

A6.70a Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* (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 2 Unfavourable conservation status (vulnerable) and concentrated in Europe |
| Migratory | ✓ | Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 | General Protection Schedule 1(1) | (UK) Species of Conservation Importance | Table 2 |
| Wintering | ✓ | EC Birds Directive 1979 | Annex II/2 Migratory | All-Ireland Vertebrate Red Data Book | Rare |

2. Population data

| | Population sizes (pairs) | Selection thresholds | Totals in species' SPA suite |
|--|--------------------------|----------------------|--|
| GB (<i>L. l. limosa</i> and <i>L. l. islandica</i>) | 34 | 1 | 42 (c. 100% of GB population) |
| Ireland | | | |
| Biogeographic population (<i>L. l. limosa</i> only) | 120,000 | 1,200 | 42 (<0.1% of biogeographic population) |

GB population source: Ogilvie & RBBP 1996

Biogeographic population source: Rose & Scott 1997

3. Distribution

Black-tailed Godwits have a markedly discontinuous global breeding distribution, restricted to Eurasia. Breeding occurs from Iceland in the west, to central Siberia – mainly south of 60°N. Isolated populations occur in China and the Russian far east (Chukotka) (Cramp & Simmons 1983). The species is migratory, moving at the end of the breeding season to winter locally in the Mediterranean basin, in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as through northern India and coastal areas of south-east Asia and Australia (Cramp & Simmons 1983). The species is polytypic with three sub-species described (Cramp & Simmons 1983). Two of these occur in Europe: the nominate race *L. l. limosa*, which breeds from England across Europe and Russia to the Yenisey, and *L. l. islandica*, which breeds in Iceland, the Faeroes and in small numbers in Shetland and Orkney (Williamson 1958a; Thom 1986; Gibbons *et al.* 1993).

In Europe, nominate-race Black-tailed Godwits breed from England and France in the west, eastwards across Europe at temperate latitudes (generally between 45°–60°N – Snow & Perrins 1998). Breeding sites are highly localised (other than in The Netherlands where the species is widespread). Generally, occurrence reflects the presence of traditionally managed low-intensity wet grasslands and fens. As this habitat has become fragmented, so has the breeding distribution of Black-tailed Godwits. Numbers are smallest in the west, but the

species is more widespread in eastern Europe – reflecting the lower levels of agricultural intensification of grassland, as well as the presence of extensive natural wetlands (*e.g.* K• osowsky *et al.* 1991).

The currently restricted British breeding population of *L. l. limosa* is a relict of a much more extensive distribution. Although now much limited and on the western edge of the species' global breeding range, two sites have a long history of occupation. All currently regular breeding sites are in England with a small cluster in the East Anglian Fens (Gibbons *et al.* 1993). In contrast, *L. l. islandica* appears to have become established as a breeding bird in the 20th century. The first record of breeding *L. l. islandica* is from Caithness in 1946, and small numbers of birds have bred “fairly regularly in Shetland” since 1949 and in Orkney since 1973 (Thom 1986).

Within its temperate European distribution, Black-tailed Godwit is a highly typical wader of lowland wet grasslands and fens, and its occurrence is a good indicator of farmland with a high nature conservation value (Hötker 1991; K• osowsky *et al.* 1991; Beintema *et al.* 1996; Thorup 1998).

4. Population structure and trends

Six biogeographical populations of Black-tailed Godwit have been described (Rose & Scott 1997). Of these, three occur in Europe: the population of *L. l. islandica*, the western European/west African population of *L. l. limosa*, and the eastern European/east African population of *L. l. limosa* (Rose & Scott 1997; Wetlands International 1999). Of these, the first two populations occur in the UK.

The European component of the *L. l. limosa* population is estimated to be 120,000 breeding pairs, of which approximately 50% occurs in The Netherlands (Rose & Scott 1997; Hagemeyer & Blair 1997). Large numbers also breed in Russia, Belarus, Germany, Poland and Ukraine (Hagemeyer & Blair 1997).

In Europe, the large breeding populations in The Netherlands, Russia, Germany, Poland and Ukraine have all declined between 1970 and 1990, whilst the large population in Belarus has remained stable (Hötker 1991; Tucker & Heath 1994). These declines are considered to be relatively small (Tucker & Heath 1994) and are attributed to drainage of wetlands and intensification of farming practices in the breeding areas, though drought in the West African wintering quarters (Tucker & Heath 1994) may also play a part.

In lowland Britain, Black-tailed Godwits were formerly widespread, but suffered a major decrease and extinction in the early part of the nineteenth century. This was consequent upon widespread drainage of natural wetlands, especially the East Anglian fens (Parslow 1973). Following an absence of over 100 years, Black-tailed Godwits began regular breeding again at the Ouse Washes in 1952. Up to 64 pairs bred here and at the nearby Nene Washes by the mid-1970s (Cottier & Lea 1969; Gibbons *et al.* 1993). Following a series of spring floods in the 1980s which disrupted the main breeding sites (Green *et al.* 1987), the population declined to 40 pairs by the late 1980s (Gibbons *et al.* 1993), after which the population has remained relatively stable (Ogilvie and the Rare Breeding Birds Panel).

