

PRESS RELEASE

From the associations Grus Extremadura, Ecologistas en Acción, Ecologistas Extremadura, ADENEX, ANSER, FONDENEX, AMUS, Sociedad Extremeña de Zoología, DEMA, and SEO/Birdlife, we issue the following statement:

Report on the impact of Avian Influenza (H5N1) along the Western migratory route of the Common Crane (*Grus grus*)

At the end of 2021, an outbreak of avian influenza caused by the H5N1 virus was detected, affecting thousands of Common Cranes (*Grus grus*) in congregation areas in the Hula Valley, northern Israel, where it was estimated that between 20,000 and 40,000 individuals of this species died along the eastern migratory route.

This autumn, with the start of migration, a very similar situation to that of 2021 has been detected along the western migratory route, including Germany, France, Spain, Portugal, and North Africa. The Common Crane (*Grus grus*) is a migratory bird that winters in France, the Iberian Peninsula, and, to a lesser extent, in North Africa. The highly pathogenic H5N1 virus spreads rapidly among gregarious birds, as is the case with this species.

In Germany, more than 10,000 dead cranes have been collected, testing positive for H5N1. Around 35,000 to 40,000 geese from a single farm have also been affected.

Along the migratory route, cases of infection and death among many individuals continue to occur. Currently, France reports daily cases, with more than a thousand crane carcasses collected in different areas, all testing positive for H5N1.

The virus has also reached Spain, and hundreds of dead birds have already been recorded during the two weeks of migration. In wetlands such as Gallocanta Lagoon (Aragón)—a key site where a large part of the western migrants pass—cranes have tested positive through PCR tests. Deaths have also been reported in rice fields and lagoons in Navarra, Cuenca, Salamanca, Toledo, Ávila, and Badajoz to date.

The number of individuals that could die in the coming weeks or months could be high—it is estimated that 10–15% of the wintering population could be affected in the best-case scenario. Therefore, the number of dead birds during this season could reach or exceed 10,000 individuals. Predation by foxes, raptors, and corvids, mainly, could facilitate the spread of the virus. Other waterbirds, such as herons, cormorants, and ducks, that share the same wetlands where cranes rest, could also be affected. The problem could therefore become widespread among wildlife, and even impact poultry and livestock farms.

For all these reasons—and because Extremadura hosts over 55% of the wintering population of Common Cranes (*Grus grus*)—we recommend that health authorities and people visiting these areas exercise extreme caution when encountering a dead bird: geolocate it and inform 112, SEPRONA, or the veterinary services of the Junta de Extremadura.

From Grus Extremadura, we can provide a list of the main roosting sites for cranes.

Dead birds should never be touched without gloves, and anyone handling them must wear PPE, gloves, FFP2 masks, and protective goggles when collecting and transporting them to analysis centers where the cause of death can be determined. The carcasses should be isolated as much as possible, keeping in mind that the virus can remain active for up to 48 hours in dead birds.

In the context of wildlife, mass treatment is not feasible; therefore, the main strategy must be prevention, surveillance, and control of the spread, to prevent infection in livestock farms and to avoid transmission to humans.

We advise health authorities to regularly send teams to these wetlands to locate and remove sick or injured birds as quickly as possible, to prevent the spread to other individuals.

We also recommend that alerts be issued to:

- Poultry and livestock farms, so they can take appropriate measures and prevent contact with wild birds at watering points or in open fields.
- Municipalities and landowners with crane roosting areas, so that they are informed and can report possible cases as soon as possible.
- Activate protocols and measures immediately, without waiting for laboratory confirmation, since the same individuals arriving here are part of the migratory population already dying along the western flyway.