

Tern deaths are ticking time bomb

Bird flu is currently causing mass deaths among shorebirds. Complete breeding colonies of the Sandwich tern, a Red List species, have been wiped out. Epidemiologist Armin Elbers of Wageningen Bioveterinary Research explains the (dismal) situation.

This is the first time shorebirds have been affected by bird flu. Could this be a virus mutation?

'We don't know of any specific mutation. These colonies were unlucky to have come into contact with the virus, which is still circulating. In the past, the Dutch bird flu season was from October to April, but in recent years the virus has hung around for longer. So in addition to resident birds, it is also affecting migrant birds that come to the Netherlands to breed.'

Can such mass deaths be prevented?

'That's very difficult. The most important preventive measure

is to stop poultry infections in certain parts of Southeast Asia such as China. A large proportion of the commercial poultry population there is vaccinated but they

'The world has not learned from the SARS and Covid pandemics'

still have large outbreaks because the vaccines don't give enough protection. The outbreaks aren't dealt with as thoroughly as here, so the virus regularly spreads to wild birds. In Asia, bird flu viruses have been circulating permanently among wild birds for some time.



The Texel tern colony at De Putten has almost been wiped out with the loss of more than 2500 birds • Photo René Pop Fotografie

The virus then spreads to the rest of the world via the breeding grounds in Siberia, for instance, where migratory birds from Asia and Europe come together.'

The time bomb keeps ticking?

'There is no sign of any improvement in the situation in Southeast Asia for now. That is worrying. It shows the world has not learned from the SARS and Covid

pandemics and there could easily be a new zoonosis. The only thing we can do in the Netherlands is to take biosecurity measures and try and keep the bird flu virus away from the poultry farms. Fortunately we are relatively good at this: the Netherlands has had about 50 infected poultry farms so far, compared with 1400 in France.' ME