

A6.47b Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* (non-breeding)

1. Status in UK

See section A6.47a.

2. Population data

	Population sizes (individuals)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
GB	750	8	244 (33% of GB total)
Ireland	540	5	No SPAs selected in Northern Ireland
Biogeographic population	24,996	249	244 (1% of the biogeographic population)

GB population source: Lack 1986

All-Ireland population source: Gibbons et al. 1993

Biogeographic population source: Hagemeijer & Blair 1997

3. Distribution

The global and European distribution of Hen Harriers is described in section A6.46a.

The winter distribution of Hen Harriers in the UK significantly differs from that during the breeding season (section 6.46a). In autumn, birds disperse from many moorland nesting areas and move to winter in lowlands, especially around the coast (Watson 1977; Lack 1986). There are significant concentrations on the south and east coast of England, especially within the East Anglia estuaries, the Greater Thames estuary and Solent area (Lack 1986). In these regions, Hen Harriers hunt especially over salt-marshes taking small passerines, small mammals and waders. Hen Harriers also occur in lowland heaths and on chalk downland, with significant winter concentrations in Hampshire and Dorset, on downland in Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Wiltshire, as well as in the East Anglia Brecks (Lack 1986).

A proportion of the adult birds that nest on moorlands are resident throughout the year, although there may be dispersal away from the immediate vicinity of the breeding territories. In these areas, birds can be present year-round. Most young birds, especially those from the Scottish Highlands and Wales, disperse widely (Etheridge in press).

During winter, Hen Harriers gather at communal roost sites at night. These can hold significant numbers of individuals (sometimes over 20) and are usually located in wetlands such as carr woodland, marshes and reedbeds, although they sometimes occur on heather moorland, lowland heath and conifer plantations.

There is some southward movement in winter to the European continent and Ireland, with birds ringed in the breeding season in Scotland and Wales having been recovered in France and Iberia as well as in England (Lack 1986). Breeding Hen Harriers ringed in The Netherlands and Scandinavia have also been recovered in the UK during the winter months.

4. Population structure and trends

There is little good information on numbers of Hen Harriers in Britain outside the breeding season and there is no national monitoring scheme that assesses either numbers or trends. However, numbers at certain roost sites are monitored annually (Clarke & Watson 1990, 1997).

Based on breeding estimates in the mid-1980s (adjusted for mortality and partial emigration), Clarke (in Lack 1986) estimated that Scotland held about 400 non-breeding birds, Ireland less than 150 and Wales about 50. England was estimated to hold about 300 individuals. Numbers will be greater than this in periods of severe winter weather when Hen Harriers move to Britain from continental Europe. Davenport (1982) estimated a total of 753 in England following a severe winter weather influx in early 1979.

5. Protection measures for population in UK

SPA suite

In the non-breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Hen Harriers supports, on average, 244 individuals. This amounts to about 33% of the British winter total and about 1.0% of the international population. In an all-Ireland context, no sites have been selected for non-breeding Hen Harriers in Northern Ireland. The SPA suite total is contained within 20 sites (Table 6.47b.1) where Hen Harrier has been listed as a qualifying species.

Other measures

See section A6.46a.

6. Classification criteria

All sites in the UK that were known to support more than 1% of the total national non-breeding population were considered under Stage 1.1, and all were selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements. In addition, four sites were considered and selected under Stage 1.4 (Blackwater Estuary, Colne Estuary, Dengie and Foulness), on the grounds of range coverage and because the four adjacent sites support a large population that is likely to use the region as an ecological unit, although more data are required to clarify this.

The sites within the suite are distributed throughout the winter range of the population in Britain, covering all current population centres, from sites in Orkney, through Scotland, to coastal strongholds in eastern and southern England. All sites are multi-species SPAs, of European importance also for a range of other birds. There is a long recorded history of occupancy at many of these sites (e.g. for Orkney see Watson 1977; Booth *et al.* 1984; Holloway 1996), although following persecution to local extinction in the 19th century, Hen Harriers have become re-established at some of the sites relatively recently.

Distribution map for non-breeding Hen Harrier SPA suite

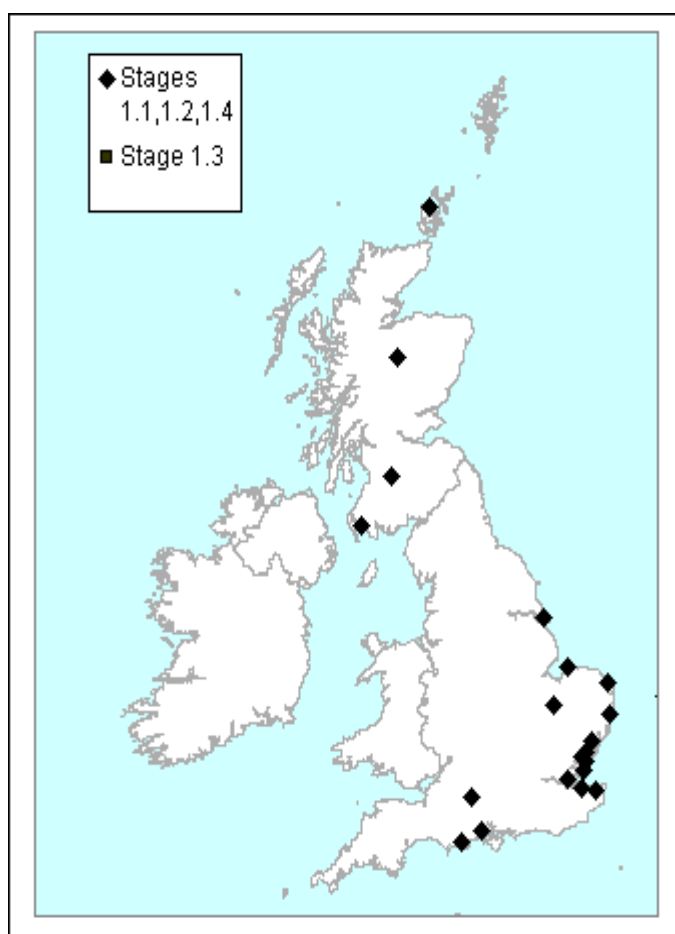


Table 6.47b.1 – SPA suite

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Blackwater Estuary	4	<0.1	0.5	1.4
Broadland	22	<0.1	2.9	1.1
Colne Estuary	4	<0.1	0.5	1.4
Dengie	5	<0.1	0.7	1.4
Dorset Heathlands	20	<0.1	2.7	1.1
Foulness	6	<0.1	0.8	1.4
Humber Flats, Marshes and Coast	20	<0.1	2.7	1.1
Loch of Inch and Torrs Warren	8	<0.1	1.1	1.1
Minsmere – Walberswick	15	<0.1	2.0	1.1
Muirkirk and North Lowther Uplands	10	<0.1	1.3	1.1
New Forest	15	<0.1	2.0	1.1
North Norfolk Coast	16	<0.1	2.1	1.1
Orkney Mainland Moors	13	<0.1	1.7	1.1

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Ouse Washes	12	<0.1	1.6	1.1
River Spey - Insh Marshes	11	<0.1	1.5	1.1
Salisbury Plain	14	<0.1	1.9	1.1
Stodmarsh	9	<0.1	1.2	1.1
Stour and Orwell Estuaries	10	<0.1	1.3	1.1
Thames Estuary and Marshes	7	<0.1	1.0	1.1
The Swale	23	<0.1	3.1	1.1

TOTALS	244	1.0%	32.5%	
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