

A6.80 Great Skua *Catharacta skua* (breeding)

1. Status in UK

Biological status		Legal status		Conservation status	
Breeding	✓	Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981	General Protection	Species of European Conservation Concern	SPEC 4 Favourable conservation status (secure) but concentrated in Europe
Migratory	✓	Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985	General Protection	(UK) Species of Conservation Importance	Table 4
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	8,500	85	6,262 (74% of GB population)
Ireland			
Biogeographic population	13,600	136	6,262 (46% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: Walsh *et al.* 1995

Biogeographic population source: Lloyd *et al.* 1991

3. Distribution

The taxonomy of the Great Skua is complex, but it is considered to be polytypic with four sub-species described. The nominate race *Catharacta skua skua* is the only sub-species to occur in the northern hemisphere and is endemic to Europe. The other three sub-species occur throughout the southern oceans, breeding within sub-Antarctic and Antarctic island groups. In Europe, Great Skuas have a localised breeding distribution and are present in just a few countries, with the main population centres being in Iceland, Scotland and the Faroe Islands (Cramp & Simmons 1983; Furness 1987; Lloyd *et al.* 1991).

In the UK, the species occurs mainly in Orkney and Shetland, with smaller numbers at a few sites in the Outer Hebrides and the mainland of north-west Scotland (Lloyd *et al.* 1991). It nests colonially and is present at its colonies from April to August. During this period, it forages in inshore waters around the northern islands (Stone *et al.* 1995), feeding by stealing food from other seabirds.

Outside the breeding season, Great Skuas move southwards as far as the north coast of South America and West Africa (Cramp & Simmons 1983), but with relatively large numbers in the

Bay of Biscay (Stone *et al.* 1995). However, the species can occur widely in the North Atlantic.

4. Population structure and trends

The world population of the nominate sub-species of Great Skua is estimated at about 13,600 pairs (Lloyd *et al.* 1991), and as the sub-species has a distinct biogeographical range, this is the population estimate used for the current review. Over 60% of this population (8,500 pairs) nests in Scotland (Walsh *et al.* 1995).

It seems likely that the species colonised the northern hemisphere relatively recently, probably just before the sixteenth century (Furness 1987). The earliest Scottish records refer to a few pairs nesting in Shetland in the eighteenth century. In the late nineteenth century, the skins of Great Skuas became prized by bird collectors, and the species was virtually exterminated in Scotland. It was partly helped back from the brink by the employment of a full-time warden on Hermaness from 1891 onwards – possibly the first wildlife protection warden in Scotland.

Since the low point in the 1890s, the UK population approximately doubled every ten years until the 1970s (Furness 1987). This rate of increase probably slowed after 1970, but is difficult to measure precisely as some pairs now nest inland in areas that had not been surveyed prior to 1985-1987. This makes it impossible to describe precisely the overall population trend in the UK. However, numbers in Shetland will have benefited in recent years from the abundance of whitefish discarded as undersized catches (Hudson & Furness 1988; Furness 1997). In contrast, the failure of sandeel recruitment in the late 1980s and early 1990s had a negative effect on the population, in particular, reducing recruitment at Foula (Hamer *et al.* 1991).

An analysis comparing total numbers in 1974–1975 and 1985–1986 in mainland Shetland indicated a 9% per annum increase over this period, whereas on Foula (the stronghold of the species, see below) the increase was much less, giving an overall figure for Shetland of only 1.3% per annum (Ewins *et al.* 1988). Sears *et al.* (1995) reported a similar situation in a 1992 census. Colonies in Shetland monitored by the UK Seabird Monitoring Programme continued to increase in size after 1992 (*e.g.* Walsh *et al.* 1995; Thompson *et al.* 1999). Elsewhere in the North Atlantic, the population on the Faroes is believed to have increased, but not as significantly as in Scotland (Furness 1987).

5. Protection measures for population in UK

SPA suite

In the breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Great Skua supports, on average about 6,262 pairs. This amounts to about 74% of the British breeding population. Great Skuas do not breed in Northern Ireland. The suite contains about 46% of the international (world) population. The SPA suite contains nine sites (Table 6.80.1) where Great Skua has been listed as a qualifying species.

