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## Title

### Infection rate of *Borrelia burgdorferi* genospecies in human-biting *Ixodes ricinus* ticks: models for surveillance based on the French citizen science programme CiTIQUE

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## Abstract

In Europe, Lyme borreliosis is the most common vector-borne human disease, caused mainly by *Borrelia afzelii* and *Borrelia garinii*, two species of the *Borrelia burgdorferi* sensu lato (Bbsl) complex transmitted by the tick *Ixodes ricinus*. Accurately assessing the spatial risk of human exposure to these pathogens is essential for efficient public health surveillance. However conventional monitoring often struggles to produce geographically explicit, large-scale data that capture the heterogeneity of human exposure and its drivers. Focusing on continental France, we leveraged data from the French CiTIQUE citizen science programme to analyse spatial variation of Bbsl infection in georeferenced human-biting *I. ricinus* ticks and to model the relationship between Bbsl distribution and environmental, ecological, and anthropogenic factors. From 2017–2019, 1,891 ticks were analysed, of which 15% tested positive for Bbsl. The most prevalent genospecies were *B. afzelii* (7.2%) and *B. garinii* (4.2%). Infection rates varied spatially, with distinct distribution patterns across pathogen groups. Tick habitat suitability was the most consistent predictor for overall Bbsl infection probability, genospecies-specific models revealed the importance of their respective reservoir hosts: *B. afzelii* occurrence was positively associated with rodent species richness, whereas *B. garinii* was associated with Turridae species and showed potential traces of a dilution effect due to rodents. Our findings demonstrate the value of citizen science for complementing formal surveillance and provide the first geographically explicit, large-scale insights into Bbsl eco-epidemiology in France. This scalable approach offers an adaptable framework for monitoring vector-borne disease risk and guiding public health strategies.

## Importance

Lyme borreliosis, caused by *Borrelia burgdorferi* sensu lato, is the most common human vector-borne disease in Europe. Accurate assessment of spatial exposure risk is essential for effective public health surveillance and interventions. Using data from the French CiTIQUE citizen science program, we reveal pathogen-specific spatial patterns and identify the factors shaping them, at a geographic resolution not previously studied. Our findings demonstrate that citizen science can provide a scalable and adaptive framework for long-term surveillance of vector-borne disease risk, offering valuable insights to

**NOTE:** This preprint reports new research that has not been certified by peer review and should not be used to guide clinical practice.

## Introduction

Lyme borreliosis (Lb) is the most prevalent vector-borne human disease in Europe, with approximately 129,000 cases reported annually from national surveillance systems (1). However, as Lb is not a notifiable disease in most European countries, these reports probably underestimate the true incidence. In France, the routine surveillance system estimated approximately 39,000 cases in 2023, but recent analyses of data from a computerised physician decision support system suggest that the actual incidence may have been closer to 191,000 cases during the same year (2).

Lyme borreliosis is a zoonotic disease caused by pathogenic spirochetes of the *Borrelia burgdorferi* sensu lato (Bbsl) species complex, primarily transmitted by the hard tick *Ixodes ricinus* (3, 4). The risk of human infection with Bbsl varies markedly across landscapes, reflecting the heterogeneity of the ecological, environmental, and socio-economic factors that drive local tick population dynamics, Bbsl enzootic transmission cycles (5), and human exposure to infected ticks (6). Understanding and mapping these spatial variations is essential for monitoring the distribution of the infection risk, improving prevention strategies, and informing public health interventions.

In Europe, the two most common and clinically relevant Bbsl genospecies are *Borrelia afzelii* and *Borrelia garinii* (7). These species have distinct eco-epidemiological cycles: *B. afzelii* is predominantly maintained by small mammals, such as rodents, whereas *B. garinii* is mainly associated with avian reservoir hosts, particularly Turdidae, which include blackbirds (*Turdus merula*) (8). These ecological differences, together with other environmental and anthropogenic factors, contribute to the spatial heterogeneity in Bbsl and its genospecies distributions across Europe (Estrada-Pena 2018). Characterizing these patterns is of public health importance, as Bbsl genospecies differ in their clinical symptoms, with some, including *B. garinii*, being more frequently associated with neuroborreliosis (9).

Assessing the spatial probability of human Lb infection (Lb risk) typically relies on two key layers of information: acarological hazard, defined by the density and distribution of host-seeking Bbsl-infected ticks, and human exposure to infected ticks, which can be described by human incidence data (7, 10). They are essential to model the local states of the host-vector-pathogen system and predict human infection risk (11). These can be modelled using two complementary methodological approaches: mechanistic models, which explicitly represent the life and transmission dynamics of the host-vector-pathogen system (12), and statistical models (13), which describe the distribution of states of the host-vector-pathogen systems and their associations with environmental or socio-economic covariates (11, 14).

Statistical models can be used to focus only on a specific component of the system, such as the spatial distribution of Bbsl infection in ticks, rather than looking for a comprehensive view of all transmission processes, which is often necessary for mechanistic modelling. Focusing on a component facilitates the acquisition of diverse large-scale, spatially explicit, and up-to-date data, whereas all of the information required for appropriately estimating the parameters of mechanistic models would require more complete datasets, which are difficult and costly to obtain due to the complexity of the system.

Field methods, such as host sampling, provide insights into pathogen ecology but rarely capture the full diversity of reservoirs within a single study (e.g., Rataud et al., 2022 for birds in France). Standardised questing tick sampling offers a good proxy for tick density and pathogen hazard (see for instance Wongnak et al., 2022 and Perez et al., 2023). However, tick sampling is often not standardized at

country level, is limited to small areas or accessible environments and lacks information on human exposure. Human case reports from medical practitioners can provide broader spatial coverage of human risk of infection but are often limited by coarse spatial resolution (18).

To overcome these limitations, citizen science initiatives have emerged as promising tools to generate geographically informed, large-scale data on human-tick encounters. Data that would otherwise be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to obtain through conventional research means, while also fostering engagement and raising awareness (19). In particular, the collection of human-biting ticks is directly associated to human exposure (20), and can be used to study spatial variations in the probability of Bbsl genospecies infection in human-biting ticks.

France hosts diverse climates and environments (21) that support both tick populations and pathogen reservoirs (16, 17, 22). Previous studies on Bbsl distribution drivers in France were conducted at highly localised scales (23, 24), making extrapolation to the contiguous national level difficult. At the other end of the spectrum, European-scale models of Bbsl distribution have been developed (25), but these rely on literature data which are from France limited and at a very local scale, highlighting the need for extensive data and studies to better understand and predict Bbsl risk in this country suffering high Lyme borreliosis incidence (26).

Here, we used human-biting ticks collected through the CiTIQUE citizen-science programme between 2017 and 2019, to study the spatial distribution of Bbsl and its major genospecies across continental France. Combining statistical relative risk mapping, which quantifies the relative density of pathogen presence in relation to its absence, and generalised additive models (GAMs), we characterised the spatial heterogeneity of tick infection risks and identified environmental and ecological drivers shaping the distribution of Bbsl in human-biting ticks, providing a detailed, data-driven picture of Lb eco-epidemiology across continental France.

