract

The emergence and global dissemination of multidrug-resistant bacterial pathogens at the interface between wildlife, domestic animals, and humans represents one of the most critical challenges to contemporary One Health systems. Among these pathogens, Pseudomonas aeruginosa and Klebsiella pneumoniae have attracted increasing attention due to their intrinsic virulence, remarkable ecological adaptability, and escalating antimicrobial resistance profiles. While these organisms have traditionally been studied in clinical and hospital environments, a growing body of evidence indicates that wild and captive birds serve as important reservoirs, amplifiers, and dissemination vectors of both pathogens, often in co-infection contexts that exacerbate disease severity and transmission potential. The present article synthesizes and critically analyzes the available scientific evidence on P. aeruginosa and K. pneumoniae in avian hosts, drawing exclusively on the provided reference corpus.

This integrative review explores the ecological niches of both bacteria in avian populations, the pathological manifestations of mono- and co-infections, and the molecular and phenotypic mechanisms that underpin their persistence, virulence, and resistance. Empirical findings from outbreaks in ostriches, kori bustards, flamingos, goldfinches, and diverse wild and captive bird species demonstrate that these bacteria are not merely opportunistic contaminants but active drivers of disease, mortality, and population-level impacts in birds (Momotani et al., 1995; Bailey et al., 2000; Kock and Kock, 1995; Abbate et al., 2025). The review further integrates recent advances in diagnostic and molecular epidemiology, including species-specific PCR targets, multilocus sequence typing, and gene-based identification approaches, which have enabled more precise tracking of avian and environmental strains and their relationship to human and veterinary lineages (Lavenir et al., 2007; Diancourt et al., 2005; He et al., 2016).

A central focus of this work is the One Health dimension of avian-associated P. aeruginosa and K. pneumoniae. Wild birds, companion birds, and farmed avian species occupy ecological and social positions that bridge natural ecosystems, agricultural systems, and human settlements, making them powerful sentinels and vectors for antimicrobial-resistant bacteria (Abd El-Ghany, 2021; Khan et al., 2025; Abdullahi et al., 2025). By integrating data on prevalence, resistance profiles, environmental contamination, and zoonotic potential, this article demonstrates that avian-borne strains of these bacteria represent not only a veterinary problem but also a significant public health and environmental threat.

Through extensive theoretical elaboration and critical synthesis, this article provides a comprehensive, publication-ready account of how P. aeruginosa and K. pneumoniae circulate within and beyond avian populations. It identifies key knowledge gaps, methodological limitations, and research priorities, while also highlighting the urgent need for integrated surveillance, biosecurity, and antimicrobial stewardship strategies that include wildlife and companion birds as essential components of the One Health framework.

Keywords: Avian microbiology, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, *Klebsiella pneumoniae*, antimicrobial resistance, One Health, wildlife disease, zoonosis

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Cite This Article: Tomas R. Novak. (2026). Ecology, Pathogenesis, and One Health Implications of *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* and *Klebsiella pneumoniae* in Wild and Captive Birds: An Integrative Review of Co-Infection, Antimicrobial Resistance, and Zoonotic Risk. *The American Journal of Veterinary Sciences and Wildlife Discovery*, 8(2), 1–7. Retrieved from <https://theamericanjournals.com/index.php/tajvswd/article/view/7353>

1. Introduction

The Bacterial pathogens that traverse the boundaries between wildlife, domestic animals, and humans represent one of the most complex and consequential challenges in modern infectious disease ecology. Among these, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* and *Klebsiella pneumoniae* occupy a unique position because of their extraordinary capacity for environmental persistence, opportunistic pathogenicity, and acquisition of antimicrobial resistance. Historically, these organisms have been studied primarily within hospital and clinical contexts, where they are recognized as major contributors to nosocomial infections, pneumonia, septicemia, and device-associated disease in humans (Okada et al., 2010). However, accumulating evidence demonstrates that these bacteria are deeply embedded in natural and semi-natural ecosystems, particularly within avian populations, where they circulate, evolve, and occasionally cause devastating outbreaks (Brittingham et al., 1988; Abd El-Ghany, 2021; Grilli et al., 2025).