6. Classification criteria

All six sites in the UK that support more than 1% of the international breeding population of Great Skuas were considered under Stage 1.2. All (Hermaness, Saxa Vord and Valla Field; Fetlar; Noss; Foula; Hoy; and St Kilda) were selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements. Additionally, three sites (Ronas Hill - North Roe and Tinson; Fair Isle; and

Handa) were selected under Stage 1.3 (see section 5.3), with Great Skua identified as an important component of the breeding seabird assemblages at these localities.

Given that the selection of sites under Stages 1.1 and 1.3 resulted in a suite which gives comprehensive coverage of Great Skua population and range in the UK, it was not considered necessary to select additional sites using Stage 1.4.

All sites selected are multi-species SPAs, important for a range of other seabirds.

The distribution of SPAs covers the range of Great Skua in the UK, from the north of Shetland, west to St Kilda. Its core distribution is in Shetland (six sites), including the largest colony in the world in Foula. Some UK SPAs for this species have a very long recorded history of occupancy. For example, Saxa Vord was the site where Great Skuas were first recorded as a breeding species in Britain (Low 1879) although breeding had occurred there from the early 1770s (Furness 1987). There are also 18th century records from Foula, Hermaness, and Ronas Hill (which was colonised in the 1820s) (Furness 1981, 1987; Holloway 1996). Other sites were colonised in the early years of the 20th century: Fetlar (1900–1909), Noss (1910), and Hoy (1914) (Furness 1987; Meek *et al.* 1985). St Kilda was occupied more recently (1962).

Distribution map for Great Skua SPA suite

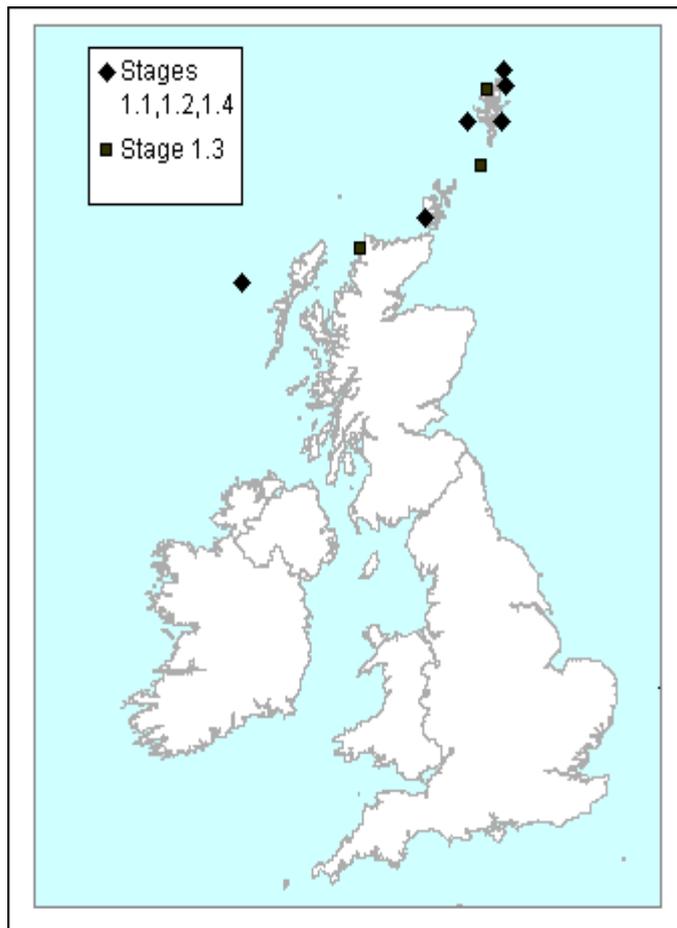


Table 6.80.1 – SPA suite

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Fair Isle	130	1.0	1.5	1.3
Fetlar	512	3.8	6.0	1.2
Foula	2,170	16.0	25.5	1.2
Handa	110	0.8	1.3	1.3
Hermaness, Saxa Vord and Valla Field	630	4.6	7.4	1.2
Hoy	1,900	14.0	22.4	1.2
Noss	410	3.0	4.8	1.2
Ronas Hill - North Roe and Tingon	130	1.0	1.5	1.3
St Kilda	270	2.0	3.2	1.2
TOTALS	6,262	46.0%	73.7%	