## Materials and methods

Our study aimed to investigate the spatial distribution in France of the infection rate of biting *Ixodes ricinus* ticks for bacteria of the *B. burgdorferi* sensu lato (Bbsl) species complex, and with a specific focus on its two most frequent genospecies, *B. afzelii* and *B. garinii*. To achieve this, we combined tick sampling and data collection, pathogen detection and identification, environmental covariates, and spatial statistical modelling.

### Tick acquisition

Ticks were collected through the CiTIQUE citizen science programme ([www.citique.fr](http://www.citique.fr)), launched in July 2017 as a collaboration between INRAE (French National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and Environment), the Laboratory of Excellence ARBRE, Anses (French Agency for Food, Environmental and Occupational Health & Safety), and the CPIE network (Permanent Centre for Environmental Initiatives). This programme aims to improve the understanding of the ecology of ticks and the tick-borne diseases they transmit, particularly Lyme Borreliosis, in order to support prevention efforts based on monitoring.

Citizens can participate in the CiTIQUE programme choosing among various levels of involvement, ranging from promoting the programme to actively contributing to research through activities in the open lab “Tous Chercheurs”, or by reporting tick bites and collecting and sending biting ticks to the

tick bank maintained by the national programme. Participants can report tick bites via a website, a mobile application or by using a paper form, providing the date and GPS location of the bite, along with basic personal information (age, sex, activity at the time of the bite, tick localisation on the body) and the ecological characteristics of the place where the tick bite occurred (e.g., forest, garden, meadow...). These data are linked to the tick samples upon reception. Between 2017 and 2020, more than 17,000 human tick-bite reports were submitted, with over 4,500 of these associated with one or more tick specimens.

## Pathogen identifications

A total of 2009 ticks, collected between 2017 to 2019 (inclusive), were randomly selected for DNA extraction, with the objective of including at least 150 human-biting ticks for each French NUTS-1 regions (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics - major socio-economic regions) except for Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (PAC) with 59 records. From this dataset, 1 891 *Ixodes ricinus* ticks were retained for the modelling analyses presented in this study, including 221 Adults, 1324 Nymphs and 110 Larvae, with 236 undetermined specimens. Details on the overall sample, selection procedure, and dataset structure can be found in Durand et al. (2025).

The tick stages and species were identified morphologically using identification keys by Pérez-Eid (2007) and Estrada-Pena et al. (2018). Species identification was confirmed using specific primers and probes on the microfluidic real-time PCR assay described below. Tick DNA was extracted and screened for pathogens using the method described in Melis et al. (2024). Briefly, tick DNA was extracted using NucleoSpin® Tissue kit (Macherey-Nagel, Germany), following manufacturer's instructions. Then, all samples underwent a pre-amplification step by PCR with the Preamp Master Mix (Standard BioTools, USA). High-throughput microfluidic real-time PCR was then performed on a BioMark™ real-time PCR system (Standard BioTools, USA), using the 48.48 Dynamic Array™ (Standard BioTools, USA) to detect pathogens and identify ticks. Only results for the different Bbsl genospecies are presented and used in this paper: *Borrelia afzelii*, *Borrelia garinii*, *Borrelia burgdorferi sensu stricto* (s.s.), *Borrelia valaisiana*, *Borrelia spielmanii*, *Borrelia bissettii*, *Borrelia lusitaniae*. This method cannot detect coinfections between different *Borrelia* genospecies. The sequences of the primers and probes are provided in Michelet et al. (2014).

## Covariates acquisition

To explain the spatial distribution patterns of Bbsl, we extracted covariates expected to be associated with the density of host-seeking *I. ricinus* ticks, the risk of Bbsl occurrence in ticks and persistence in the environment, and human exposure. Climatic variables were included given their influence on tick habitat favourability, and consequently, on Bbsl distribution (31). In addition, we included integrated habitat suitability variables for *I. ricinus* and host-related variables, as we expected a correlation between the distribution of Bbsl genospecies and the presence and density of their reservoir hosts. Non-competent hosts, such as roe-deer, were retained because of their role as tick population amplifiers (32). Since pathogen identification was performed on human-biting ticks, variables reflecting human exposure to ticks bites were considered, including human population density and human pressure variables, both of which influence the spatial risk of exposure to Lyme borreliosis.

In total, 103 covariates were extracted from various databases (Cf. Supplementary table 1). All covariates were extracted at the scale of continental France, using a 5km grid resolution. Given the risk of collinearity and overfitting, all 103 covariable could not be included simultaneously in the correlative

model, making a variable selection process necessary. They were by aggregating them to a grouped into seven categories based on their thematic relevance: bioclimatic, landcover/soil, human pressure, and hosts related, with the latter subdivided into deer, birds, rodents, and species richness.

Within each category, a hierarchical clustering on principal components (HCPC) was performed to explore the relationship between variables within each category and to identify clusters of associated variables. Clusters were defined by applying a partition cut corresponding to the highest relative loss of inertia. Inertia reflects the compactness of the clusters: lower inertia values indicate more cohesive and homogeneous clusters. Within each category-specific cluster, the most relevant covariates for explaining Bbsl distribution were selected, based on prior hypotheses and literature (Cf. Table 1).

For each tick, selected covariate values were extracted within a 5 km radius around the GPS coordinates to characterize the environment where the tick was encountered and the conditions potentially influencing pathogen acquisition. The weighted median of the covariate raster cell values, accounting for the proportion of each cell covered by the buffer, was retained (Cf. Table 1). All covariates were centred and reduced prior to further analyses. This spatial buffer approach accounts for both environmental heterogeneity and the limited precision of location information provided by citizens. To further limit collinearity between selected covariates from different categories, we assessed variance inflation factors (VIFs), using a cut-off value of 5, to remove collinear covariates (*car* package, version 3.1.3; Fox and Weisberg, 2018).

Table 1 Covariates selected for the models with their descriptions and associated hypotheses on their effects on Lyme borreliosis occurrence.

Type	Variable	Description	Resolution	Hypotheses	Source
Vectors	Habitat suitability index of <i>I. ricinus</i> in France	Habitat suitability index for <i>I. ricinus</i> throughout continental France multi-criteria decision analysis integrating climate, land cover, altitude and the density of wild ungulates.	100m	Area suitable for <i>Ixodes ricinus</i> may be area with high density of <i>I. ricinus</i> and as such Bbsl prevalence as <i>I. ricinus</i> is the main vector species for <i>B. burgdorferi</i> sensu lato (Bbsl) in France (3, 17)	(22)
	<i>I. ricinus</i> suitability	Proportion of suitable habitat for <i>I. ricinus</i>	1km	Area suitable for <i>I. ricinus</i> may be area with high density of <i>I. ricinus</i> and as such Bbsl prevalence <i>I. ricinus</i> is the main vector species for Bbsl in France (3, 17)	William Wint Mood project (undisclosed data)
Hosts	Deer	Sum of ensemble models describing the proportion of suitable habitat for roe deer, red deer, and fallow deer respectively within recorded distributions for Europe as identified from diverse source	1km	High cervid densities are hypothesised to increase overall tick populations without directly increasing Bbsl prevalence, as cervids are incompetent reservoirs. However, their role in supporting adult tick feeding indirectly sustains nymphal tick density, which contributes to Bbsl transmission dynamics in areas with abundant reservoir-competent hosts (34).	William Wint Mood project (undisclosed data)
	Mammal species richness	Mammal species richness including major taxonomic Orders (Cetartiodactyla, Carnivora, Primates, Eulipotyphla, Chiroptera, Rodentia) and marsupials	10km	High mammal species richness is hypothesised to elevate Bbsl prevalence in ticks by providing multiple competent hosts, which support ongoing infection cycles within tick populations (35). However, in highly diverse communities, the "dilution effect" might reduce overall infection rates by increasing the proportion of non-competent hosts (36).	Biodiversity mapping (37)
	Sheep and cattle density	Density of cattle and sheep per km <sup>2</sup> with weight estimated by Random Forest model with a dasymetric method	~10 km	Livestock grazing may affect negatively the abundance of small rodents and ticks (38). High livestock densities are correlated with areas of human activity, potentially leading to increased reports of biting ticks	Gridded livestock of the world database (39)

