

## A6.10 Gannet *Morus bassanus* (breeding)

### 1. Status in UK

Biological status		Legal status		Conservation status	
Breeding	✓	Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981	General Protection	Species of European Conservation Concern	SPEC 2 Unfavourable conservation status (localised) and concentrated in Europe
Migratory	✓	Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985	General Protection	(UK) Species of Conservation Importance	Table 4
Wintering	✓	EC Birds Directive 1979	Migratory	All-Ireland Vertebrate Red Data Book	

### 2. Population data

	Population sizes (pairs)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
<b>GB</b>	201,000	2,010	197,127 (98% of GB population)
<b>Ireland<sup>1</sup></b>			
<b>Biogeographic population</b>	263,000	2,630	197,127 (75% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: Stone et al. 1997

Biogeographic population source: Lloyd et al. 1991

### 3. Distribution

The Gannet's global range is restricted to the North Atlantic where it breeds in very large numbers contained in just a few major colonies at northern latitudes (Fisher & Vevers 1943-44; Nelson 1978). Whilst there are some colonies on the coast of Newfoundland and Quebec (amounting to about 39,700 pairs) most of the population (*i.e.* about 223,500 pairs) breed in the eastern Atlantic (Lloyd *et al.* 1991). The species is monotypic.

Within the East Atlantic, greatest numbers breed in the UK. Between 60% and 70% of the world population of Gannets nest around the British coastline with other colonies in Ireland, France, Norway, Faeroes, and Iceland.

Most British Gannets nest on Scottish offshore islands (Murray & Wanless 1986, 1997), with one colony in England (Bempton on the east coast) and one off south-west Wales (Grassholm). Gannets also nest in the Channel Islands (Lloyd *et al.* 1991), though in relatively small numbers.

<sup>1</sup> Although occurring in the Republic of Ireland, there are no Gannetries in Northern Ireland.

Gannets are present at their colonies from March to September and during this period they fish in waters relatively close to the colonies (Stone *et al.* 1995). At other times of the year, the species is pelagic, occurring not only in inshore European waters – generally south of their summer range around British and Irish coasts – but also more widely in the North Atlantic as far south as West Africa (Stone *et al.* 1995).

#### **4. Population structure and trends**

Gannet colonies have been censused accurately for nearly a century. During that time, the population has consistently increased in size and new colonies have been founded (Fisher & Vevers 1943-44). These trends apply both within Britain and elsewhere in the species' range. In the early 1900s, there were only seven British Gannetries and the population was thought to be around 50,000 pairs (Gurney 1913). Now, there are 14 colonies holding around four times the number of birds. The increase is continuing with a current rate of growth of about 2.4% per annum (Murray & Wanless 1997).

The initial increase in Gannet numbers was attributed to the introduction of bird protection laws. Since then, it seems likely to have been a consequence of the provision of food by man, since Gannets are vigorous competitors for discarded fish around trawlers (Hudson & Furness 1988; Camphuysen *et al.* 1995). They have probably also taken advantage of increased sandeel stocks in the North Sea.

#### **5. Protection measures for population in UK**

##### **SPA suite**

In the breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Gannet supports an average of 197,127 pairs. This amounts to over 98% of the British breeding population and about 75% of the international population. The species does not breed in Northern Ireland. This total is contained within ten sites (Table 6.10.1) for which Gannet has been listed as a qualifying species.

