Statement

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Unprecedented high level of highly pathogenic avian influenza in wild birds in Europe during the 2025 autumn migration

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Abstract

Between 6 September and 14 November 2025, 1,443 highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) A(H5) virus detections were reported in wild birds across 26 countries in Europe. This number was four times higher than in the same period in 2024 and the highest overall for those weeks since at least 2016. Almost all the detections (99%) were due to HPAI A(H5N1) viruses, and most of them belonged to EA-2024-DI.2.1, a new sub-lineage of the EA-2024-DI.2 genotype. These HPAI virus detections in wild birds involved increasing numbers of waterfowl species (ducks, geese and swans) that were found positive in large parts of Europe. In addition, high numbers of common cranes were affected across a wide band stretching from northeast to southwest Europe. Given the unprecedented high circulation of HPAI virus in the wild bird population compared to previous years, and the associated high environmental contamination, strict biosecurity measures and early detection of infected poultry establishments are urgently needed to prevent introductions from wild to domestic birds and further spread among poultry establishments. Prompt removal of wild bird carcasses is indicated to reduce the risk of infection for other wild and domestic birds and mammals.

Keywords: avian influenza, HPAI, monitoring, wild birds, autumn migration

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1. Introduction

This EFSA statement was requested by the European Commission (EC) under the mandate M-2024-00009 due to the quickly evolving situation with very high level of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) virus circulation in wild birds during the current autumn migration. It provides an overview of all HPAI virus detections reported in wild birds in Europe between 6 September and 14 November 2025. Specific recommendations for the current period are provided at the end of this document.

2. Data

This EFSA statement includes data from European Union (EU) Member States and other third countries reporting via the Animal Disease Information System (ADIS), and data from the United Kingdom collected via the World Animal Health Information System (WOAH-WAHIS) of the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH)[1]. Data extraction for the period from 6 September to 14 November 2025 was carried out on 14 November 2025.

3. Results

During the current reporting period from 6 September to 14 November 2025, a total of 1,443 HPAI virus detections in wild birds (with an HPAI virus detection potentially including more than one wild bird species) were reported in Europe. Compared to the same dates in previous years, this number was four times higher than in 2024, ten times higher than in 2023, twice as high as in 2022, and four times higher than in 2021 (Figure 1).