Type	Variable	Description	Resolution	Hypotheses	Source
	Index of rodent species richness	Predicted average number of rodent species in the field. Layer containing 5 rodent species: <i>Apodemus agrarius</i> , <i>Apodemus flavicollis</i> , <i>Myodes glareolus</i> , <i>Microtus arvensis</i> , <i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>	1km	Higher rodent species richness is hypothesised to elevate Bbsl. prevalence in ticks by increasing the diversity of reservoir hosts for genospecies such as <i>B. afzelii</i> . This enhances local transmission dynamics and may sustain infection cycles across various habitats (40).	(41)
	<i>Myodes glareolus</i> suitability map	Ensemble model describing the proportion of suitable habitat for <i>M. glareolus</i>	1km	<i>Myodes glareolus</i> is a good reservoir for Bbsl (42)	William Wint Mood project (undisclosed data)
	Anthro bird abundance	Layer containing the sum of the predicted full year abundance of 4 species which habitat extend to anthropised areas: <i>Sylvia atricapilla</i> , <i>Parus major</i> , <i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i> , <i>Ficedula albicollis</i>	3km	Birds that can thrive in anthropised habitat can be more susceptible to carry <i>B. garinii</i> (8).	<a href="#">E-birds</a>
	Turdidae abundance	Sum of abundance of birds belonging to the Turdidae family. Layer containing the sum of the predicted mean full year abundance of birds belonging to the Turdidae family: <i>Turdus iliacus</i> , <i>Turdus merula</i> , <i>Turdus philomelos</i> , <i>Turdus pilaris</i>	3km	Members of the Turdidae family are reported to be hosts of <i>B. garinii</i> (43) <i>Turdidae</i> bird abundance is hypothesised to increase Bbsl prevalence in ticks by serving as key reservoir hosts, particularly for bird-specific <i>Borrelia</i> genospecies as <i>B. garinii</i> . Their behaviour and high tick burden facilitate <i>Borrelia</i> transmission, increasing infection rates in tick populations in areas where these birds are common.	<a href="#">E-birds</a>
	Passeriformes species richness	Passeriformes species richness	10km	High passeriform species richness may be associated with more <i>B. garinii</i> prevalence (44)	Biodiversity mapping (37)

Type	Variable	Description	Resolution	Hypotheses	Source
Bioclimatic	Mean temperatures of the driest quarter	Average mean temperature for the years 1970-2000 of the driest quarter of the year. A quarter is a period of three months	1km	An association between temperature and <i>B. burgdorferi sensu lato</i> prevalence has been pointed out (25). Mean daily temperatures during the driest quarter might modify the prevalence of <i>Borrelia burgdorferi</i> in ticks by impacting tick survival (45), questing activity (16), and pathogen transmission (46). Optimal temperatures would lead to larger tick populations and longer active periods, leading to elevated <i>Borrelia</i> transmission.	Worldcilm 2 (47)
	Temperature seasonality	Standard deviation of the monthly mean temperatures for the years 1970-2000	1km	Temperature seasonality, especially shifts from colder to warmer periods, is hypothesised to increase <i>Bbsl</i> prevalence in ticks (25), potentially by synchronizing host-seeking behaviour with reservoir host availability (48), extending active seasons, and enabling differential pathogen genotype survival across varying climate (49).	Worldcilm 2 (47)
	Annual precipitation amount	Accumulated precipitation amounts over 1 year for the years 1970-2000	1km	Higher annual precipitation is hypothesised to increase <i>Borrelia burgdorferi sensu lato</i> prevalence in ticks by supporting optimal moisture conditions and vegetation that sustain tick populations and questing behaviour (50, 51), enhancing pathogen transmission across tick-host networks.	Worldcilm 2 (47)
	Mean precipitation amount of the driest quarter	Average mean precipitation for the years 1970-2000 of the driest quarter of the year. A quarter is a period of three months	1km	Humidity plays a vital role in tick activity and survival (52). Higher mean monthly precipitation in the driest quarter is hypothesised to increase <i>Borrelia burgdorferi sensu lato</i> prevalence by enhancing tick survival and activity during dry periods, thereby supporting sustained transmission cycles of <i>Borrelia</i> in regions prone to seasonal drought as in USA (53, 54).	Worldcilm 2 (47)

Type	Variable	Description	Resolution	Hypotheses	Source
Landcover	Shrubs cover fraction	Fractional cover (%) in a 100m pixel for the shrubland class	100m	Shrub cover fraction is hypothesised to positively influence <i>Borrelia burgdorferi sensu lato</i> , particularly <i>Borrelia garinii</i> as shrubs can provide varied resources to birds species in the form of food, nesting and shelter from predators (55). Additionally, shrub habitats can be associated with more species richness and in some cases abundance (56, 57).	Copernicus global land service 2019 (58)
	Deciduous broad leaf forest	(Discrete) forest type of layer for all pixels where the tree cover fraction exceeds 1% and matches the deciduous broad leaf forest	100m	Deciduous forests might act as critical habitats for maintaining and amplifying <i>Borrelia</i> transmission cycles due to favourable microclimatic conditions, high host diversity, and abundant tick populations (59, 60). However, these forests' exact role in amplifying or diluting <i>Borrelia</i> prevalence depends on the interplay between biodiversity, host availability, and habitat structure.	Copernicus global land service 2019 (58)
	Grass cover fraction	Fractional cover (%) in a 100m pixel for the herbaceous vegetation class	100m	Grass cover fraction is hypothesised to influence Bbsl prevalence in ticks by supporting tick habitats in ecotone areas and near woodland edges, though prevalence is generally lower than in forested regions. Grasslands with adjacent habitats for reservoir hosts may contribute to localised <i>Borrelia</i> transmission dynamics.	Copernicus global land service 2019 (58)

Type	Variable	Description	Resolution	Hypotheses	Source
	Crops cover fraction	Fractional cover (%) in a 100m pixel for the cropland class	100m	Crop cover fraction is hypothesised to influence Bbsl prevalence in ticks due to the lack of suitable habitats, reservoir host diversity, and management practices in agricultural landscapes. Edge habitats near croplands, however, may support occasional tick populations and pathogen transmission, though at reduced prevalence levels compared to forested areas (61).	Copernicus global land service 2019 (58)
	Built-up cover fraction	Fractional cover (%) in a 100m pixel for the built-up class	100m	Built-up areas can alter the natural habitat favourable for <i>I. ricinus</i> and Bbsl reservoir, though some connected greenspaces in urban environment may support enough wildlife such as rodents and birds to support Bbsl transmission cycle (62–64).	Copernicus global land service 2019 (58)
Human pressure	Travel times cities	Accessibility to high-density urban centres in 2015 as measured by pixel-level travel times for the optimal path between each pixel and its nearest city (that is, with the shortest journey time)	1km	Travel times to cities impact Bbsl prevalence in ticks, with higher prevalence expected in green spaces of rural areas due to greater connectivity and wildlife reservoirs. Ticks in peri-urban areas may maintain <i>Borrelia</i> transmission cycles, while urban areas further from rural habitats would exhibit on average lower prevalence due to reduced wildlife host and tick densities (65).	(66)
	Human population density	Gridded human population estimates	1km	Areas with high human population density may be areas with a higher probability of tick bite reports and thus tick samples than others.	<a href="#">Worldpop</a>

