

## A6.72a Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* (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 II/2 Migratory	All-Ireland Vertebrate Red Data Book	

### 2. Population data

	Population sizes (pairs)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
<b>GB</b>	530	5	65 (12% of GB population)
<b>Ireland</b>			
<b>Biogeographic population</b>	220,000	2,200	65 (<0.1% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: Dore & Ellis 1994

Biogeographic population source: Rose & Scott 1997

### 3. Distribution

The Whimbrel has a wide, though highly localised, global distribution. During the breeding season, it occurs primarily in the boreal, sub-Arctic and low Arctic zones of Eurasia and America (Cramp & Simmons 1983). From Iceland in the west, it breeds through northern Europe (generally north of *c.* 60°N) as far as the River Ob. It breeds further east in Russia in a number of small, and localised areas of the Arctic, as well as in western and northern Alaska, and on the west coast of Hudson Bay in Canada (Cramp & Simmons 1983). The Whimbrel is polytypic, with four sub-species described. Of these, only the nominate race *N. p. phaeopus* occurs in Europe, breeding in Iceland, the Faeroes, Fennoscandia, the Baltic States, parts of northern Russia and northern Scotland (Cramp & Simmons 1983).

UK-breeding Whimbrel – at the south-western extremity of the species' Eurasian distribution – are concentrated in Shetland, with a few in Orkney, the Outer Hebrides and scattered pairs on the north Scottish mainland. Whilst Whimbrel are widespread in Shetland, most pairs are concentrated on the islands of Fetlar, Unst and west-central Mainland (Richardson 1990).

Throughout Europe, Whimbrel nest in a wide range of habitats including overgrown lava flows in Iceland, alpine heaths and sparse montane forest. In Scotland, however, the breeding habitat is primarily heathland and bog dominated by heather *Calluna vulgaris* and cotton grass *Eriophorum* spp. or unimproved grassland (Grant 1992; Grant *et al.* 1992a,b).

#### **4. Population structure and trends**

Six biogeographical populations of Whimbrel have been described (Rose & Scott 1997). Of these, the only one to occur in Europe is the European/western African population estimated at 600,000–700,000 individuals (Rose & Scott 1997). This comprises about 220,000 breeding pairs.

Iceland holds the highest numbers of breeding Whimbrel in Europe (100,000–200,000 pairs), followed by Fennoscandia (50,000–70,000 pairs) and Russia (10,000–30,000 pairs – although this is almost certainly an under-estimate) (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997).

The current British population is approximately 500 pairs (Dore & Ellis 1994). Records indicate that this population has fluctuated considerably in both numbers and distribution during the last two centuries. Whimbrels have been known to breed in Orkney and Shetland for much of the 19th century (Parslow 1973; Holloway 1996; Richardson 1990) – possibly very commonly in Shetland (Dunn 1837), although its population decreased at both sites during the late 1800s and early 1900s. However, the Shetland population increased to 50–55 pairs by the 1950s, and by the 1960s, many islands had been recolonised (Holloway 1996). Further increase has continued with the Shetland population during the period 1982–1986 being estimated at 413–471 pairs, representing about 95% of the UK population at that time (Richardson 1990). This increase, where records exist, appears to be mirrored in other localities in Europe, *e.g.* Estonia, Finland, over the same period (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997).

The causes of the population fluctuations in Scotland are not known in detail but it has been suggested that local decreases in Shetland have been associated with increases in the populations of large gulls and, historically, possibly even human consumption of eggs (Dunn 1837). More recent increases in the population, and distributional changes have been linked with climatic factors (Richardson 1990). In Shetland, where the species has been studied in some detail, the adults showed a high degree of site fidelity, nested at densities at least as high as elsewhere in their European range, and consistently fledged large numbers of chicks – in excess of that needed to balance adult mortality (Grant 1991, 1992; Grant *et al.* 1992a,b).

#### **5. Protection measures for population in UK**

##### **SPA suite**

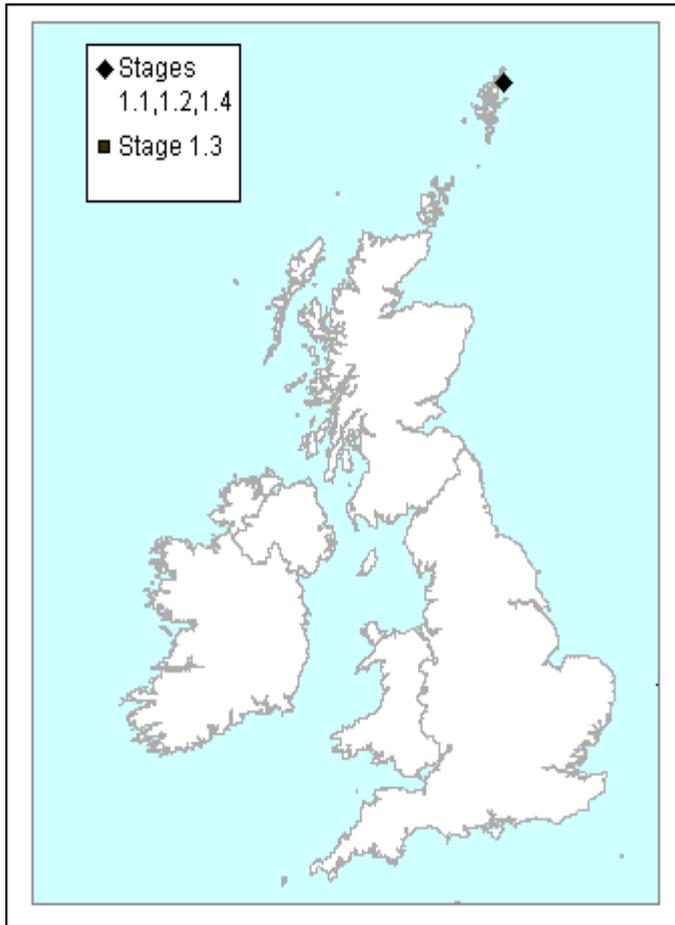
In the breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Whimbrels supports, on average, 65 pairs. This amounts to about 12% of the British breeding population, and less than 0.1% of the international population. Whimbrels do not breed in Northern Ireland. The SPA suite total is contained at a single site (Table 6.72a.1) where Whimbrel has been listed as a qualifying species.

#### **6. Classification criteria**

No site in the UK holds more than 1% of the international population of Whimbrel. No sites were thus selected under Stage 1.2.

Ten sites in the north of Scotland were assessed under Stage 1.4 to provide coverage of population size and range. The Stage 2 judgements of population size, range and multi-species interest were especially used to inform the selection of sites. Following consideration of these judgements, Fetlar was included as the site supporting the largest population within the core distribution in Shetland. This site has a relatively high breeding density of Whimbrel with a good record of breeding success (Grant 1991), and a long history of occupancy. It is a multi-species site. Habitat comprises largely serpentine heath with some mires and reseeded heathland (both new and old).

**Distribution map for breeding Whimbrel SPA suite**



**Table 6.72a.1 – SPA suite**

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Fetlar	65	<0.1	12.3	1.4
<b>TOTALS</b>	65	<0.1%	12.3%	