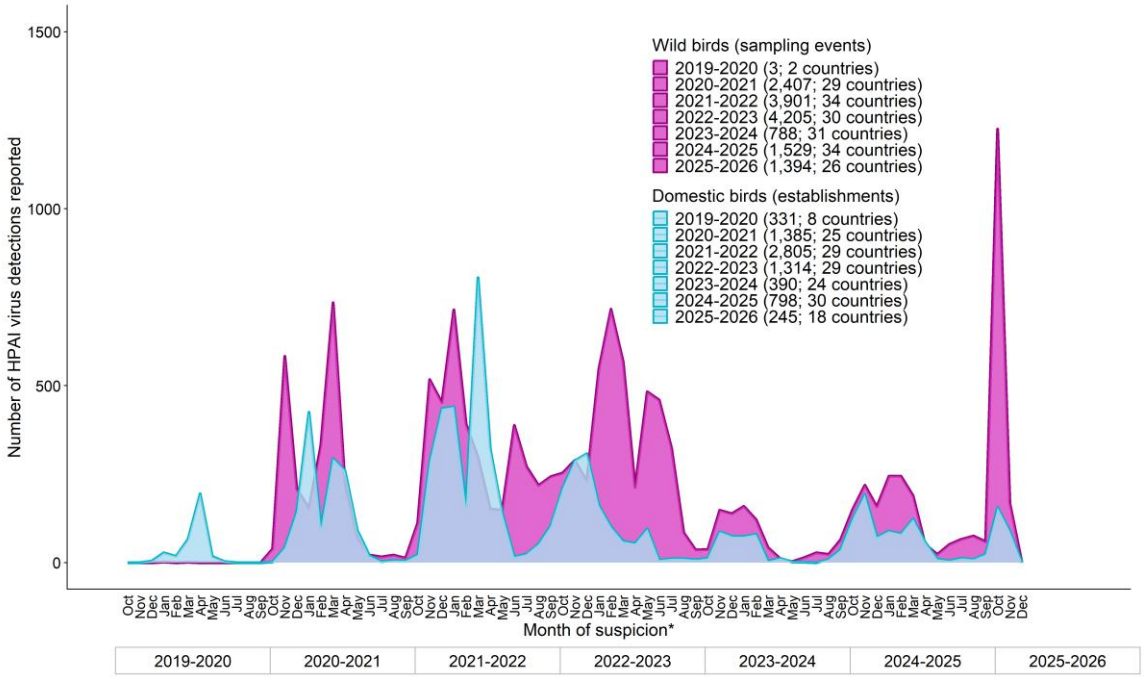
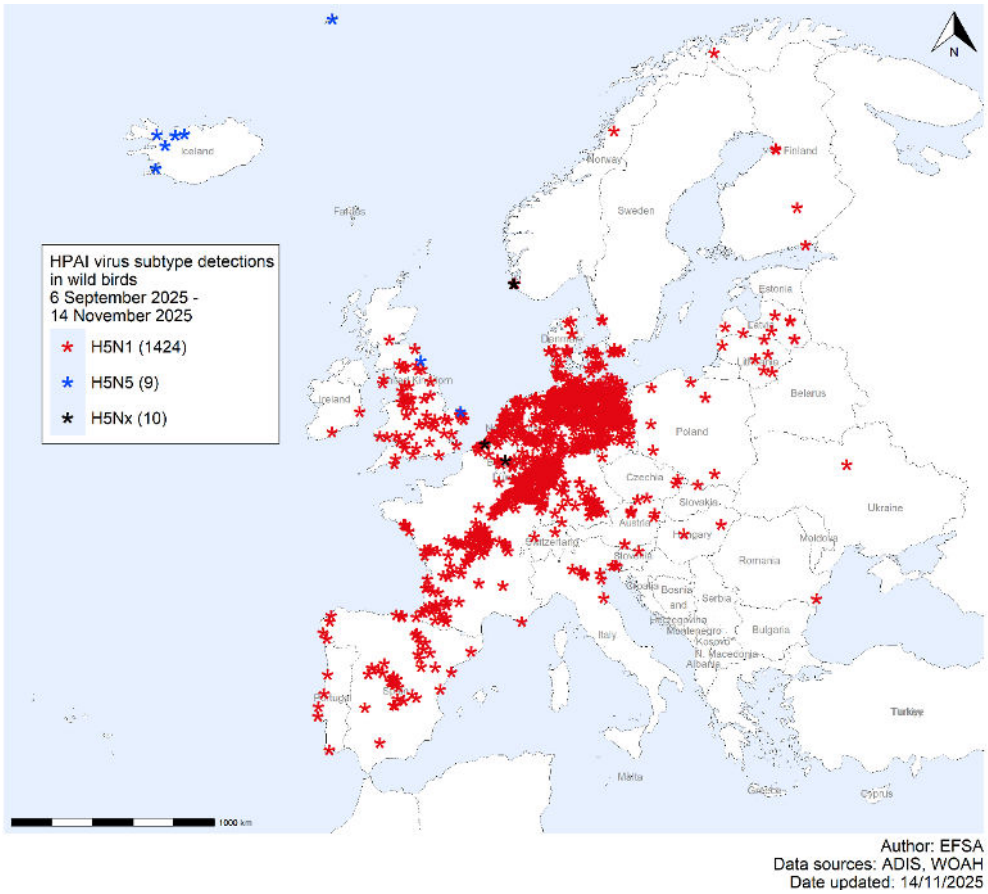


Figure 1: Distribution of the number of HPAI virus detections in wild birds (cumulative number n = 14,227) (pink) and establishments keeping domestic birds (cumulative n = 7,268) (blue) reported in Europe during seven epidemiological years by month of suspicion, from 1 October 2019 to 14 November 2025 (total n = 21,495).

[1] World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) (2025) – WAHIS periodical extraction of early warning outbreak data. Retrieved on 14 November 2025. Data extracted by EFSA. WOAH bears no responsibility for the integrity or accuracy of the data contained herein, not limited to: any deletion, manipulation, or reformatting of data that may have occurred beyond its control.

Such a sharp increase and high number of HPAI virus detections in wild birds is unprecedented at this time of the year and has not been observed since at least 2016. It is likely that the number of HPAI infections in wild birds found dead during the current reporting period is much higher than reported here, because not all recent HPAI virus detections have been reported yet, and because the number of reported HPAI virus detections in wild birds are an underrepresentation of the actual HPAI-associated mortality of wild birds.