Type	Variable	Description	Resolution	Hypotheses	Source
	Human footprint	Annual dynamics of the global human footprint using eight variables that reflect various aspects of human pressures.	1km	Human footprint is an important predictor of vector borne disease occurrence (67). Higher human footprint index values are hypothesised to lower overall tick densities but can create isolated, fragmented habitats that maintain <i>Borrelia</i> prevalence within tick populations. Urban green spaces and edge habitats support localised <i>Borrelia</i> transmission due to the continued presence of tick hosts, even in human-modified landscapes.	(68)
	Soil biodiversity threats	The potential rather than the actual level of threat to soil organism using threats proxy (loss of above ground biodiversity, pollution and nutrient overloading, agricultural use, overgrazing, fire risk, soil erosion, land degradation, climate change)	~10km	Biotic interactions within soil regulate the structure and functioning of aboveground communities and contribute to the delivery of vital ecosystem services (69, 70). As soil-dwelling arthropods, ticks can benefit from soil biota and plants for their survival (71). We hypothesize that areas with high potential of threats to soil organism were less favourable to ticks and their hosts such as of rodents or soil dwelling birds that respectively benefit of the products of a rich soil , including seeds, fruits, and soil invertebrates.	ESDAC (72)

## Modelling

We used Generalised Additive Models (GAMs) to investigate the variation in Bbsl and Bbsl genospecies distribution, used as the response variable, in relation to the selected set of continuous explanatory covariates (see Table 1), while accounting for the spatial distribution of the observations. The general structure of the models was:

$$y_i \sim \text{Binom}(p_i) \text{ where } \text{logit}(p_i) = \beta_0 + f_n(x_{n,i}) + te(\text{long}_i, \text{lat}_i)$$

where  $f_n$  are spline functions applied to the explanatory covariates  $x_{n,i}$ , and  $te$  is a bivariate tensor product function accounting for the spatial structure based on the longitude and latitude.

Given the large number of 23 explanatory covariates, we applied a double penalty approach to control smoothness of the model terms (i.e., curves  $f_n$  and spatial surfaces  $te(\text{long}, \text{lat})$ ), and perform covariate selection (73). The first penalty controlled the complexity of smooth functions to prevent overfitting by ensuring that relationships remained smooth and interpretable. The second penalty shrunk entire uninformative smooth functions towards zero and effectively removing them from the model. The degree of smoothing was selected using the restricted maximum likelihood (REML) method, and the number of basis functions for smooth terms was limited to the default of 10 simple terms to avoid overfitting.

Three GAM specifications were fitted. The first model (M0) investigated factors associated with the presence of Bbsl across all observations, encompassing both presence ( $y_i = 1$ ) and absence ( $y_i = 0$ ) of Bbsl genospecies. In a second step, we focused the modelling process to locations where a *Borrelia* genospecies was detected, to identify factors associated with the infection probability of specific genospecies. Only *B. afzelii* and *B. garinii* had sufficient data for the whole territory, as they were the most frequent genospecies. Therefore, two separate GAMs were constructed (M1 for *B. afzelii* and M2 for *B. garinii*), using the subset of 285 individuals where a Bbsl genospecies was present. In these models, infection with *B. garinii* or *B. afzelii* (depending on the model) was coded as presence ( $y_i = 1$ ), while infection with another Bbsl genospecies was coded as absence ( $y_i = 0$ ).

The predicted infection rate of *B. afzelii* and *B. garinii* was calculated by the product of the predicted general bbsl presence (M0) with the species-specific relative probability (M1 or M2 depending on the genospecies).

Model fitting was performed using the *mgcv* package (v1.9.1; Wood, 2011). All final models were checked for residuals validity using the *Dharma* package. (v0.4.7 ; Hartig et al., 2024).

In addition to GAMs, we used spatial relative risk analysis to identify areas of elevated risk (i.e., “hot spots”) where tick infection by Bbsl and its genospecies was higher than expected, while accounting for underlying tick distribution. Spatial relative risk was estimated using the *sparr* package in R (v2.3.15; Davies et al., 2018). This method estimates the relative density of pathogen presence versus absence points. To account for our spatial sampling, we applied an adaptive bandwidth, allowing finer resolution in densely sampled regions and smoother estimates in sparsely sampled areas. The relative risk surface was estimated asymmetrically, meaning that different bandwidths were applied to the case and control point distributions, as recommended by Davies and Hazelton (2010). Edge effects were corrected using the default settings described by Diggle (1985). Statistical significance of elevated and diminished risk areas was assessed using asymptotic tolerance contours based on p-values, generated via the Monte Carlo method with 1,000 simulations.

All analyses were performed in R version 4.3.2 (79).

## Results

### Descriptive analysis

A total of 1,891 *I. ricinus* ticks were screened for pathogens, of which 291 (15%) were found to be infected with *Borrelia burgdorferi* sensu lato (Bbsl). Among these, *B. afzelii* and *B. garinii* were the most prevalent genospecies, infecting 136 (7.2%) and 80 (4.2%) individual ticks, respectively. Infections with other genospecies were less common, with 37 ticks (2%) infected with *B. valaisiana*, 25 (1.3%) with *B. burgdorferi* ss, 8 (0.4%) with *B. spielmanii*, and 5 (0.3%) with *B. lusitanae*. No ticks were found to be infected with *B. bissettii*.

*I. ricinus* ticks were collected across the continental French territory, and Bbsl was detected in all NUTS-1 regions. The distribution of infected ticks, however, was uneven: more infected samples relative to the sampling effort were reported in the eastern and central regions, particularly in Grand Est (GES) with the highest infection rate whereas southern regions such as Occitanie (OCC) and Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (PAC) had fewer infected samples (Figure 1).

