

A6.82 Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* (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	167,000	1,670	15,582 (9% of GB population)
Ireland	53,800	538	33,000 (61% of all-Ireland population)
Biogeographic population	1,650,000	16,500	48,582 (3% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: Lloyd *et al.* 1991

Ireland population source: Gibbons *et al.* 1987

Biogeographic population source: Lloyd *et al.* 1991

3. Distribution

The Black-headed Gull has a global breeding range that extends from about 35°–65°N throughout the Palearctic from the Kamchatka Peninsula in the east, to the Atlantic seaboard in the west (Cramp & Simmons 1983). The species is monotypic.

In Europe, many colonies occur along the north-western coasts as well as a few areas around the Mediterranean. The largest coastal colonies are found in Sweden, Denmark, The Netherlands and Britain (Cramp *et al.* 1983). However, Black-headed Gulls also have an extensive inland breeding distribution, occurring in most European countries.

In Britain, coastal colonies are largest in southern and south-eastern England and along the Irish Sea, including a large colony in the Ribble estuary (20,000 pairs in 1985) (Lloyd *et al.* 1991). As elsewhere, inland colonies are more numerous than coastal sites, especially in north-west Ireland, Wales, north-west England and most of Scotland. These include some significant concentrations such as 33,000 nests in 1987 at Lough Neagh, Northern Ireland and 25,000 pairs at Sunbigin Tarn in Cumbria (Lloyd *et al.* 1991).

Throughout the range, typical Black-headed Gull breeding habitats include bogs, marshes and man-made ponds. Dry sites next to water are also selected, such as heath-covered moorland, coastal sand-dunes, rocky islets and industrial waste dumps.

Outside the breeding season Black-headed Gulls range widely, occurring both at sea, as well as inland in much of western Europe (as far south as Spain). The species occurs through the Mediterranean as well as in coastal and inshore areas of much of the north-east Atlantic (Cramp & Simmons 1983; Stone *et al.* 1995).

4. Population structure and trends

There are six described biogeographic populations of Black-headed Gulls (Rose & Scott 1997), of which two occur in Europe (Mediterranean and North-western European populations). As most Black-headed Gulls breed inland throughout their global range, the species' breeding distribution and abundance in most countries is not precisely known. Coastal and inland breeding colonies in Britain and Ireland held at least 220,800 pairs in 1985–1987, or about 22% of the European total.

There has been a marked spread in northern Europe since the early 20th century and the recent colonisation of Italy (1960), Spain (1960), Greenland (1969) and Newfoundland (1977) would suggest this expansion is continuing. British and Irish populations have also reflected the increases that started during the 1900s (Cramp *et al.* 1983). More recent population changes have only been adequately documented for coastal sites, and these showed a slight increase of about 7% between 1969–1970 and 1985–1987 for Britain and Ireland as a whole (Lloyd *et al.* 1991). English coastal colonies showed an overall increase of more than 30%, whereas over the same period, a 55% decrease was recorded on Scottish coasts (particularly south-east Scotland). Coastal populations in Wales also declined.

In Ireland, numbers on the north-east coast increased by 70%, but elsewhere there were no clear trends. In some areas dramatic variations may occur, for example, a tenfold increase in east and west Sussex sites from 260 to 2,900 pairs between the two census dates (Gibbons *et al.* 1993). Such phenomena may, however, merely reflect movements between colonies. Inter-colony movements by breeding birds are known to occur inland (Gribble 1976), at least, in response to factors such as disturbance or fluctuations in water levels.

The most notable recent changes are the apparent loss of colonies in Scotland (probably a consequence of agricultural drainage) and north-west Ireland (Gibbons *et al.* 1993). The latter loss may be due in part to changes in census coverage but the decline in Scotland is unclear. There has not been any apparent increase in the amount of predation, flooding or other factors that have adversely affected coastal birds so the reason for the decline remains unknown.

5. Protection measures for population in UK

SPA suite

In the breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Black-headed Gulls supports, on average, 48,582 pairs. This amounts to about 9% of the British breeding population, 61% of the all-Ireland population, and about 3% of the international population. The SPA suite total is contained within four sites (Table 6.82.1) where Black-headed Gull has been listed as a qualifying species.

6. Classification criteria

The single Black-headed Gull colony in the UK that supports more than 1% of the international breeding population (Lough Neagh and Lough Beg) was considered under Stage 1.2, and was selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements. Additionally, the Alde-Ore Estuary, Coquet Island and the Ribble and Alt Estuaries were selected under Stage 1.3 (see section 5.3), since Black-headed Gulls were identified at those sites as an important component of a wider breeding seabird assemblage. All these sites are multi-species SPAs, important for a range of other seabirds.

The suite encompasses sites in Northern Ireland, and north and east England. Black-headed Gull has a wide distribution in the UK and is a very successful species. Accordingly, as the selection of sites under Stages 1.2 and 1.3 resulted in a suite which gives adequate coverage of the population and breeding range in the UK, there was no case to select additional sites using Stage 1.4.

Distribution map for breeding Black-headed Gull SPA suite

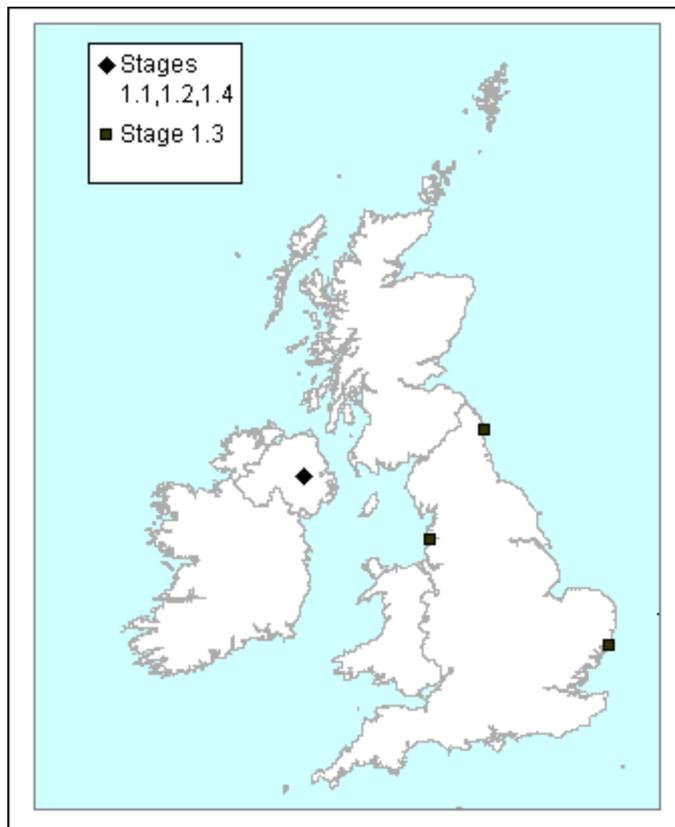


Table 6.82.1 – SPA suite

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Alde-Ore Estuary	1,582	0.1	1.0	1.3
Coquet Island	2,100	0.1	1.3	1.3
Lough Neagh and Lough Beg	33,000	2.0	61.3 (Ire)	1.2
Ribble and Alt Estuaries	11,900	0.7	7.1	1.3

TOTALS	48,582	2.9%	9.3% 61.3% (Ire)
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