

A6.68a Ruff *Philomachus pugnax* (breeding)

1. Status in UK

Biological status		Legal status		Conservation status	
Breeding	✓	Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981	General Protection Schedule 1(1)	Species of European Conservation Concern	SPEC 4 Favourable conservation status (secure) but concentrated in Europe
Migratory	✓	Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985	General Protection Schedule 1(1)	(UK) Species of Conservation Importance	Table 4
Wintering	✓	EC Birds Directive 1979	Annex I Migratory	All-Ireland Vertebrate Red Data Book	

2. Population data

	Population sizes (males)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
GB	11	1	10 (91% of GB population)
Ireland			
Biogeographic population	105,700	1,056	10 (<0.1% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: Ogilvie & RBBP 1996

Biogeographic population source: Hagemeyer & Blair 1997

3. Distribution

The Ruff has a boreal global breeding distribution that extends from Scandinavia and Great Britain in the west, almost to the Bering Strait in the east. Across most of its range the Ruff is an Arctic-breeding wader, occurring mainly north of about 65°N, however in Europe it breeds in more temperate latitudes (to about 65°N) (Cramp & Simmons 1983; Hagemeyer & Blair 1997; van Rhijn 1991). The species is monotypic.

Within Europe, the Ruff has a wide breeding distribution in northern Russia, Finland and northern (and montane) Sweden and Norway. It has a localised breeding distribution in most north-east European countries, from the Baltic states, Poland, Germany and Denmark, through the Low Countries to Britain.

Because Britain is at the extreme western edge of the species' world breeding range, only very small numbers nest in the UK, with none at all in some years. However, several sites have a long history of occupation and previously the species was much more widespread in eastern England (Hollaway 1996). All regular breeding sites are in England, with a small

cluster in the East Anglian Fens and outlying sites in north and north-west England (Gibbons *et al.* 1993).

Within its temperate European distribution, the Ruff is a highly typical wader of lowland wet grasslands, and its occurrence is a good indicator of farmland with a high nature conservation value (Hötker 1991; Beintema *et al.* 1996).

4. Population structure and trends

Three biogeographical populations of Ruff have been described (Rose & Scott 1997). Of these, only the West African wintering population occurs in Europe. The European component of this population (used as the reference for this review) is estimated to be 105,655–139,209 breeding pairs (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997). Large numbers occur in Sweden (61,000 pairs), Finland (39,000 pairs) and Norway (14,000 pairs), whilst all other national totals comprise fewer than 2,000 pairs (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997). Most of the global numbers occur in Russia (over 3 million pairs in European Russia alone)

In Europe, the largest breeding populations in Russia and Sweden are reported to be stable, whilst numbers in Norway have increased, mostly because of range expansion in the south (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997; Tucker & Heath 1994). Meanwhile, large declines (>50% 1970-1990) have occurred in Finland, Poland, Latvia and The Netherlands (90% decline since the 1950s, only 400-800 pairs left in early 1990s). Although this affects only a small proportion of the biogeographical population, it is a continuation of the marked range contraction that has occurred over the last 200 years (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997; Tucker & Heath 1994). These declines have been variously attributed to drainage, increased fertiliser use, encroachment on – or abandonment of – previously mown or grazed breeding sites, and over-hunting (Hötker 1991; Hagemeijer & Blair 1997; Vksne 1997; Thorup 1998).

In Britain, the Ruff was a widespread, though only locally common, breeding bird in eastern England until the end of the 18th century. The twin impacts of hunting and the drainage of breeding habitats led to its progressive localisation and then extinction by 1898 (Parslow 1973; Holloway 1996). After sporadic breeding attempts in the 1920s, Ruffs bred again in the UK at the Ouse Washes in 1963 (Cottier & Lea 1969). Numbers at this site increased to a maximum of 21 pairs in 1971 (Sharrock 1976; Taylor *et al.* 1999). Since then, the species has bred regularly at three other sites, but by the early 1990s probably fewer than five females were breeding each year (Gibbons *et al.* 1993). This represents a decline of at least 76% since 1971. As the main sites are all managed as nature reserves, the reasons for this decline are not obvious. One possible cause is the tendency for high water levels on its main breeding sites in recent years (Taylor *et al.* 1999) or it may simply be the result of natural demographic fluctuations on the edge of the species' range.