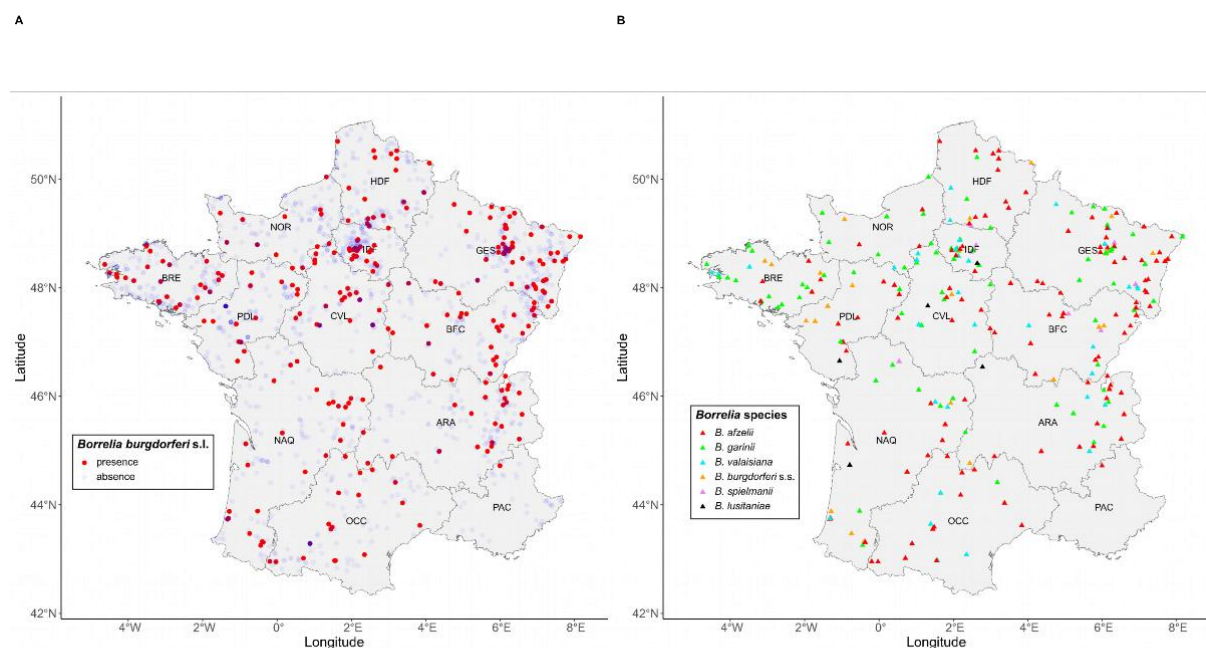


Figure 1 Original location of the 1891 human-biting ticks sent for pathogen identification across the French territory, and associated infection status. Left panel: Red points correspond to sample locations where one *Borrelia* was identified. Blue points mark sample locations where no *Borrelia* was detected. Darker blue shading represents overlapping points due to multiple reports from the same area. Right panel: detailed description of the borrelia genospecies found at each presence location. Each colour indicates the presence of a specific *Borrelia burgdorferi* genospecies. Major socio-economic (NUTS-1) are as follow : ARA: Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes; BFC: Bourgogne-Franche-Comté; BRE: Bretagne, CVL: Centre-Val de Loire; GES: Grand-Est; HDF: Haut-de-France; IDF: Ile-de-France; NOR: Normandie; NAQ: Nouvelle-Aquitaine; OCC: Occitanie; PDL: Pays-de-la-Loire; PAC: Provence Alpes Côte d'Azur.

## Factors associated with Bbsl distribution

The results of the first GAM model (M0) , which investigated factors associated with Bbsl infection rate, are presented in Figure 2. After penalisation, only two variables were retained as significant predictors: the *I. ricinus* habitat suitability index and the grass cover fraction (Table 1). The *I. ricinus* suitability index showed a positive association with Bbsl infection rate (p-value = 0.007), indicating that higher habitat suitability values correspond to an increased probability of Bbsl infection, with this relationship plateauing at higher suitability values (Figure 2D). Bbsl infection rate exhibited a convex relationship with grass cover fraction (p-value = 0.026). At lower grass cover values, an initial increase was associated with a decline in Bbsl infection rate, reaching a minimum, followed by a slight increase at higher grass cover values. However, this latter trend was characterised by greater uncertainty, likely due to the limited number of observations in areas with high grass cover (Figure 2E).

The relative risk map (Figure 2A) highlights significant low-risk areas (blue contours), which include the Bretagne (BRE) and Normandie (NOR) regions in northwestern France, and significant high-risk areas (red contours), concentrated in the Grand Est (GES), Bourgogne-Franche-Comté (BFC), and Centre-Val de Loire (CVL) regions in the east and centre of the country. These high-risk regions correspond to areas with higher Bbsl infection rate as predicted by the GAM model (Figure 2B). Conversely, Bretagne (BRE) and Normandie (NOR) exhibited lower predicted infection rates, consistently with the low-risk areas identified by the relative risk analysis. Additional regions, particularly in the southwest and Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes (ARA), also displayed elevated Bbsl infection rates according to the GAM model predictions (Figure 2B). The associated uncertainty in infection rate predictions was highest in the Rhône Valley (southeastern France) and the Alpine regions (eastern France) where sample density was lower and environmental heterogeneity may be greater (Figure 2C).

