

## A6.84 Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*

### 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
<b>GB</b>	83,000	830	88,028 (c. 100% of GB population)
<b>Ireland</b>	5,200	52	605 (12% of all-Ireland population)
<b>Biogeographic population</b>	124,000	1,240	88,633 (71% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: Lloyd et al. 1991

All-Ireland population source: Gibbons et al. 1989

Biogeographic population source: Lloyd et al. 1991

### 3. Distribution

The Lesser Black-backed Gull has a restricted global breeding range that extends from Iceland east to the Taimyr peninsula and south to Portugal. In the eastern part of the range, the Lesser Black-backed Gull is an Arctic breeding bird, occurring largely in inland areas above the Arctic Circle and especially along major river valleys (Rogaeva 1992). Further west, breeding occurs south to about 40°N on the coast of Portugal. In western Europe, Lesser Black-backed Gulls have a largely coastal breeding distribution with colonies occurring only short distances from the coast.

The species is polytypic, with five sub-species described, of which four occur in Europe. The nominate race *L. f. fuscus* breeds in northern Norway, Sweden and the western part of the Kola Peninsula. All the birds that breed in Britain and Ireland belong to the race *L. f. graellsii* whose range also includes Iceland, France and north-west Spain. The sub-species *L. f. intermedius* breeds in The Netherlands and Denmark, whilst *L. f. heuglini* breeds from the southern Kola Peninsula to the Yenisey. A further race is found further east in Russia breeding from the Yenisey east to the Taimyr (Cramp & Simmons 1983).

Other than in Finland and around the White Sea, the European distribution of Lesser Black-backed Gulls is largely restricted to coastal areas.

The species is widespread throughout Britain and Ireland with possibly a more southerly distribution than the closely related Herring Gull. The west coasts of England and Wales hold upwards of 58% of the coastal breeding population and there is another marked concentration of colonies in central Scotland. In Ireland, far more birds breed inland than on the coast, especially in the west of the country (Lloyd *et al.* 1991). Lesser Black-backed Gulls share many colonies with Herring Gulls, though the former tend to favour more vegetated breeding habitats.

Lesser Black-backed Gulls are highly migratory, and outside the breeding season birds move south along the west coasts of Europe and Africa. Coastal wintering birds occur as far as the coast of Nigeria, and there is some evidence from ringing recoveries of birds wintering inland in the Inner Niger Delta (Cramp & Simmons 1983). At least some birds remain in northern waters, with sightings of birds at sea around Britain and Ireland in all months of the year (Stone *et al.* 1995).

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

The European population of Lesser Black-backed Gulls has been estimated at between 212,377–229,522 pairs (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997), although this total includes birds of several sub-species as noted above. The total *L. f. graellsii* population amounts to about 124,000 pairs (Lloyd *et al.* 1991) and this is the biogeographic population used in this review. In 1985–1987, there were 88,200 Lesser Black-backed Gulls breeding in Britain and Ireland – about 71% of total *L. f. graellsii* numbers.

Like many other seabird species, the Lesser Black-backed Gull has expanded its range and abundance during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The species first bred in Iceland, The Netherlands and Germany during the 1920s and 1930s. It also recolonised northern France over the same period. In another expansion episode, Spain and Portugal were colonised in the 1970s (Cramp *et al.* 1983). More recently, some populations have been showing signs of decline (Finland, Sweden and Denmark) (Lloyd *et al.* 1991), though in Britain and Ireland numbers increased by about 25% between 1969–1970 and 1985–1987.

The census of 1985–1987 found most Lesser Black-backed Gull colonies to be located in the west of England and Wales, between Cumbria and the Isles of Scilly. Nearly 79% of the total bred in 17 major colonies, each holding over 500 pairs. The largest coastal sites were at Skomer Island (13,205 pairs) and South Walney in Cumbria (10,000). The latter site has more recently been abandoned with birds moving to the Bowland Fells. Other large colonies with more than 2,000 pairs were found at Little Cumbrae in the Firth of Clyde (3,000) (now in decline), and at Orfordness, Suffolk (5,000) (Lloyd *et al.* 1991). As noted above, there have been significant changes in numbers at many of the formerly important breeding colonies, often with birds re-locating to other sites.

Breeding Lesser Black-backed Gull numbers in 1969–1970 in coastal Britain and Ireland were assessed at 50,100 pairs, although increases over many areas had, by 1985–1987, brought the total to an estimated 64,500. Coastal colonies in England between 1969–1970 and 1985–1987 remained stable, but increases were recorded in Scotland (55%), in Wales (65%) and Ireland (29%) (Lloyd *et al.* 1991). Problems with the census techniques make interpretation of the data difficult for some areas but there was a general upward trend in breeding numbers between 1969–1970 and 1985–1987. A highly significant increase in the number of gulls breeding on the shingle spit of Orfordness, Suffolk was recorded. The first pairs of Lesser Black-backed Gulls became established in the mid-1960s on then Ministry of

Defence land. By 1986, the colony had grown to 5,000 pairs (Thomas *et al.* 1982) and by 1997 the figure was 19,700 (Cormack & Lohoar 1999). It was concluded by Thomas *et al.* (1982) that such increases in gull numbers could only have occurred by the immigration of birds into the colony but it was not known from which sources.