#### **6. Classification criteria**

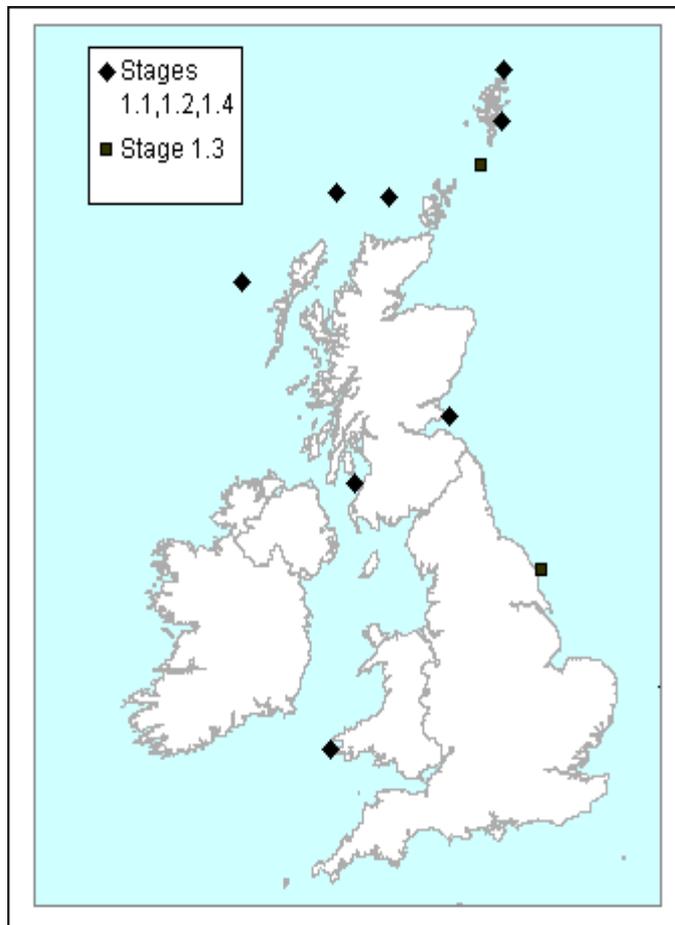
All Gannet colonies in the UK that were known to support more than 1% of the international breeding population were considered under Stage 1.2, and all were selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements. Additionally, Fair Isle, and Flamborough Head and Bempton Cliffs were selected under Stage 1.3 (see section 5.3), with Gannet identified as an important component of the wider breeding seabird assemblages at these localities. These sites also contribute to the range coverage of the suite, Flamborough Head and Bempton Cliffs being the only Gannet breeding colony on the east coast of England.

Most sites selected are multi-species SPAs, important for a range of other seabirds, although Grassholm in west Wales has been selected solely for this species.

Most UK SPAs for this species have a very long recorded history of occupancy (Gurney 1913; Fisher & Vevers 1943-44, Nelson 1978; Holloway 1996). Archaeological evidence on St Kilda indicates that it was occupied by Gannets prior to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and the colony was used for subsistence purposes by islanders until about 1910. It is the world's biggest Gannetry, holding nearly a quarter of the world population. The Bass Rock, amongst the Firth of Forth Islands, is the second largest Gannetry in Britain. The species' scientific name is derived from the site, giving an indication of its long history of occupation (earliest written

records date from 1521). Ailsa Craig was occupied prior to 1526, whilst Gannets were breeding on Sula Sgeir by 1549. However, occupation of the latter site must considerably pre-date this period since the name of the site originates from the Viking name for Gannet (as is the case for Sule Skerry and Sule Stack). Young Gannets at this colony are still harvested in a traditional hunt dating back several centuries (Beatty 1992). As a consequence, the rate of growth of this colony is not as high as at other sites. Gannets were harvested on Sule Stack until 1932, with the earliest written record of the species' presence at the site dating from 1710. Other colonies are known to have been founded more recently (relative to the long-recorded history of some sites), with Grassholm founded between 1820 and 1860, Noss in 1914, Hermaness in 1917, Flamborough Head in the 1930s, the Flannans in the mid-1960s, and Fair Isle in 1975.

### Distribution map for breeding Gannet SPA suite



**Table 6.10.1 – SPA suite**

<b>Site name</b>	<b>Site total</b>	<b>% of biogeographical population</b>	<b>% of national population</b>	<b>Selection stage</b>
Ailsa Craig	32,460	12.3	16.2	1.2
Fair Isle	1,166	0.4	0.6	1.3
Firth of Forth Islands	34,400	13.1	17.1	1.2
Flamborough Head and Bempton Cliffs	2,501	0.95	1.2	1.3
Grassholm	33,000	12.6	16.4	1.2
Hermaness, Saxa Vord and Valla Field	12,000	4.6	6.0	1.2
North Rona and Sula Sgeir	9,000	3.4	4.5	1.2
Noss	7,310	2.8	3.6	1.2
St Kilda	60,400	23.0	30.1	1.2
Sule Skerry and Sule Stack	4,890	1.9	2.4	1.2
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>197,127</b>	<b>75.0%</b>	<b>98.1%</b>	