

## A6.40 Velvet Scoter *Melanitta fusca*

### 1. Status in UK

Biological status		Legal status		Conservation status	
Breeding		Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981	<b>General Protection</b> <b>Schedule 1(1)</b>	Species of European Conservation Concern	<b>SPEC 3 (winter)</b> Unfavourable conservation status ( <b>localised in winter</b> ) but not concentrated in Europe
Migratory	✓	Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985	<b>General Protection</b>	(UK) Species of Conservation Importance	<b>Table 4</b>
Wintering	✓	EC Birds Directive 1979	<b>Annex II/2</b> <b>Migratory</b>	All-Ireland Vertebrate Red Data Book	

### 2. Population data

	Population sizes (individuals)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
<b>GB</b>	3,000	50 (see section 5.1.2 for rationale)	639 (21% of GB population)
<b>Ireland</b>			
<b>Biogeographic population</b>	1,000,000	10,000	639 (<0.1% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: Kirby et al. 1993

Biogeographic population source: Rose & Scott 1997

### 3. Distribution

The global breeding distribution of the Velvet Scoter extends, at northern latitudes (50°–68°N), across most of northern Eurasia, as well as western and central North America. There is a very isolated population in the Caucasus (Scott & Rose 1996; Berndt & Hario 1997). There are three sub-species, two of which occur in Europe: the nominate (*M. f. fusca*) occurs eastwards from Scandinavia to the Yenisey River, whereas *M. f. stejnegeri* replaces it further east in northern Russia (Scott & Rose 1996).

In Europe, Velvet Scoters breed in montane and northern areas of Norway, Sweden and Finland, as well as in coastal zones around the Baltic (Berndt & Hario 1997). They migrate south and west from these areas to winter mainly in the Baltic and along the coast of Norway, as well as more locally along other Atlantic and North Sea coasts. Most overwinter in Danish waters, but other important wintering sites have recently been located in the Gulf of Pommern (approximately 285,000) and in the Gulf of Riga (c. 137,000). Danish waters also hold a significant number of the north-west European moulting flock during the autumn (Joensen 1976).

In Britain and Northern Ireland, this is the least abundant non-breeding seaduck, with peak annual totals largely dependent on the numbers wintering in the Moray Firth and St. Andrews Bay (Kirby et al. 1993). Birds wintering in Britain and Northern Ireland are thought to

originate from Scandinavian and Siberian breeding grounds although precise locations remain to be identified (Campbell 1986). Only 0.3% of the biogeographic population overwinter in Britain. The species frequently mixes with flocks of Common Scoter *M. nigra*.

In Britain, Velvet Scoter is most numerous along North Sea coasts and generally has a more northerly distribution than Common Scoter (Campbell 1986). Flocks of more than 50 birds are unusual away from the large non-breeding concentrations in the eastern Scottish firths and coastal bays. Only small numbers occur in Ireland (Colhoun 2000). Movements between sites within winters are unknown because of the paucity of ringing recovery data and the lack of detailed co-ordinated counts in many areas.

The species favours shallow sandy coastal waters in which to feed on sandeels *Ammodytes* sp. and small invertebrates (predominantly molluscs; Durinck *et al.* 1993). Although normally coastal, many hundreds of birds occasionally reach the interior of central Europe during cold winters (Aubrecht *et al.* 1990).

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

A single population has been identified in western Siberia and north-west Europe which comprises of some 1,000,000 birds (Rose & Scott 1997; Pihl & Laursen 1996). Elsewhere, in southern Europe, a small (c. 1,500), discrete population has been identified, breeding in the Caucasus and wintering in the Black Sea (Rose & Scott 1997). Lack of annual monitoring in the Baltic (where most of the population occurs in winter) means that there is no information about annual or long-term trends at an international scale (Delany *et al.* 1999). The best available information suggests that the biogeographical population is probably stable (Rose & Scott 1997).

The northern Scandinavian breeding population has declined since the early 1900s, largely due to spring hunting in the Finnish Åland Islands, the annual bag averaging 25,000 (Berndt & Hario 1997). In other parts of the Baltic, numbers are declining locally as a consequence of poor breeding success (Berndt & Hario 1997). This reduced breeding success may be due, in part, to inclement weather conditions or recreational disturbance on the brood-rearing areas (Mikola *et al.* 1994; Berndt & Hario 1997).