At the same time, these HPAI virus detections in wild birds were widespread geographically, with reports from 26 countries in Europe: Germany (909), France (165), Netherlands (78), United Kingdom (excluding Northern Ireland) (60), Spain (48), Denmark (28), Austria (24), Belgium (22), Luxembourg (17), Italy (16), Norway (14), Latvia (9), Sweden (9), Iceland (7), Lithuania (6), Poland (6), Portugal (5), Finland (4), Hungary (3), Slovenia (3), Czechia (2), Ireland (2), Romania (2), Switzerland (2), Slovakia (1) and Ukraine (1) (Figure 2).



Notes: The unit reported is the number of HPAI virus detections at outbreak level and not the total number of HPAI virus detections in wild birds (as more than one species can be involved in one single HPAI virus detection reported).

*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and the International Court of Justice Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

Source: ADIS, EFSA and WOAH (data extraction carried out on 14 November 2025).

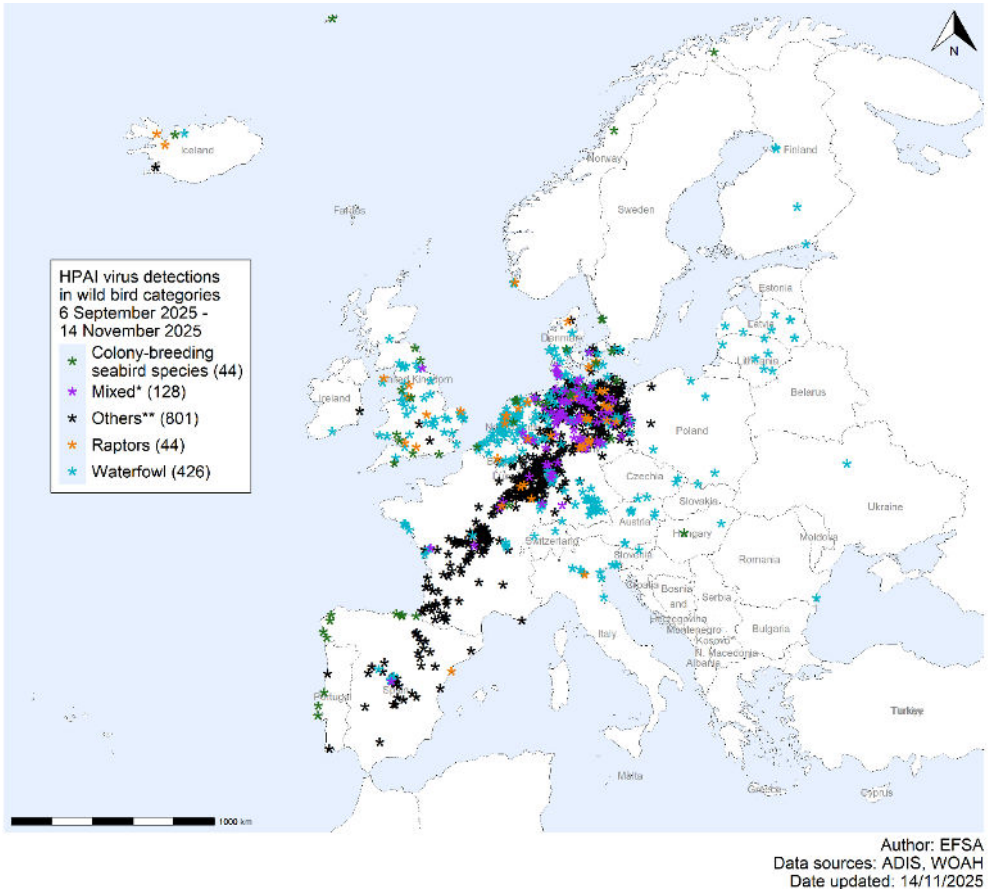
Figure 2: Geographic distribution, based on available geocoordinates, of HPAI virus detections in wild birds (1,443), reported by virus subtype, in Europe from 6 September to 14 November 2025.

In parallel, an increase in HPAI outbreaks in domestic birds (Figure 1) was observed in many countries, likely as a consequence of high levels of virus circulation in wild birds and high contamination of the environment. Observations from previous epidemiological years indicate a correlation of HPAI presence in waterfowl and incursions into domestic birds.

Overall, 1,424 HPAI virus detections in wild birds (99%) were reported as A(H5N1), nine as A(H5N5) and ten as A(H5Nx) (Figure 2). Based on genetic data available so far, most of the HPAI A(H5N1) viruses identified were a variant of the previously circulating EA-2024-DI.2 genotype, which has mutated sufficiently to form a new sub-lineage, namely EA-2024.DI.2.1. Phylogenetic analysis indicates that this sub-lineage was probably newly introduced into Europe during autumn migration from the east and rapidly spread westward.