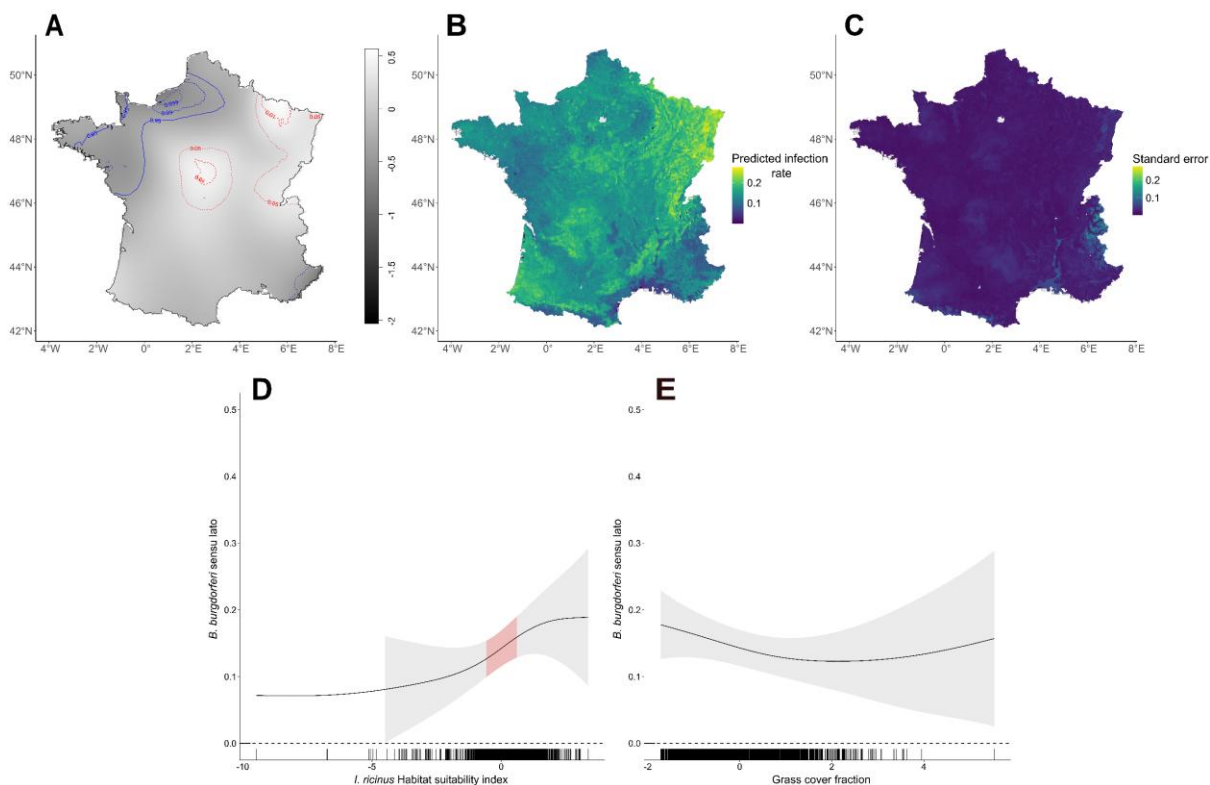


Figure 2 Model predictions for *Borrelia burgdorferi sensu lato* (Bbsl) infection rate in *Ixodes ricinus* tick across France. A: Bbsl relative risk surface using the Bbsl presence and absence data. Significance contours represent lower risk areas in blue and higher risk areas in red. B: Predicted infection rate of Bbsl based on the MO GAM, with values ranging from low (dark blue) to high (yellow-green) infection rate. C: Corresponding standard error of the GAM predictions, with lower uncertainty indicated in dark blue and higher uncertainty in yellow. D-E: Each plot demonstrates the marginal effects of *I. ricinus* habitat suitability index (D) and grass cover fraction (E) on Bbsl predicted infection rate, with 95 % confidence intervals shown in shaded areas while values for which the slope is significantly different from zero are highlighted in red. Black ticks along the x-axis represent observed values of the covariables.

### Factors associated with *Borrelia afzelii* distribution

The results of the M1 GAM model assessing factors associated with *B. afzelii* distribution are presented in Figure 3. This model focused on sites where a *Borrelia* genospecies was detected, with the presence probability of *B. afzelii* (conditional on overall *Borrelia* presence) as the response variable. Therefore, the model highlights determinants of the variability in relative incidence of *B. afzelii* among all *Borrelia* occurrences. Four covariates were identified as significant predictors: cattle density, *I. ricinus* habitat suitability index, rodent species richness, and grass cover fraction.

Cattle density was negatively associated with *B. afzelii* presence probability (p-value = 0.035), although uncertainty increased at higher cattle densities (Figure 3D). The relationship between *B. afzelii* presence (D) and *I. ricinus* habitat suitability index was convex (p-value = 0.009), with a decline in presence probability observed at lower suitability values, reaching a minimum around 0 on the x-axis, followed by an increase at higher suitability values. However, both trends were accompanied by high uncertainty (Figure 3E). A concave relationship was observed with rodent species richness (p-value = 0.015), peaking around a richness value of one, before slightly declining. Uncertainty was highest at both low and high richness values (Figure 3F). Grass cover fraction also showed a concave

relationship (p-value =0.041), with *B. afzelii* presence probability increasing to a maximum at intermediate grass cover values (around 2 on the x-axis), followed by a slight decline and higher uncertainty at greater grass cover fractions (Figure 3G).

The relative risk map (Figure 3A) revealed that areas of significant low (blue contours) and high (red contours) *B. afzelii* risk broadly overlapped with those identified for Bbsl. However, an additional high-risk area was detected in the northern part of the Occitanie (OCC) region. Predictions from the GAM aligned with the relative risk surface, with the highest *B. afzelii* infection rates in northeastern regions, including GES, BFC and CVL Grand Est, Bourgogne-Franche-Comté, and Centre-Val de Loire. High infection risk was also predicted in regions such as Nouvelle-Aquitaine and Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes (Figure 3B). Prediction uncertainty was greatest in the Rhône Valley (southeastern France), the Alps (eastern France), and the eastern part of the Grand Est region, which also correspond to areas of high predicted infection rates (Figure 3C).

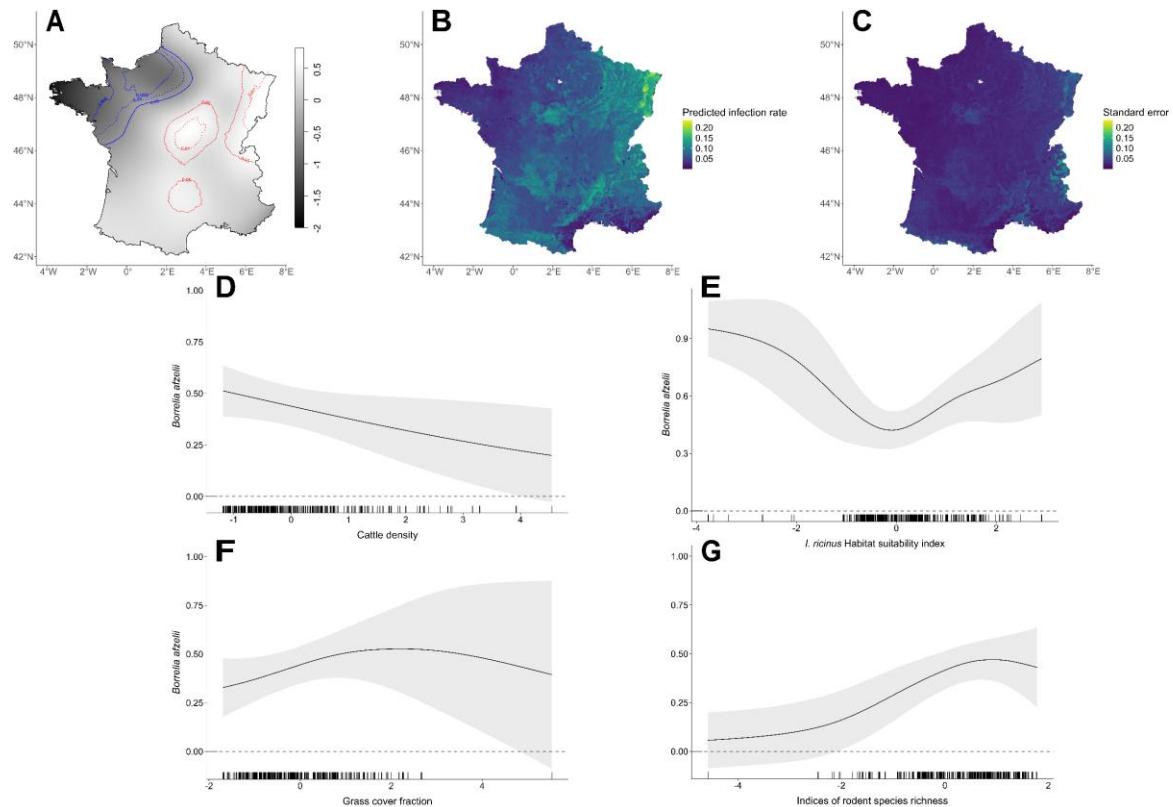


Figure 3 Model predictions for *Borrelia afzelii* infection rate in *Ixodes ricinus* tick across France. A: *B. afzelii* relative risk surface using the *B. afzelii* presence and absence data. Significance contours represent lower risk areas in blue and higher risk areas in red. B: Predicted infection rate of *B. afzelii* based on the product of the predicted general *Borrelia burgdorferi sensu lato* (Bbsl) presence (M0) with the *B. afzelii* relative probability knowing presence (M1). Infection rate values are ranging from low (dark blue) to high (yellow-green) infection rate. C: Corresponding standard error of the predicted infection rate of *B. afzelii* based on the product of M0 and M1, with lower uncertainty indicated in dark blue and higher uncertainty in yellow. D-G: Each plot demonstrates the marginal effects of the model on the relative probability of having *B. afzelii* knowing Bbsl presence (M1), with Cattle density (D), *I. ricinus* habitat suitability index (E), indices of rodent species richness (F) and grass cover fraction (G). 95 % confidence intervals are shown in shaded areas while values for which the slope is significantly different from zero are highlighted in red. Black ticks along the x-axis represent observed values of the covariables.