5. Protection measures for population in UK

SPA suite

In the breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Ruff supports, on average, 10 pairs. This amounts to about 91% of the British breeding population. The species does not breed in Northern Ireland. The suite contains less than 0.1% of the international population (numbers in the UK are very small compared to the major concentrations that breed in Scandinavia and northern Russia). The SPA suite total is contained within four sites (Table 6.68a.1) where Ruff has been listed as a qualifying species.

It should be noted however, that calculation of site totals and population coverage for Ruffs is problematic. At any site, breeding is often difficult to confirm, and additionally complicated

by the fact that birds nesting at a site can be joined in spring by migrants that perform at leks in southerly areas prior to migrating further north to nest (van Rhijn 1983).

6. Classification criteria

All sites in the UK that were known to support more than 1% of the national breeding population of Ruff (*i.e.* any site where regular breeding occurs) were considered under Stage 1.1, and all were selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements.

The sites within the suite include the main current centres of occurrence of Ruff. Several of the sites were traditional haunts prior to the persecution to extinction in the nineteenth century (Holloway 1996). The Ouse Washes was the site of the initial re-colonisation of Britain by Ruff in 1963 (Cottier & Lea 1969).

All the sites in the suite have a high degree of naturalness, and all are multi-species SPAs. Most of the areas used by Ruffs within the suite are in the ownership of nature conservation organisations and are subject to active conservation management.

Distribution map for breeding Ruff SPA suite

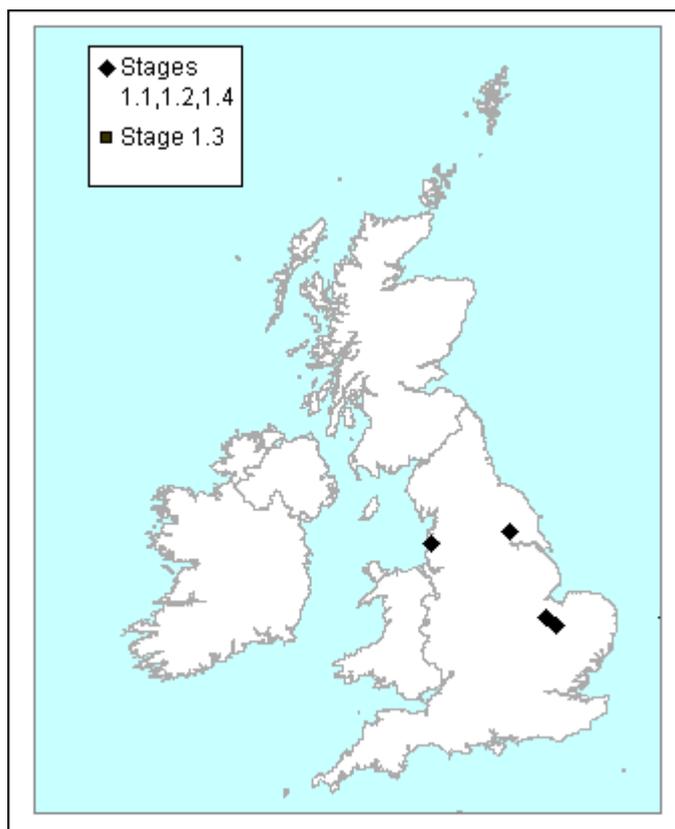


Table 6.68a.1 – SPA suite

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Lower Derwent Valley	7	<0.1	64	1.1
Nene Washes	1	<0.1	9	1.1
Ouse Washes	1	<0.1	9	1.1
Ribble and Alt Estuaries	1	<0.1	9	1.1
TOTALS	10	<0.1%	91%	