

A6.86 Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus* (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	19,000	190	4,457 (23% of GB population)
Ireland	4,500	45	No SPAs selected in Northern Ireland
Biogeographic population	95,546	955	4,457 (5% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: Lloyd et al. 1991

All-Ireland population source: Gibbons et al. 1993

Biogeographic population source: Hagemeijer & Blair 1997

3. Distribution

The Great Black-backed Gull is the largest and most maritime of the six *Larus* gulls that breed regularly in Britain and Ireland. Its global breeding range extends around the coasts of the North Atlantic: from Chesapeake Bay on the east coast of the USA, up the eastern coast of Canada, Greenland, Iceland, Svalbard, and the coasts of Scandinavia and the Baltic through to the White Sea. In the east Atlantic, the range extends south to include Britain, Ireland and France. The species is monotypic.

In Europe, Great Black-backed Gulls breed in Brittany and on the west coasts of Britain and Ireland. They are largely absent from southern and western coasts of the North Sea, but breed around the Baltic Sea from Estonia almost continuously to the White Sea (Cramp & Simmons 1983).

Great Black-backed Gulls breed around much of the UK coastline, from the Solent to Shetland. They are largely absent in the breeding season from the east coast of England and Scotland. In 1985–1987 around 70% of the total coastal population bred in Scotland (Lloyd et al. 1991). The majority of these colonies were found in Orkney, Shetland and the Western

Isles. North Rona (733 pairs) was the only Scottish island outside Orkney to hold over 200 pairs (Gibbons *et al.* 1993). The remainder of the population occurred in England – mainly the south-west (7%), and Wales (2%). Only two of the Irish colonies recorded in 1985–1987 held over 200 pairs: Duvillaun Islands off Mayo and a site in the Blasket Islands off Kerry. Other smaller colonies were found in Donegal, Dublin, Cork, Galway and Wexford.

Great Black-backed Gulls are generally coastal breeders nesting on islands or on top of rocky stacks. A small number of gulls nest inland on moorland or beside lochs.

Outside the breeding season, Great Black-backed Gulls range widely in the seas around northern Europe, especially inshore waters around the North Sea (Stone *et al.* 1995).

4. Population structure and trends

The European breeding population of Great Black-backed Gulls is estimated at between 95,546–121,233 pairs (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997). As the species is monotypic the minimum figure of this range is considered as the biogeographical population for the purposes of this review.

The total breeding numbers of Great Black-backed Gulls in Russia and Iceland are not known with any precision, but the world population was estimated by Lloyd *et al.* 1991 as between 120,000–240,000 pairs. In 1985–1987, the British population was estimated at 19,000 pairs and the Irish population at 4,500 pairs (Lloyd *et al.* 1991). The combined British and Irish total of 23,500 pairs represents about 25% of the estimated European population and around 10% of the world population.

From near elimination in the 19th century, there was a strong and widespread increase in the British and Irish populations. The trend began around 1880 and continued for most of the 20th century (Parslow 1967). This reflected a more general spread and increase during the 20th century over most of the species' range on both sides of the Atlantic, although the breeding populations of Britain and Ireland appeared to be stable by the 1970s and 1980s (Cramp *et al.* 1983). Great Black-backed Gulls colonised Svalbard, Denmark and France in the 1920s and 1930s and have recently spread north to the North West Territories of Canada (Brown & Nettleship 1984). One large increase occurred at the colony on Ainov Island in the Barents Sea which grew tenfold between 1958 and 1984 to 6,000 pairs (Golovkin 1984). The largest North American colony, off Long Island, New York, held over 2,000 pairs in 1983 (Buckley & Buckley 1984). By comparison, the largest Great Black-backed Gull colony in Britain and Ireland was the Calf of Eday, Orkney with 800 pairs in 1986.

The reasons for this expansion are unclear but there could be a number of factors, including the enactment of bird protection measures at the end of the 19th century which helped to ease the persecution and egg collecting that had formerly kept numbers of Great Black-backed Gulls and other seabirds low. The greater availability of discarded fish and offal at sea (Hudson & Furness 1988; Camphuysen *et al.* 1995) and access to food at landfill sites have probably also helped cause the increase.