Birds nesting inland or at urban sites have not been included in recent seabird surveys, and a number of the inland sites have been culled in recent years, generally on human health grounds. Lloyd (1991) estimated the total inland breeding population of Lesser Black-backed Gulls in Britain in the 1980s to be about 20,000 pairs.

In Ireland, far more birds breed inland than on the coast, particularly in the west of the country. Some 200 pairs were located on the islands of Upper and Lower Lough Erne in 1986. An earlier survey in 1978 found 2,500 pairs in the west of Ireland, mainly on Lough Corrib, Galway (Whilde 1978). A repeat survey in 1983 suggested little change had occurred (Whilde 1983).

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

### **SPA suite**

In the breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Lesser Black-backed Gulls supports, on average, 88,633 pairs. This is virtually the whole of the British breeding population, and about 12% of the all-Ireland population. The suite contains about 71% of the international population (total numbers of *L. f. graellsii*), and comprises ten sites (Table 6.84.1) where Lesser Black-backed Gull has been listed as a qualifying species.

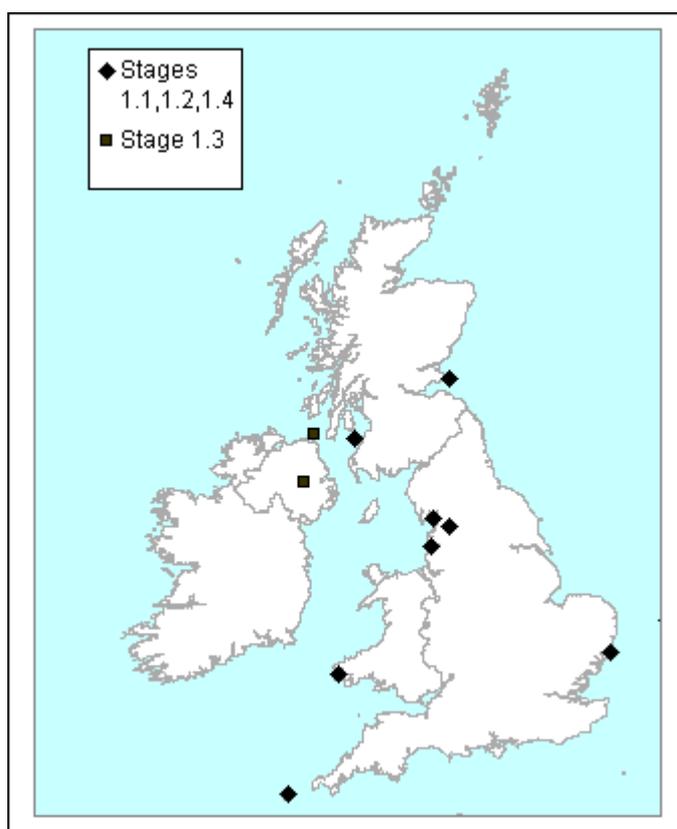
## **6. Classification criteria**

The eight Lesser Black-backed Gulls colonies in the UK that support more than 1% of the international breeding population (Ailsa Craig; Alde-Ore Estuary; Bowland Fells; Firth of Forth Islands; Isles of Scilly; Morecambe Bay; Ribble and Alt Estuaries; and Skomer and Skokholm) were considered under Stage 1.2, and all were selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements. Additionally, Lough Neagh and Lough Beg, and Rathlin Island were both selected under Stage 1.3 (see section 5.3), with Lesser Black-backed Gull identified as an important component of wider breeding seabird assemblages at these localities.

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

The suite encompasses ten sites in Northern Ireland, England, Wales and Scotland. 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, it was not considered necessary to select additional sites using Stage 1.4.

### Distribution map for breeding Lesser Black-backed Gull SPA suite



**Table 6.84.1 – SPA suite**

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Ailsa Craig	1,800	1.5	2.2	1.2
Alde-Ore Estuary	21,700	17.5	26.1	1.2
Bowland Fells	13,900	11.2	16.8	1.2
Firth of Forth Islands	2,920	2.4	3.5	1.2
Isles of Scilly	3,608	2.9	4.4	1.2
Lough Neagh and Lough Beg	450	0.4	8.7 (Ire)	1.3
Morecambe Bay	22,000	17.7	26.5	1.2
Rathlin Island	155	0.1	3.0 (Ire)	1.3
Ribble and Alt Estuaries	1,800	1.5	2.2	1.2
Skomer and Skokholm	20,300	16.4	24.5	1.2
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>88,633</b>	<b>71.4%</b>	<b>100%</b> <b>11.6% (Ire)</b>	