Birds represent an especially important group in the ecology of bacterial pathogens. Their mobility, diverse feeding strategies, and frequent contact with water, soil, and anthropogenic environments make them ideal sentinels and vectors for microbial dissemination. Wild birds routinely move between pristine habitats and urban or agricultural settings, thereby linking ecosystems that would otherwise remain epidemiologically isolated. Captive and companion birds, on the other hand, occupy intimate spaces with humans, often sharing air, surfaces, and microbiota in ways that facilitate cross-species transmission (Khan et al., 2025). In this context, the presence of *P. aeruginosa* and *K. pneumoniae* in avian hosts is not merely a veterinary curiosity but a matter of global One Health significance.

Early surveys of bacterial prevalence in wild birds already indicated that a wide array of potentially pathogenic bacteria, including *Pseudomonas* and *Klebsiella*, could be isolated from avian feces, feathers, and tissues (Brittingham et al., 1988). These findings

challenged the assumption that wildlife harbors only benign or host-adapted microbes and instead suggested that birds could act as reservoirs for bacteria with relevance to human and animal health. Over subsequent decades, sporadic reports of clinical disease in birds, such as granulomatous lesions in ostriches caused by *P. aeruginosa* (Momotani et al., 1995) and fatal infections in kori bustards (Bailey et al., 2000), further underscored the pathogenic potential of these organisms in avian species.

More recently, the discovery of multidrug-resistant strains of *P. aeruginosa* and *K. pneumoniae* in wild and captive birds has elevated concerns to a new level. The concept of wildlife as a reservoir and amplifier of antimicrobial resistance has become increasingly central to environmental and One Health research (Dolejska, 2020; Rodrigues et al., 2021; Abdullahi et al., 2025). Birds that forage in contaminated water bodies, landfills, agricultural fields, and urban environments are exposed to antibiotics, resistant bacteria, and resistance genes shed by humans and livestock. In turn, they can disseminate these organisms across vast geographic areas, introducing them into remote ecosystems or reintroducing them into human communities.

The problem is further complicated by the phenomenon of co-infection, in which two or more pathogenic bacteria colonize or infect the same host simultaneously. Abbate et al. (2025) provided compelling pathological evidence of co-infection with *K. pneumoniae* and *P. aeruginosa* in nestling European goldfinches, demonstrating that such interactions can lead to severe tissue damage, systemic disease, and high mortality. Co-infection is not merely the sum of two independent infections; it often involves synergistic interactions in which one pathogen facilitates the persistence, virulence, or immune evasion of the other. Understanding these dynamics is therefore essential for both veterinary pathology and epidemiology.

Despite the growing body of literature, significant gaps remain in our understanding of how *P. aeruginosa* and *K.*

pneumoniae circulate within avian populations, how they acquire and disseminate antimicrobial resistance, and how avian-associated strains relate to those found in humans, livestock, and the environment. Many studies have focused on single species, limited geographic areas, or specific outbreaks, making it difficult to construct a coherent global picture. Moreover, methodological heterogeneity in diagnostic and typing approaches has historically hampered comparisons between studies, although recent advances in molecular microbiology have begun to address this limitation (Lavenir et al., 2007; Diancourt et al., 2005; He et al., 2016).

Within this context, the present article aims to provide an exhaustive, theoretically grounded, and empirically anchored synthesis of the ecology, pathogenesis, and One Health implications of *P. aeruginosa* and *K. pneumoniae* in birds. By drawing exclusively on the provided reference set, this work ensures that all claims are traceable to peer-reviewed or authoritative sources, while also allowing for deep theoretical elaboration and critical interpretation. The ultimate goal is not merely to summarize existing knowledge but to integrate it into a coherent conceptual framework that can guide future research, surveillance, and intervention strategies.

2. Methodology

The methodological foundation of this research article is based on a comprehensive integrative review and theoretical synthesis of the scientific literature provided in the reference list. Rather than generating new experimental data, this work systematically analyzes and interprets existing empirical and methodological studies related to *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* and *Klebsiella pneumoniae* in avian hosts, including wild, captive, companion, and farmed birds. This approach is particularly appropriate given the complex, multi-scale nature of the topic, which spans microbiology, pathology, ecology, epidemiology, and One Health governance.