The majority of HPAI A(H5) virus detections in wild birds were in waterfowl and common cranes. In particular, there were 426/1,443 (29.5%) detections in waterfowl (ducks, geese and swans) (Figure 3; Figure 4, upper panel), with mortality in mute swans reported in various parts of Europe, e.g. in the United Kingdom, France and Italy. In addition to the detections in dead birds, HPAI virus was identified in apparently healthy wild ducks through active surveillance activities (e.g. prevalence in apparently healthy mallards in the Netherlands was higher than ever before), indicating an even higher circulation of HPAI viruses in the wild bird population than the number of HPAI virus detections in wild birds found dead suggests. Moreover, the contemporaneous high prevalence of low pathogenic avian influenza (LPAI) and HPAI A(H5) viruses in wild waterfowl, as demonstrated by the SENTINEL Wild Birds project in recent weeks (https://zenodo.org/records/17696338), increases the chance of mixed infections potentially resulting in new reassortant viruses that play an important role in the rapid evolution of HPAI A(H5) viruses. In addition, there were 877/1,443 (61%) HPAI virus detections in which common cranes were involved: 115/128 (90%) among the 'Mixed' category (Figure 3; Figure 4, upper panel) and 762/801 (95%) among the 'Others' category (Figure 3; Figure 4, lower panel). Mass mortality of common cranes was first reported in Germany, where the first spillover to this species likely occurred. Subsequently, HPAI virus detections in common cranes were reported in France and Spain, following a southwest direction along their migratory route (Figure 4, lower panel).

There were fewer HPAI virus detections is the other wild bird categories: colony-breeding seabirds and raptors. There were 44/1,443 (30.5%) detections in colony-breeding seabirds, mainly gull species, and the same number (44/1,443; 30.5%) in raptors, mainly Eurasian buzzards (Figure 3; Figure 4, upper panel).



Notes: The unit reported is the number of HPAI virus detections in different wild bird categories at outbreak level and not the total number of HPAI virus detections in wild birds (as more than one species can be involved in one single HPAI virus detection reported).

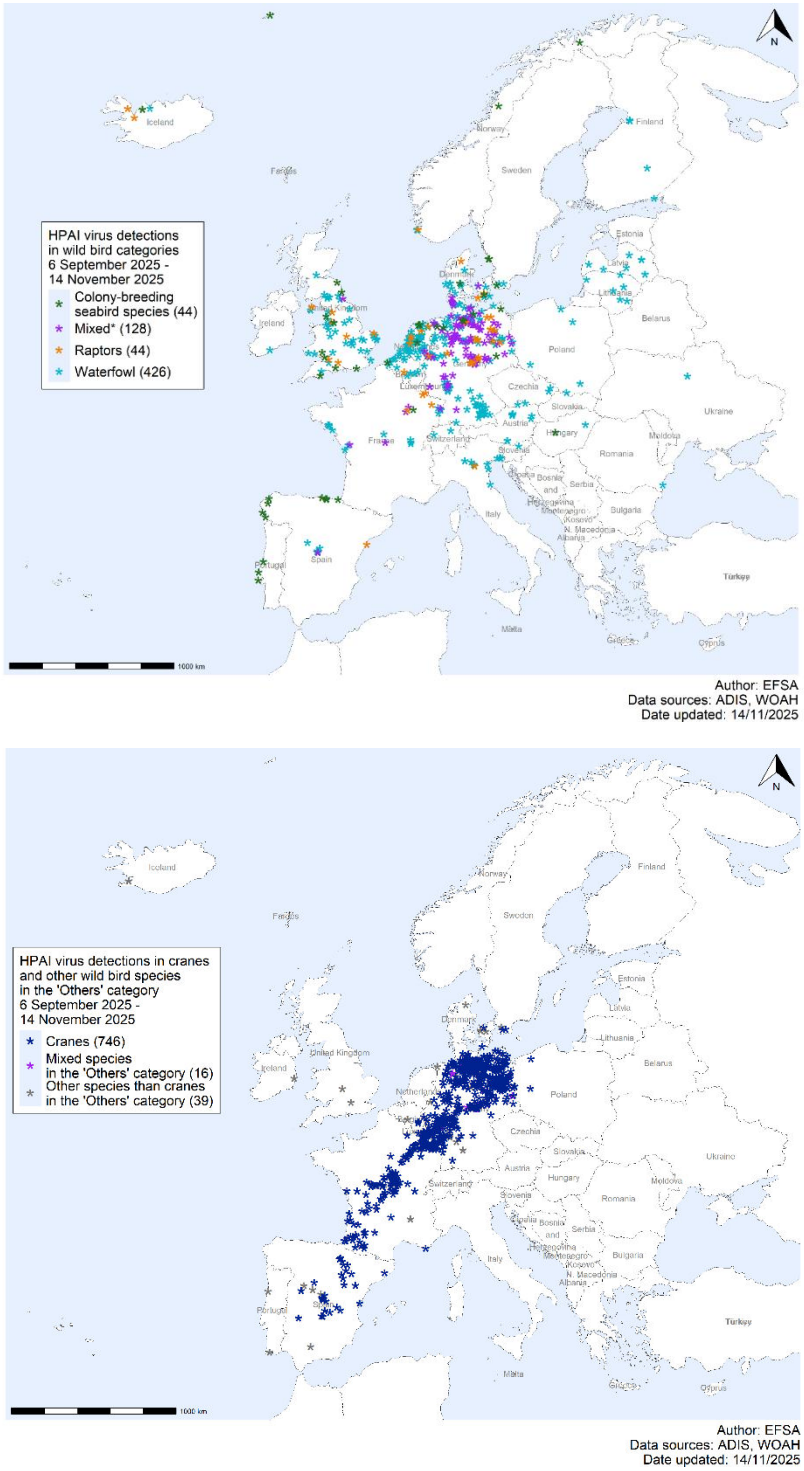
*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and the International Court of Justice Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