### Factors associated with *Borrelia garinii* distribution

The predicted infection rate of *B. afzelii* and *B. garinii* was calculated by the product of the predicted general bbsl presence (M0) with the species-specific relative probability (M1 or M2 depending on the genospecies)

The results of the M2 GAM assessing factors associated with *B. garinii* distribution are presented in Figure 4. This model, again restricted to locations where *Borrelia* was detected, used the presence probability of *B. garinii* (conditional on *Borrelia* presence) as the response variable. Therefore, the model highlights determinants of the variability in relative incidence of *B. garinii* among all *Borrelia* occurrences. Two covariates were identified as significant predictors: rodent species richness and *Turdidae* abundance.

Rodent species richness showed a significant negative association with *B. garinii* presence probability (p-value = 0.002), with increased uncertainty at lower values along the x-axis (Figure 4D). In contrast,

Turdidae abundance had a significant positive effect on *B. garinii* presence probability (p-value = 0.049), although uncertainty increased markedly at higher abundance values (Figure 4E).

The relative risk map of *B. garinii* (Figure 4A) revealed localised high-risk areas (red contours) in the western part of the Bretagne BRE region and the western part of the Centre-Val de Loire CVL region. Low-risk areas (blue contours) were concentrated in the southwestern regions, including Occitanie and Nouvelle-Aquitaine (Figure 4A). GAM model predictions (Figure 4B) were consistent with the relative risk map, showing the highest *B. garinii* infection probabilities in the identified high-risk areas. Additional suitable areas for *B. garinii* were predicted in northwestern France, particularly in Bretagne BRE, Normandie NOR, and Hauts-de-France HDF, as well as in the northern parts of Nouvelle-Aquitaine NAQ and Centre-Val de Loire CVL. Uncertainty associated with the infection probability predictions was generally low but increased in areas with the highest predicted infection probability, notably in the high-risk zones highlighted on the map (Figure 4C).

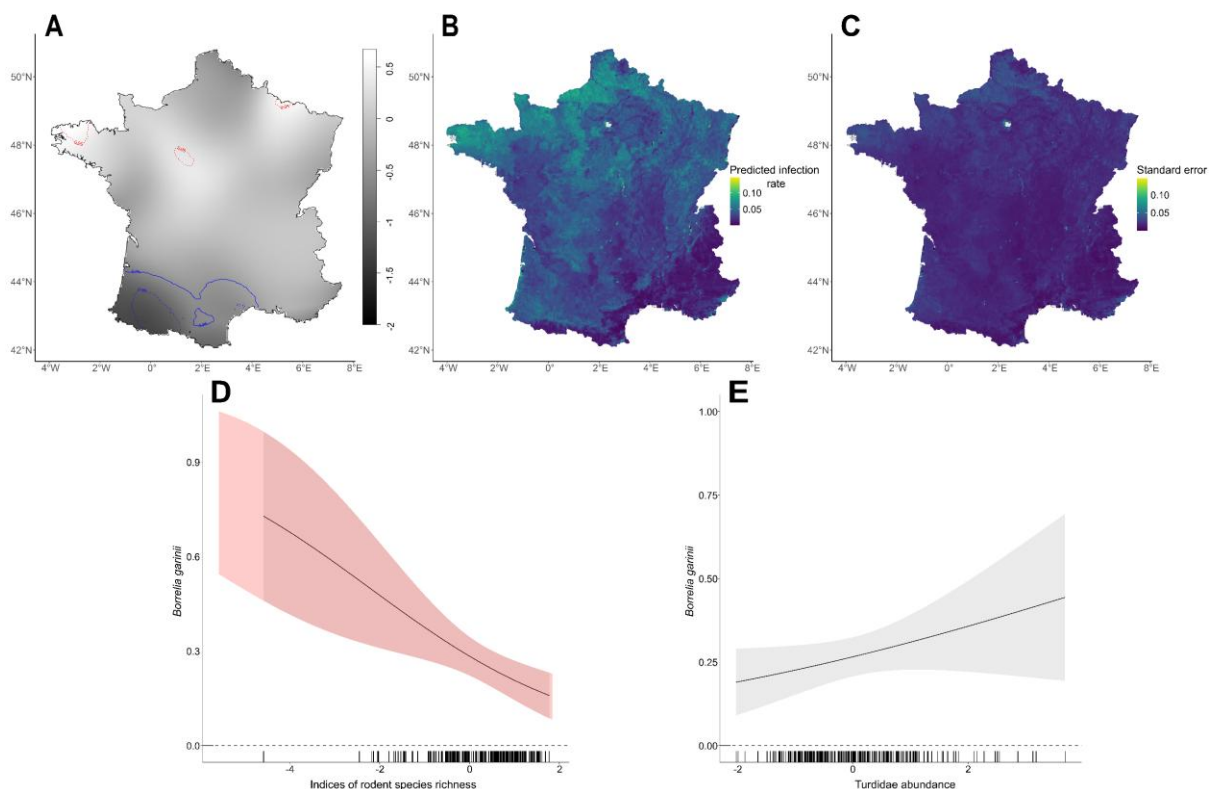


Figure 4 Model predictions for *Borrelia garinii* infection rate in *Ixodes ricinus* tick across France. A: *B. garinii* relative risk surface using the *B. garinii* presence and absence data. Significance contours represent lower risk areas in blue and higher risk areas in red. B: Predicted infection rate of *B. garinii* based on the product of the predicted general *Borrelia burgdorferi sensu lato* (Bbsl) presence (M0) with the *B. garinii* relative probability knowing presence (M2). Infection rate values are ranging from low (dark blue) to high (yellow-green) prevalence. C: Corresponding standard error of the predicted infection rate of *B. garinii* based on the product of M0 and M2, with lower uncertainty indicated in dark blue and higher uncertainty in yellow. D-F: Each plot shows the marginal effects of the model on the relative probability of having *B. garinii* knowing Bbsl presence (M2) with indices of rodent species richness (D), *Turdidae* abundance (E) on the probability of having *B. garinii* knowing Bbsl presence. 95 % confidence intervals are shown in shaded areas while values for which the slope is significantly different from zero are highlighted in red. Black ticks along the x-axis represent observed values of the covariables.

## Discussion

Understanding the spatial distribution of Lyme borreliosis (Lb) risk for human remains a major public health challenge, particularly in temperate areas of Europe. Beyond estimating overall infection rate in *Ixodes ricinus*, identifying locations and environmental factors that drive infection risk is essential to inform prevention strategies. In France, diverse climates, landscapes, and host communities generate spatial heterogeneity in both tick abundance and pathogen circulation. However, most existing studies either rely on: i) localised but poorly generalisable standardised flagging campaigns, which provide precise prevalence estimates but limited spatial coverage; or ii) broad-scale human incidence data, which often lack the spatial precision required to infer ecological and epidemiological mechanisms.