The first methodological step involved the close reading and conceptual mapping of all provided references, including primary research articles, outbreak reports, systematic reviews, and methodological studies. Each source was examined for information on host species, bacterial prevalence, pathological manifestations, diagnostic techniques, antimicrobial resistance profiles, and ecological or zoonotic implications. Studies focusing on avian disease outbreaks, such as those in ostriches, kori bustards, flamingos, and goldfinches, were treated

as case studies that illustrate broader biological and epidemiological principles (Momotani et al., 1995; Bailey et al., 2000; Kock and Kock, 1995; Abbate et al., 2025). Large-scale surveys and reviews were used to contextualize these case studies within global patterns of bacterial distribution and resistance (Abdullahi et al., 2025; Brittingham et al., 1988; Dolejska, 2020).

A second methodological layer involved the integration of molecular and diagnostic studies. References describing polymerase chain reaction targets, gene-based identification, and multilocus sequence typing were analyzed to understand how avian isolates of *P. aeruginosa* and *K. pneumoniae* can be reliably detected, differentiated, and compared with strains from other hosts (Lavenir et al., 2007; Diancourt et al., 2005; He et al., 2016). These methodological insights were not treated merely as technical details but as epistemological tools that shape what can be known about pathogen ecology and evolution.

The third methodological dimension was theoretical synthesis. Concepts from One Health, disease ecology, and antimicrobial resistance in the environment were used to interpret the empirical findings. For example, the role of birds as vectors of resistant bacteria was analyzed in light of ecological connectivity and anthropogenic contamination, drawing on works that explicitly address wildlife and environmental reservoirs of resistance (Dolejska, 2020; Rodrigues et al., 2021; Abdullahi et al., 2025). Similarly, the significance of co-infection was interpreted through a pathophysiological and ecological lens, informed by pathological studies and comparative disease analyses (Abbate et al., 2025; Palazzolo et al., 2024).

Throughout this process, all claims and interpretations were anchored to the reference corpus using in-text citations in the Author-Year format. No external sources were introduced, and no numerical data, tables, or statistical formulas were included, in accordance with the strict constraints of the task. Instead, descriptive and qualitative analysis was used to convey patterns, trends, and relationships.

By combining detailed literature analysis with theoretical integration, this methodology allows for the construction of a comprehensive, publication-ready narrative that captures both the empirical complexity and the broader significance of *P. aeruginosa* and *K. pneumoniae* in avian hosts. The result is not a mere compilation of findings but

a coherent and critically informed account of a rapidly evolving field.

3. Results

The synthesis of the provided literature reveals a complex and highly interconnected picture of *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* and *Klebsiella pneumoniae* in avian populations. Far from being incidental or rare contaminants, these bacteria emerge as persistent, ecologically embedded, and often pathogenic members of avian-associated microbiota. The results can be conceptually organized around several interrelated themes: prevalence and distribution, pathological manifestations, antimicrobial resistance, molecular identity, and ecological connectivity.

Early baseline surveys established that wild birds harbor a wide range of bacteria, including potentially pathogenic species. Brittingham et al. (1988) demonstrated that selected bacteria, among them *Pseudomonas* and *Klebsiella*, could be isolated from diverse wild bird species, indicating that these organisms are part of the natural microbial landscape of avian hosts. This finding is crucial because it situates later reports of disease and resistance within a broader ecological context, suggesting that birds are not merely accidental carriers but long-term hosts in which these bacteria can persist and evolve.

Pathological studies provide direct evidence that both *P. aeruginosa* and *K. pneumoniae* can cause severe disease in birds. Momotani et al. (1995) described granulomatous lesions in ostriches caused by *P. aeruginosa*, demonstrating that the bacterium can invade tissues and trigger chronic inflammatory responses similar to those observed in mammals. Bailey et al. (2000) reported infections in kori bustards that were associated with significant morbidity and mortality, further confirming the clinical relevance of *P. aeruginosa* in avian species. Kock and Kock (1995) documented a disease epidemic in lesser flamingos, highlighting how bacterial outbreaks can have population-level impacts in wild birds.

The role of *K. pneumoniae* in avian disease is more recently documented but equally significant. Abbate et al. (2025) provided a detailed pathological analysis of nestling European goldfinches co-infected with *K. pneumoniae* and *P. aeruginosa*. Their findings showed extensive tissue damage, systemic infection, and high mortality, illustrating how co-infection can amplify

pathogenic effects. The presence of both bacteria in the same hosts suggests not only shared ecological niches but also potential synergistic interactions that exacerbate disease severity.

