

A6.56a Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* (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 (pairs)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
GB	33,000	330	1,367 (4% of GB population)
Ireland	3,000	30	No SPAs selected in Northern Ireland
Biogeographic population	290,000	2,900	1,367 (0.5% of biogeographic population)

GB and all-Ireland population source: Piersma 1986
Biogeographic population source: Rose & Scott 1997

3. Distribution

The global distribution of Oystercatchers is quite discontinuous. In Iceland and northern Europe, they breed largely in coastal areas, while occurrence is more continuous in lowland areas of Ukraine and Russia, extending to parts of central Asia. Separate populations breed in coastal Kamchatka as well as the Far Eastern Russian Pacific coast. These birds migrate south to winter on the coast of China, whilst Oystercatchers breeding in Europe and central Asia generally move south to winter in coastal areas elsewhere in Europe, the Middle East, and east and west Africa (Cramp & Simmons 1983; Smit & Piersma 1989).

Three sub-species have been described. The nominate race *H. o. ostralegus* has a European breeding distribution from Iceland, the Faeroes and much of northern Europe to western Russia (Colston & Burton 1988). *H. o. longipes* occurs in east and southern Russia, east to western Siberia. Birds breeding in eastern Asia belong to *H. o. osculans*.

Within Europe, Oystercatchers breed more or less continuously around north-western coasts from the White Sea to Brittany. Additionally, there are significant inland breeding populations in Scotland and the Low Countries. There are small, more local breeding groups in the north-western Mediterranean, north-eastern Adriatic, northern Greece and the Aegean coasts of Turkey.

Within the UK, breeding Oystercatchers are concentrated in coastal and inland areas of Scotland, but also occur at inland sites in northern England, as well as at coastal sites throughout much of the rest of the UK. More recently they have spread into areas of intensive arable farming in lowland England (particularly East Anglia and the Vale of York) and north-east Wales (Gibbons *et al.* 1993).

4. Population structure and trends

Three biogeographic populations are recognised globally, comprising each of the three sub-species. Those occurring in Britain and Ireland thus comprise all of the nominate sub-species, amounting to 874,000 individuals (and about 290,000 pairs; Rose & Scott 1997). Of this total, approximately 20% occur in the UK.

Whilst the European breeding population appears to be stable or increasing, in The Netherlands, there has been a recent, rapid increase in numbers. The overall European trend, however, is reflected in the UK, which has seen an increase of approximately 50% between the 1960s and 1980s, to give an estimated population of 33,000–43,000 pairs by the mid-1980s (Piersma 1986). The main reason for this population increase is thought to be behavioural, as Oystercatchers have adapted their use of habitat to allow the exploitation of inland areas (Gibbons *et al.* 1993).

5. Protection measures for population in UK

SPA suite

In the breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Oystercatcher supports, on average, 1,367 pairs. This amounts to about 4% of the British breeding population. The suite contains about 0.5% of the international population. Within an all-Ireland context, there have been no SPAs selected for Oystercatchers in Northern Ireland. The SPA suite total is contained within three sites (Table 6.56a.1) where Oystercatcher has been listed as a qualifying species.

6. Classification criteria

No sites in the UK hold more than 1% of the international population of Oystercatchers (2,900 pairs). As the UK supports a significant proportion of the European population of this species (22%), known areas of high density were assessed under Stage 1.4. Three sites were selected (North Uist Machair and Islands, South Uist Machair and Lochs, and Sleibhtean agus Cladach Thiriodh (Tiree Wetlands and Coast)) by virtue of their high population densities (Fuller *et al.* 1986; Shepherd & Stroud 1991), and as a contribution to the maintenance of their European range. All have a long recorded history of occupation.

Each of these sites is a multi-species site, and each is of significance for holding a diverse assemblage of breeding waterbirds, the composition of which is unique to the machair habitats of western Scotland and western Ireland.

Distribution map for breeding Oystercatcher SPA suite

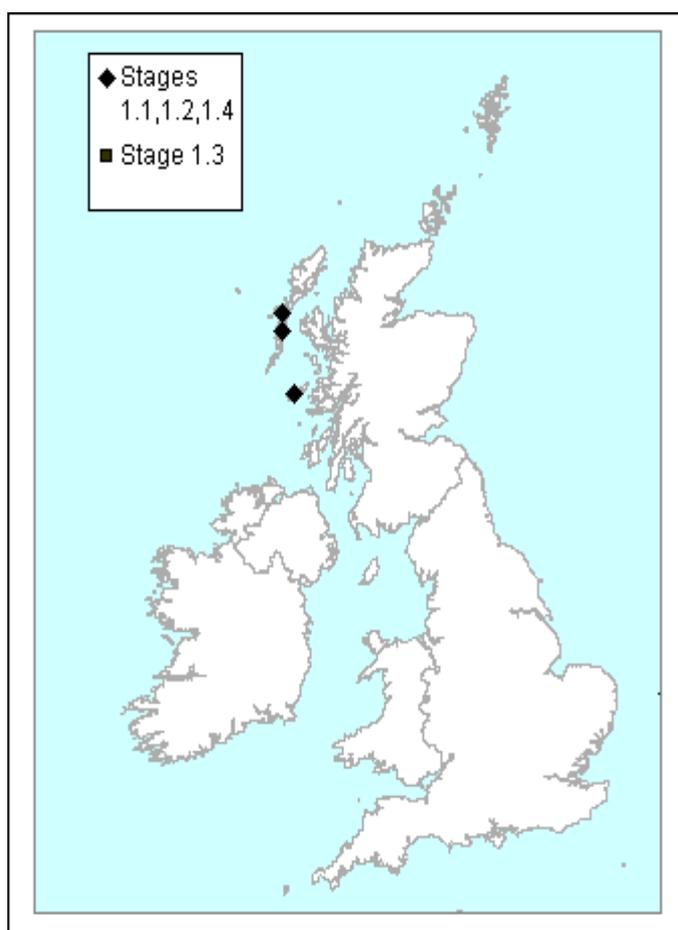


Table 6.56a.1 – SPA suite

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
North Uist Machair and Islands	630	0.2	1.9	1.4
South Uist Machair and Lochs	577	0.2	1.8	1.4
Sleibhtean agus Cladach Thiriodh (Tiree Wetlands and Coast)	160	<0.1	0.5	1.4
TOTALS	1,367	0.5%	4.1%	