*'Mixed' refers to outbreaks in which multiple categories were involved.

**'Others' groups all other affected categories that are not indicated in the legend.

Source: ADIS, EFSA and WOAH (data extraction carried out on 14 November 2025).

Figure 3: Geographic distribution, based on available geocoordinates, of HPAI virus detections in different categories of wild birds in Europe, by species category, from 6 September to 14 November 2025 (total n = 1,443).



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*'Mixed' refers to outbreaks in which multiple categories were involved.

Source: ADIS, EFSA and WOAH (data extraction carried out on 14 November 2025).

Figure 4: Geographic distribution, based on available geocoordinates, of HPAI virus detections in all wild bird categories apart from 'Others' (upper panel, total n = 642), and in the 'Others' wild bird category only (lower panel, total n = 801), in Europe, from 6 September to 14 November 2025.

Based on the sharp increase, high level and wide geographical distribution of HPAI virus detections reported in wild birds during the current reporting period, it is expected that high levels of HPAI virus circulation in wild birds in Europe are likely to continue and to expand to other geographical areas in coming weeks as wild birds continue to migrate to their wintering areas in Europe and Africa. Unless additional measures are taken, this will likely lead to increased virus incursion into poultry and other captive bird establishments, as well as higher mortality of wild birds and mammals. Therefore, people and organisations involved with domestic or wild birds, or mammals, at risk for HPAI need to account for this unprecedented high level of HPAI virus circulation to prevent or reduce further virus spread. However, on no account should the concern about HPAI result in killing or disturbing wild birds or damaging their habitat. Not only would such measures be ineffective, they also contravene national and international agreements to protect wild birds and their habitats.

4. Recommendations

- Biosecurity measures in domestic bird establishments and compliance thereof should be optimised and maintained at high level both during the production cycle and culling operations.
- Housing orders for domestic birds are highly recommended in areas where HPAI is circulating in wild birds or mass mortality events in wild birds are reported.
- Surveillance in domestic birds should be enhanced to ensure early detection of infected poultry establishments.
- Surveillance activities in wild birds should be enhanced, particularly in wetland areas and migratory stopover sites in and outside Europe.
- EFSA's Bird Flu Radar may be consulted to monitor the probability of HPAI virus introduction in wild bird populations over space and time: https://app.bto.org/hpai
- Wildlife rescue/rehabilitation centers should be part of surveillance activities and implement adequate biosecurity to protect both animal and public health.
- Artificial feeding of wild birds, particularly of cranes and swans, should be avoided during high-risk periods to reduce the level of crowding of these species.
- Prompt removal of wild bird carcasses is indicated to reduce the level of virus contamination in the environment and subsequent possible infection of other wild and domestic birds and mammals.
- Unnecessary disturbance of wild bird populations (e.g. hunting activities, tourism, leisure activities, use of drones) should be avoided to limit further dispersal of the virus.