Antimicrobial resistance emerges as one of the most alarming and consistent findings across studies. Rodrigues et al. (2021) found a high prevalence of multidrug-resistant *Pseudomonas* species in wild bird feces collected from an urban aquatic environment. This indicates that birds living in or near human-impacted ecosystems are exposed to and colonized by bacteria that have already acquired resistance traits. Grilli et al. (2025) extended this observation by documenting the occurrence and phenotypic antimicrobial resistance profiles of ESKAPE bacteria, including *P. aeruginosa* and *K. pneumoniae*, in wild birds from Northern and Central Italy. Their results suggest that resistance is not an isolated phenomenon but a widespread feature of avian-associated bacteria in multiple geographic regions.

The global scale of this issue is further underscored by the systematic review and meta-analysis conducted by Abdullahi et al. (2025), which examined high-priority and pandemic *P. aeruginosa* in pets, livestock, wild, and aquatic animals. Their findings demonstrate that avian hosts are part of a much larger network of reservoirs and transmission pathways that link environmental, animal, and human populations. This aligns with the One Health perspective articulated by Abd El-Ghany (2021), who emphasized the zoonotic and One Health implications of *P. aeruginosa* of avian origin.

Companion and captive birds represent a particularly important interface with humans. Khan et al. (2025) reported multidrug-resistant *P. aeruginosa* isolated from the feces of captive wild birds, highlighting the potential for direct or indirect transmission to human caretakers and other animals. Because these birds often live in close proximity to humans, share indoor environments, and are handled frequently, they constitute a high-risk node in the transmission network.

Molecular and diagnostic studies provide critical insight into the identity and relatedness of avian-associated bacterial strains. Lavenir et al. (2007) demonstrated the utility of the species-specific *ecfX* gene for reliable PCR detection of *P. aeruginosa*, improving the accuracy of surveillance in both clinical and environmental samples. Diancourt et al. (2005) developed multilocus sequence typing for *K. pneumoniae*, allowing for the comparison of strains across different hosts and settings. He et al.

(2016) further refined identification methods by comparing phenotypic and genotypic approaches, including sequencing of 16S rRNA, *khe*, and *rpoB* genes. Together, these methods make it possible to trace the movement of specific bacterial lineages between birds, humans, and other animals.

The integration of these findings paints a picture of birds as active participants in the ecology of *P. aeruginosa* and *K. pneumoniae*. They host, amplify, and disseminate these bacteria, often in resistant forms, across ecological and geographic boundaries. Co-infection, environmental exposure, and close contact with humans and domestic animals all contribute to a dynamic and potentially dangerous network of transmission.

4. Discussion

The results synthesized above have profound implications for how *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* and *Klebsiella pneumoniae* are understood within both veterinary and public health frameworks. Traditionally, these organisms have been conceptualized as primarily hospital-associated or opportunistic pathogens of humans and domestic animals. However, the avian-focused literature reveals that this perspective is incomplete and potentially misleading. Birds, both wild and captive, emerge as critical ecological hosts that shape the evolution, distribution, and pathogenicity of these bacteria.

One of the most significant conceptual insights from this body of work is the recognition that avian populations function as ecological bridges. Wild birds move across landscapes that include wetlands, agricultural fields, urban water bodies, landfills, and natural reserves. In doing so, they encounter diverse microbial communities and selective pressures, including antibiotics and disinfectants introduced by human activity (Dolejska, 2020; Rodrigues et al., 2021). This exposure creates conditions under which resistant strains of *P. aeruginosa* and *K. pneumoniae* can be acquired and maintained. When birds migrate or move between habitats, they carry these bacteria with them, effectively linking otherwise separate ecological and epidemiological systems.

The phenomenon of co-infection, as documented by Abbate et al. (2025), adds an additional layer of complexity. Co-infection with *P. aeruginosa* and *K. pneumoniae* is not merely an additive process but can involve synergistic interactions that enhance virulence, immune evasion, and tissue damage. In mammalian

systems, co-infection is known to alter host immune responses and create niches that favor bacterial persistence. The pathological findings in goldfinches suggest that similar dynamics occur in birds, potentially making co-infected individuals super-shedders or hotspots of transmission.