In Britain, non-breeding numbers fluctuate markedly between years at the most important sites with numbers relatively stable overall (Kirby *et al.* 1993; Cranswick *et al.* 1999). Numbers in the Moray Firth increased during the early 1970s and were regularly between 2,500 and 5,000 during the period 1973/74 to 1983/84, with a peak of 8,000 in April 1983, before declining in recent years (Kirby *et al.* 1993). Numbers in the Tay/St. Andrews Bay area have increased since the early 1970s (Kirby *et al.* 1993). High counts in this area have coincided with low numbers in the Moray Firth suggesting interchange between these two important sites between years. Reasons for this possible interchange remain unclear but may be linked to changes in food supply. Numbers of birds on the Firth of Forth, the other key site in Scotland, have fluctuated greatly in recent decades with no obvious trend.

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

##### **SPA suite**

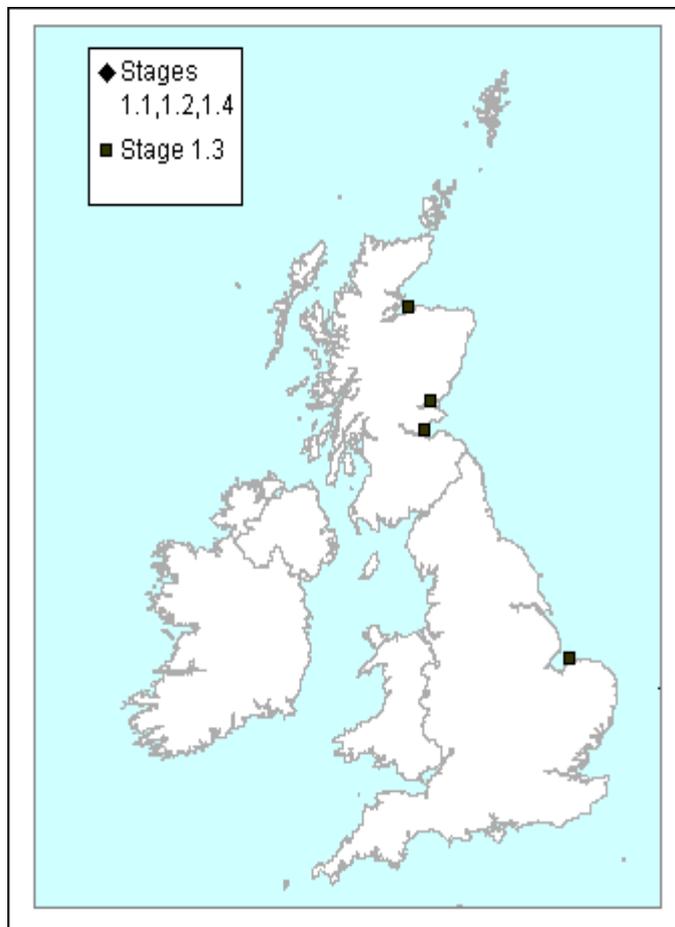
In the non-breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Velvet Scoter supports, on average, 639 individuals (calculated using WeBS January site totals for the period 1992/93 to 1996/97 – see section 4.4.1 and Appendix 2 for further explanation). This total amounts to about 21% of the British wintering population. The species does not regularly occur in winter in Northern Ireland. The suite holds less than 0.1% of the international flyway population at four sites where Velvet Scoter has been listed as a qualifying species (Table 6.40.1).

## 6. Classification criteria

No sites in the UK regularly support more than 1% of the international Velvet Scoter population in winter (Stage 1.2). However, four sites in the suite were identified under Stage 1.3 (see section 5.3) where Velvet Scoter is an important component of non-breeding waterbird assemblages. The sites thus identified (Firth of Forth; Firth of Tay and Eden Estuary; the Moray and Nairn Coast; and the North Norfolk Coast) were included within the suite. By definition, these sites are multi-species SPAs, of importance also for other waterbirds. There is a very long recorded history of occupancy at most of these sites (Boyd in Atkinson-Willes 1963).

As the selection of sites under Stage 1.3 resulted in a terrestrial suite that includes the main population centres of non-breeding Velvet Scoter in the UK, it was not considered necessary to select additional terrestrial sites using Stage 1.4.

### Distribution map for Velvet Scoter SPA suite



**Table 6.40.1 – SPA suite**

<b>Site name</b>	<b>Site total</b>	<b>% of biogeographical population</b>	<b>% of national population</b>	<b>Selection stage</b>
Firth of Forth	356	<0.1	11.9	1.3
Firth of Tay and Eden Estuary	256	<0.1	8.5	1.3
Moray and Nairn Coast	133	<0.1	4.4	1.3
North Norfolk Coast	78	<0.1	2.6	1.3

<b>TOTALS</b>	639 (in January)	<0.1%	21.3%	
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