In this study, we addressed these limitations by leveraging crowdsourced data from the CiTIQUE program, which provides geographically explicit, large-scale information, and biological material on human exposure to tick bites. For the first time in France, we combined relative risk mapping with generalised additive models (GAMs) to explore how environmental, ecological, and anthropogenic factors are associated with the distribution of *Borrelia burgdorferi* sensu lato (Bbsl) and its two most common and medically relevant genospecies, *B. afzelii* and *B. garinii*. This dual approach provided different yet complementary insights: while relative risk mapping highlighted spatial heterogeneity and significant variations in tick infection risk, GAMs identified environmental drivers associated with pathogen distribution across continental France.

### *Spatial heterogeneity of the tick infection rates*

*B. afzelii* and *B. garinii* were the most prevalent genospecies in the biting ticks which is consistent with the dominant genospecies and their relative frequencies reported across European countries, primarily based on questing tick studies (7, 80). However, the pathogen detection method only identified the dominant genospecies in co-infected ticks, potentially underestimating the prevalence of other species. For example, if *B. afzelii* dominates in co-infected ticks, it may have been disproportionately reported in areas with high tick abundance and higher frequencies of co-infection.

Previous work at the European scale (25), using a rough resolution (around 28 km × 28 km per cell) reported high prevalence of *B. afzelii* across France, particularly in eastern Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes. In contrast, our analyses at a finer resolution (5km x5km per cells) revealed a more heterogeneous pattern, with higher infection rates in eastern and central regions (Grand Est, Bourgogne-Franche-Comté, Centre-Val de Loire) and lower rates in western, northern, and southern regions (Bretagne, Normandie, Occitanie). For *B. garinii*, they found very high prevalence in these western, southern and northern regions, whereas our analyses revealed a more even distribution nationwide, while still confirming higher infection rates in the western and northern part. Our approach, based on finer-scale data, provides the first geographically explicit, large-scale resource to refine Bbsl distribution models across continental France, overcoming the scarcity of data limitations for the territory.

### *Influence of habitats and hosts on tick infection rates*

Our GAMs highlighted distinct environmental and ecological factors associated with the distribution of Bbsl and its two main genospecies, *B. afzelii* and *B. garinii*. At the overall Bbsl level, infection probability was positively associated with the *I. ricinus* habitat suitability index, a composite indicator derived from a multi-criteria analysis integrating climate, altitude, land cover and wild ungulates density, which are factors known to influence tick abundance (22). This result suggests that, in areas where human exposure occurs, favourable environments for ticks also promote higher Bbsl circulation and prevalence. This finding aligns with theoretical models predicting a positive, yet non-linear, relationship between tick density and pathogen prevalence, modulated by host community composition, including the presence of non-competent host for Bbsl transmission (81, 82).

Observational studies in comparable ecological settings are consistent with these results. In Belgium, tick density was identified as a key driver of Bbsl-infected nymph density, with limited evidence for dilution effects from non-competent hosts (83). Similarly, in the Netherlands, increased ungulate abundance led to higher tick density and a non-linear, accelerating rise in the density of Bbsl-infected nymphs, without clear evidence for dilution effects attributable to ungulates (84). Long-term monitoring in southern England further showed that habitats favourable to ticks, such as structurally diverse forests and woodland edges, sustain higher densities of both questing and Bbsl-infected *I. ricinus* nymphs (85).

At the genospecies level, habitat and host associations differed, reflecting the distinct ecological characteristics of *B. afzelii* and *B. garinii* (8, 86, 87). *Borrelia garinii* infection probability was positively associated with Turdidae bird abundance, consistent with its known reliance on avian hosts (88, 89), and negatively associated with rodent species richness, possibly reflecting a dilution effect from these non-specific host (84). Conversely, *B. afzelii* infection probability was positively associated with rodent richness, consistent with the role of small mammals as primary reservoirs for this genospecies (40). Rodent richness was also positively associated with the presence of Bbsl, likely reflecting both the dominance of *B. afzelii* in our dataset and the association of several minor Bbsl genospecies, as *B. burgdorferi sensu stricto*, with small mammal hosts (90). However these results on *B. afzelii* could be either because *B. afzelii* is very dominant especially in the core areas of *Borrelia* presence or it could be a consequence of a method bias toward *B. afzelii* in co infected ticks, linking its presence with areas of high infection rate.

Grass cover exhibited a non-linear association with Bbsl and *B. afzelii* infection probabilities, with a negative trend across most observed values. Elevated risk was observed at low grass cover levels, characteristic of forest, fragmented woodlands, and associated ecotones, including adjacent private gardens, which are all known to favour both tick and *Borrelia* presence (91). In contrast, extensive grass cover, typical of open meadows or pastures, was associated with lower infection probabilities, likely due to reduced tick survival in open, hot, and dry environments, and a lower density of competent hosts (92, 93).

### *Present limitations and perspectives offered by the continuous engagement of citizens*

Our modelling approach prioritised interpretability using a parsimonious set of covariates, selected to limit collinearity and capture the main ecological drivers, while accounting for the current sampling structure. Although additional covariates, such as vegetation indices (25), forest structural complexity (94) or soil properties (95), have been highlighted in previous studies, our sampling resolution likely limits the reliable detection of such fine-scale environmental effects.

Sampling constraints also restricted our capacity to investigate several relevant aspects of Bbsl infection risk, including variation across tick developmental stages, seasonal and inter-annual dynamics, as well as infection rates across specific environmental contexts. Despite efforts to mitigate sampling bias, by analysing a minimum of 150 ticks per region, a substantial proportion of the analysed samples originated from densely populated areas, leaving gaps in remote and sparsely populated regions in France. A further challenge in estimating Lyme disease risk is the limited understanding of the components leading host seeking infected Bbsl tick to human populations (96). In this regard, our analysis on human-biting ticks provides valuable insights (97). However, a more precise assessment of risk would require comparison with infection rates in questing ticks, to disentangle ecological hazard from human exposure. Finally, integrating CiTIQUE tick-bite reports could provide complementary information on the socio-behavioral and ecological factors shaping human exposure thereby improving risk mapping (98).

Despite these limitations, our study demonstrates the substantial potential of citizen-generated data for monitoring tick-borne pathogen distribution at a national scale. The ticks analysed here represent approximately 40 % of all human-biting ticks submitted to CiTIQUE along with a tick-bite report during the study period. Since its inception, the CiTIQUE programme has grown considerably, with over 60,000 human and animal-biting ticks currently stored in the national tick bank. This continuously expanding resource offers unique opportunities to refine surveillance and research on tick-borne diseases in France.

As data and biting ticks continues to be collected, targeted sub-sampling strategies could be implemented to improve spatial representativeness, assess temporal dynamics, compare infection rates across tick developmental stages, and address refined ecological questions regarding Bbsl infection risk. Such approaches will contribute to a more detailed understanding of the eco-epidemiology of Bbsl genospecies and other tick-borne pathogens in human-biting ticks.

In the context of global environmental change and potential shifts in ticks and tick-borne pathogen distributions, the continued development of CiTIQUE provides a scalable, adaptable, citizen-driven tool to support large scale surveillance, environmental risk assessment, and public health preparedness.

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## Data availability

The dataset will be made publicly available through the Recherche Data Gouv repository (<https://entrepot.recherche.data.gouv.fr>) upon publication of this study.

## Ethics approval

Approval of the ethics committee was not required since participation in sending ticks was voluntary and the short questionnaire online was anonymous (no identification possible). The participants are given information about the study on the website of the project.

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