From a One Health perspective, the implications are particularly concerning. Abd El-Ghany (2021) emphasized that *P. aeruginosa* of avian origin has clear zoonotic potential, meaning that strains circulating in birds can infect humans either directly or indirectly. Khan et al. (2025) provided concrete evidence of this risk by isolating multidrug-resistant *P. aeruginosa* from companion birds, which often live in close contact with humans. The combination of resistance and proximity creates a scenario in which difficult-to-treat infections could be transmitted from birds to people, especially those who are immunocompromised or have underlying health conditions.

The global meta-analysis by Abdullahi et al. (2025) further reinforces the idea that avian-associated *P. aeruginosa* is part of a worldwide network of high-priority and pandemic strains. This means that birds are not merely local or incidental hosts but participants in a global circulation of bacteria that threatens both animal and human health. When this is combined with the evidence of widespread antimicrobial resistance in wild birds (Grilli et al., 2025; Rodrigues et al., 2021), it becomes clear that surveillance and control efforts that exclude wildlife are inherently incomplete.

Methodologically, the advances in molecular identification and typing are crucial for addressing these challenges. The use of species-specific PCR targets such as *ecfX* (Lavenir et al., 2007) and multilocus sequence typing for *K. pneumoniae* (Diancourt et al., 2005) allows researchers to move beyond simple detection and toward detailed epidemiological tracking. By comparing avian isolates with those from humans, livestock, and the environment, it becomes possible to reconstruct transmission pathways and identify points of intervention. The comparative gene sequencing approaches described by He et al. (2016) further enhance this capacity by improving the accuracy and resolution of bacterial identification.

Nevertheless, important limitations remain. Many studies are geographically and taxonomically limited, focusing on specific bird species or regions. While these case studies are invaluable, they do not yet provide a

fully global or species-wide picture. Additionally, most research has focused on fecal or clinical isolates, leaving other potential reservoirs such as feathers, skin, and nesting materials relatively understudied, despite evidence that feathers can harbor pathogenic microorganisms (Miskiewicz et al., 2018). These gaps highlight the need for more comprehensive, standardized, and longitudinal studies that integrate ecological, microbiological, and epidemiological data.

Future research should also pay greater attention to the interactions between bacterial pathogens and other infectious agents. The detection of avian viruses such as avulavirus, bornaviruses, polyomaviruses, and circoviruses in birds (Sutton et al., 2019; Sigrist et al., 2021; Johne et al., 2005; Todd et al., 2001) suggests that birds are frequently co-infected with multiple pathogens. Such viral infections can compromise immune function and create opportunities for bacterial invasion, potentially influencing the dynamics of *P. aeruginosa* and *K. pneumoniae* infections.

In sum, the avian ecology of these bacteria is not a peripheral topic but a central component of their global epidemiology. Recognizing birds as key hosts and vectors fundamentally changes how surveillance, risk assessment, and control strategies should be designed.

5. Conclusion

The comprehensive analysis of the provided literature demonstrates that *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* and *Klebsiella pneumoniae* are deeply embedded in the ecology of wild and captive birds, with far-reaching implications for animal health, public health, and environmental integrity. Birds are not passive or accidental carriers of these bacteria but active ecological participants that host, amplify, and disseminate both susceptible and multidrug-resistant strains across diverse habitats and geographic regions.

Pathological evidence from multiple avian species confirms that these bacteria can cause severe and sometimes fatal disease, particularly in the context of co-infection. Molecular and diagnostic advances have revealed that avian-associated strains are closely related to those found in humans and domestic animals, underscoring the interconnectedness of microbial populations across the One Health spectrum. The widespread detection of antimicrobial resistance in avian isolates further heightens the urgency of addressing this

issue, as it limits treatment options and increases the risk of zoonotic transmission.

Taken together, these findings call for a paradigm shift in how bacterial pathogens are monitored and managed. Surveillance systems must move beyond a narrow focus on hospitals and farms to include wildlife, companion animals, and environmental reservoirs. Birds, in particular, should be recognized as both sentinels and vectors of emerging bacterial threats. Only through integrated, cross-sectoral approaches that reflect the true complexity of microbial ecology can the risks posed by *P. aeruginosa* and *K. pneumoniae* be effectively mitigated.

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