

A6.50b Merlin *Falco columbarius* (non-breeding)

1. Status in UK

See section A6.50a.

2. Population data

	Population sizes (individuals)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
GB	1,500	15	15 (1% of GB population)
Ireland	416	4	No sites selected in Northern Ireland
Biogeographic population	30,600	306	15 (<0.1% of biogeographical population)

GB population source: Stroud et al. 1990a

Biogeographic population source: derived from Hagemeyer & Blair 1997

3. Distribution

The global and European breeding distribution of Merlins is described in section A6.50a. Merlins winter in almost any type of open country in the northern and southern temperate zones of Eurasia and the Americas. Birds breeding in northern Europe migrate south and west in autumn to winter across west and central Europe, including north-west Africa and the Mediterranean basin.

Ringling has shown that the British breeding population is either sedentary or moves from upland to lowland areas, including coasts. British birds are joined in winter by at least a proportion of the Icelandic breeding population (Lack 1986).

Non-breeding Merlins in Britain are found widely scattered in lowland areas at low densities, mainly 1–3 birds/10 km square (Lack 1986). They hunt singly or sometimes in pairs (and occasionally with other species) over open farmland and coastal habitats, probably attracted by flocks of finches and small waders, particularly in Scotland and south-east England (Lack 1986). Winter roosts may be communal and are often shared with Hen Harriers (Elliott *et al.* 1991). Roost sites known to have held two or more Merlins occur on heaths, dunes, bogs and in reedbeds (Lack 1986).

4. Population structure and trends

Knowledge of trends is poor (Elliott *et al.* 1991) and there is no monitoring of numbers in winter. Given the British and – to a lesser extent – Icelandic origin of non-breeding Merlins in the UK, their numbers can be assumed to have fluctuated over the last 50 years in a similar fashion, and for the same reasons, as the breeding populations.

Lack (1986) estimated the midwinter total in Britain and Ireland at 2,000–3,000 birds, although the population wintering in Great Britain is currently estimated at 1,300 individuals (Stroud *et al.* 1990).

5. Protection measures for population in the UK

SPA suite

In winter, the UK's SPA suite for Merlin supports, on average, 15 individuals. This amounts to about 1% of British non-breeding numbers. Within an all-Ireland context, there have been no SPAs selected in Northern Ireland, and the suite contains less than 0.1% of the international population. This total is contained within a single site (Table 6.50b.1) for which Merlin has been listed as a qualifying species.

6. Classification criteria

The only site (Dorset Heathlands) in the UK known to support more than 1% of the national total of non-breeding Merlins was considered under Stage 1.1, and was selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements. Away from the Dorset Heathlands, the species' winter distribution in Britain is mostly scattered and consists of isolated individuals associated with coastal and other wetlands.

Dorset Heathlands is a multi-species SPA, of European importance also for a range of other breeding and non-breeding birds.

Distribution map for non-breeding Merlin SPA suite

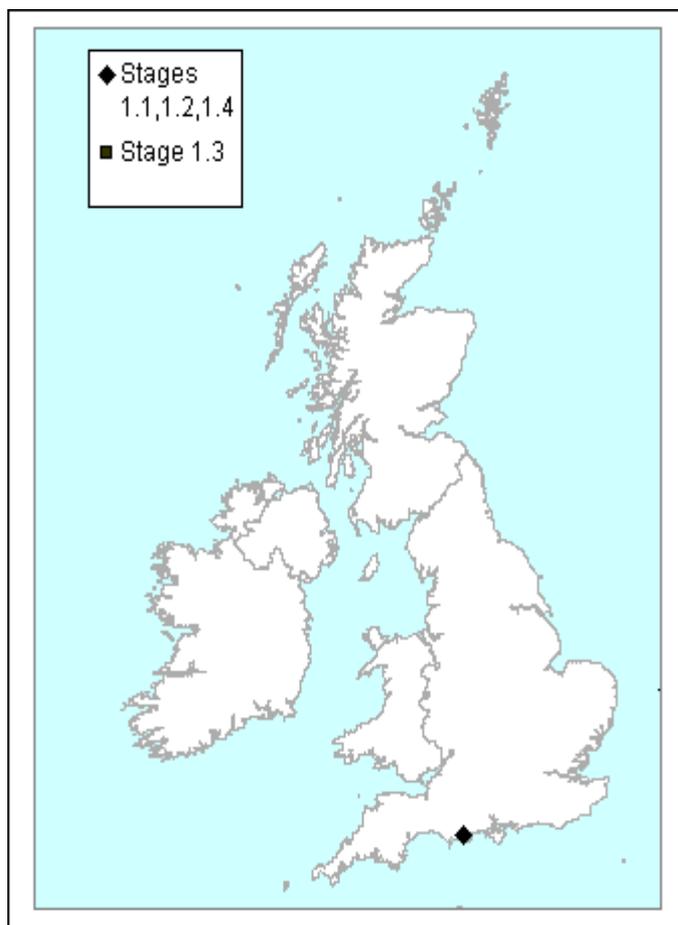


Table 6.50b.1 – SPA suite

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Dorset Heathlands	15	<0.1	1.2	1.1
TOTALS	15	<0.1%	1.2%	