Black-tailed Godwits breeding in northern Scotland belong to a separate population of *L. l. islandica*. This population breeds in the Faeroes, Iceland and north Scotland, and is estimated to have a stable size of 5,000–15,000 pairs (Hagemeyer & Blair 1997).

5. Protection measures for population in UK

SPA suite

In the breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Black-tailed Godwit of the western European/west African population of *L. l. limosa* supports, on average, 42 pairs. This amounts to the great majority of this breeding population in Britain, and less than 0.1% of the international population (numbers in the UK are very small in comparison to the much larger numbers in Belgium, The Netherlands and Germany). The SPA suite total is contained within two sites (Table 6.70a.1) where breeding Black-tailed Godwit has been listed as a qualifying species. No sites have been proposed in the UK for the Icelandic biogeographic population of Black-tailed Godwit as most birds breed in isolated pairs with no significant concentrations.

Other measures

The UK has contributed to the development of a European Union Management Action Plan for Black-tailed Godwit as part of the Ornithological Committee's initiative to develop such plans for a number of Annex II species with an unfavourable conservation status. Although these action plans are advisory rather than legally binding, the UK will be seeking to implement the recommended actions of the plan as specified for the period 1999–2002. As one example of the implementation of recommended actions, JNCC and other organisations are currently developing an Integrated Monitoring Programme related to UK waterbird monitoring. As indicated by the Black-tailed Godwit Action Plan (Operational Objectives 2.4.1 & 2.4.2), this aims to develop a better understanding of the factors influencing Black-tailed Godwit population dynamics through integrating results from separate programmes which currently collect data and information on parameters such as population sizes, distribution, productivity, mortality and dispersal.

6. Classification criteria

No sites in the UK hold more than 1% of the international population in the breeding season. A case for SPA selection using Stage 1.4 was made in the light of:

- the SPEC 2 status of Black-tailed Godwit (globally concentrated in Europe and with an unfavourable conservation status – Tucker & Heath 1994);
- the former wider occurrence of the sub-species *L. l. limosa* in the UK, but subsequent restriction through historic habitat loss and degradation (Parslow 1973; Holloway 1996);
- the viable occurrence in significant numbers at two sites; and
- the fact that East-Anglian strongholds are geographically close to the main European centre of population (The Netherlands) thus potentially providing a focus for recolonisation of England should wet grassland conditions elsewhere in England improve.

The two UK sites (the Nene Washes and the Ouse Washes) that together support the great majority of the national breeding population of *L. l. limosa* was thus considered under Stage 1.4. Both sites were selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements. These sites are currently the main centres of breeding Black-tailed Godwits. There is a relatively long occupancy at the Ouse Washes (Cottier & Lea 1969; Green *et al.* 1987) where recolonisation of Britain began in 1952, whilst the Nene Washes have been occupied since the late 1970s. Both these SPAs are managed as nature reserves by conservation organisations, primarily to maintain appropriate water levels and grazing regimes, but also to protect against disturbance and egg-collecting.

Distribution map for breeding Black-tailed Godwit SPA suite

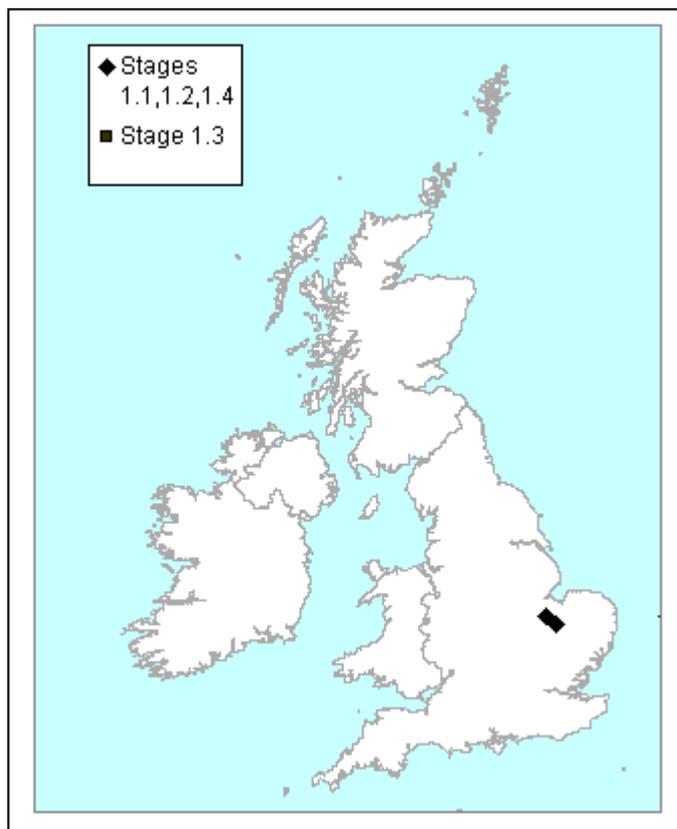


Table 6.70a.1 – SPA suite

| Site name | Site total | % of biogeographical | % of national population | Selection stage |
|---------------|------------|----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|
| Nene Washes | 16 | <0.1 | 47 | 1.4 |
| Ouse Washes | 26 | <0.1 | 76 | 1.4 |
| TOTALS | 42 | <0.1% | 100% | |