

A6.3 Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* (non-breeding)

1. Status in UK

Biological status		Legal status		Conservation status
Breeding	✓	Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981	General Protection	Species of European Conservation Concern
Migratory	✓	Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985	General Protection	(UK) Species of Conservation Importance
Wintering	✓	EC Birds Directive 1979	Migratory	All-Ireland Vertebrate Red Data Book

2. Population data

	Population sizes (individuals)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
GB	3,290	50 (see section 5.1.2 for rationale)	445 (15% of GB total)
Ireland	5,000	50	382 (8% of all-Ireland total)
Biogeographic population	550,000	5,500	828 (0.2% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: Kirby 1995a

Ireland population source: Sheppard 1993

Biogeographic population source: Rose & Scott 1997

3. Distribution

The Little Grebe has a wide global distribution, with a breeding range extending across Europe, central/southern Asia and central/southern Africa, to Japan and Papua New Guinea in the east. Outside the breeding season, the species prefers open, although sheltered waters on coasts and estuaries. It moves to these areas in the autumn (Snow & Perrins 1998).

The species is polytypic, with at least nine sub-species having been described (Cramp & Simmons 1977). Of these, only the nominate race *T. r. ruficollis* occurs in Europe with any regularity.

In Europe, breeding occurs from Iberia and Britain and Ireland in the west as far as the borders of Russia and the Caucasus. In the eastern part of this range, Little Grebes are totally migratory, with birds moving south and west in winter to avoid the severe continental winters. Elsewhere in its European range the species is a partial migrant, with some birds being resident, whilst others move to coastal waters, where feeding occurs in shallow tidal areas (Fox 1994).

Within the UK, which lies in the north-west of the species' world range, the Little Grebe is widely, though thinly distributed, being scarcer in the north of Scotland (Lack 1986). The species' secretive habits mean that it is probably under-recorded in much of its range. Little Grebes occur in a wide variety of wetland types, from inland freshwaters to shallow estuaries.

Common features of important sites are muddy bottoms and significant growths of emergent vegetation within which birds can conceal themselves (Snow & Perrins 1998). Indeed, because of their ability to hide, Little Grebes can often occupy waters that are unattractive to other species owing to human disturbance.

4. Population structure and trends

In the non-breeding season, the international population (Western Palearctic) is estimated to be about 550,000 individuals (Rose & Scott 1997). However, information of the international context is generally poor for this species since it is not monitored by the International Waterbird Census (Delany *et al.* 1999). Thus, trends in the non-breeding season need to be inferred from information about breeding numbers.

The species' European breeding population has shown little recent change in most countries, and its status is described as stable (Tucker & Heath 1994). Within Britain, the species showed a slow, steady increase from the mid-1980s, but data from the 1997/98 winter (Cranswick *et al.* 1999) show a marked decrease compared to the preceding two years. This decline is thought to be due to a particularly cold winter in 1996/7 combined with a very wet June in 1997, adversely affecting both non-breeding and breeding birds.

5. Protection measures for population in UK

SPA suite

In the non-breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Little Grebe supports, on average, 828 individuals (calculated using WeBS January site totals for the period 1992/93 to 1996/97 — see section 4.4.1 and Appendix 2 for further explanation). This total amounts to about 15% of the British population, about 8% of the all-Ireland population, and about 0.2% of the international flyway populations. The suite comprises ten sites where Little Grebe has been listed as a qualifying species (Table 6.3.1).

The dispersed distribution of non-breeding Little Grebes means that the SPA suite makes only a small contribution to the conservation of the species during winter.

6. Classification criteria

Owing to the dispersed nature of Little Grebes in winter, no UK site supports more than 1% of the international population — indeed numbers in the UK as a whole are less than 1% of the international population. At ten sites holding internationally important assemblages of waterbirds, Little Grebes occur as significant components of the assemblage. Accordingly, these sites were considered and all were selected under Stage 1.3 (see section 5.3) after consideration of Stage 2 judgements.

These sites are situated in southern and eastern England, and Northern Ireland. However, given that Little Grebes are widely distributed at low densities across Britain and Ireland in winter, it was not considered necessary to select additional sites using Stage 1.4.

Distribution map for non-breeding Little Grebe SPA suite

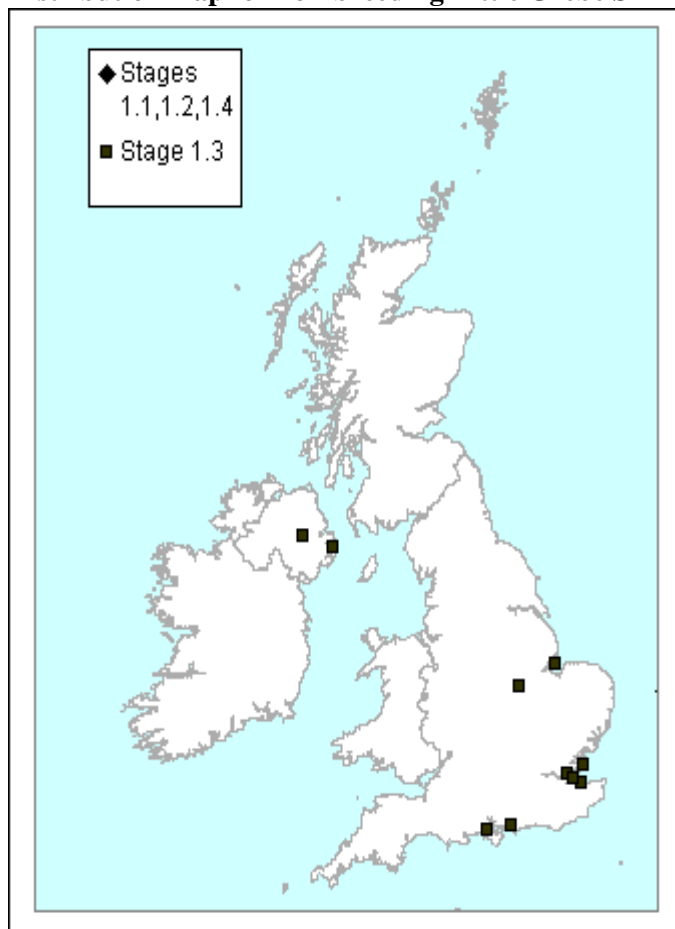


Table 6.3.1 – SPA suite

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Chichester and Langstone Harbours	68	<0.1	2.1	1.3
Foulness	52	<0.1	1.6	1.3
Lough Neagh and Lough Beg	465	<0.1	9.3 (Ire)	1.3
Medway Estuary and Marshes	53	<0.1	1.6	1.3
Rutland Water	51	<0.1	1.6	1.3
Solent and Southampton Water	91	<0.1	2.8	1.3
Strangford Lough	127	<0.1	2.5 (Ire)	1.3
Thames Estuary and Marshes	209	<0.1	6.1	1.3
The Swale	126	<0.1	3.8	1.3
The Wash	93	<0.1	2.8	1.3
TOTALS	828 (in January)	0.2%	14.8% 7.6% (Ire)	