Great Black-backed Gull numbers in Britain and Ireland appeared to have altered little between 1969–1970 (22,500 pairs) and 1985–1987 (23,300 pairs) although the latter total includes a possible census error (Lloyd *et al.* 1991). Small declines occurred in the north of Scotland and the Channel Islands, whereas there were small increases in Northern Ireland, Cumbria and the Isle of Man. The few colonies in north-west Ireland counted in both 1969–1972 and 1986–1987 showed increases of 60–70%, but this figure is based on a very incomplete set of data. Breeding pairs on the Isles of Scilly varied from 1,200 to 1,600 pairs between 1969 and 1983, but declined to 1,000 pairs by 1987 (Birkin & Smith 1987). The

small Welsh breeding population declined by more than half between 1969 and 1983. The main losses were in the colonies of Midland, Skomer and St Margaret's; each had over 100 pairs in 1969 but these had reduced to between 20–40 pairs in 1985–1987 (Lloyd *et al.* 1991).

5. Protection measures for population in UK

SPA suite

In the breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Great Black-backed Gulls supports, on average, 4,457 pairs. This amounts to about 23% of the British breeding population, and about 5% of the international population. Within an all-Ireland context, there have been no SPAs selected in Northern Ireland. The SPA suite contains six sites (Table 6.86.1) where Great Black-backed Gull has been listed as a qualifying species.

6. Classification criteria

No Great Black-backed Gull colonies in the UK hold more than 1% of the international breeding population. At six sites (Calf of Eday; Copinsay; East Caithness Cliffs; Hoy; Isles of Scilly; North Rona and Sula Sgeir) however, Great Black-backed Gull occurs as an important component of a wider breeding seabird assemblage. Accordingly, these six sites were selected under Stage 1.3 (see section 5.3), after consideration of Stage 2 judgements. By definition, all these sites are multi-species SPAs, important for a range of other seabirds. There is a very long history of occupation at some of the selected SPAs (Holloway 1996), with written records for some colonies dating from the 19th century.

The suite encompasses sites in northern Scotland as well as south-west England. Outside the SPA suite, Great Black-backed Gulls generally occur at low densities and are widely distributed. Accordingly, it was not considered necessary to select additional sites using Stage 1.4.

Distribution map for breeding Great Black-backed Gull SPA suite

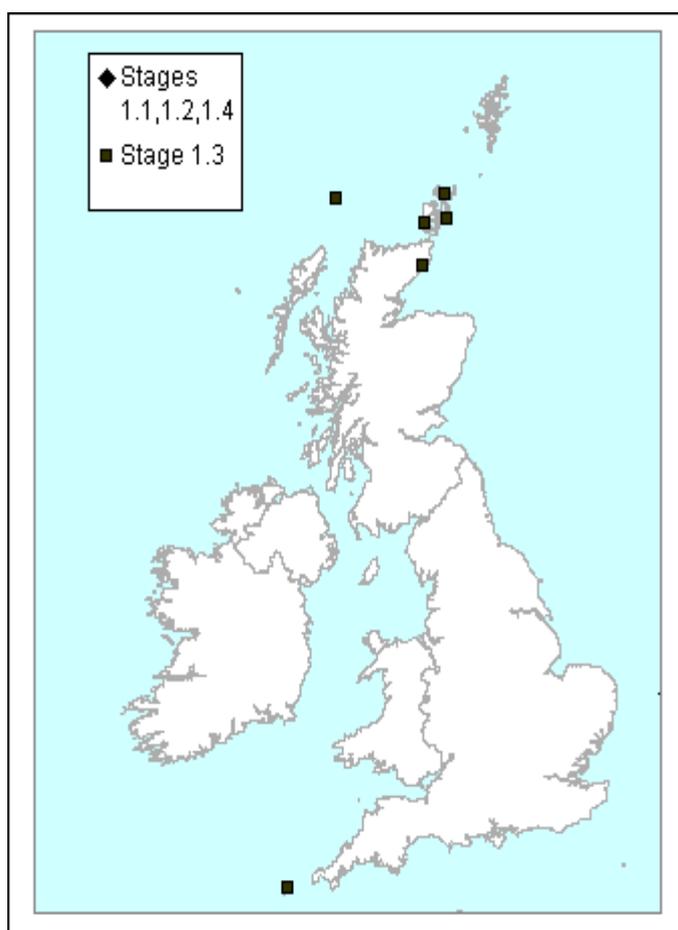


Table 6.86.1 – SPA suite

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Calf of Eday	938	0.9	4.9	1.3
Copinsay	600	0.6	3.2	1.3
East Caithness Cliffs	850	0.9	4.5	1.3
Hoy	570	0.6	3.0	1.3
Isles of Scilly	766	0.8	4.0	1.3
North Rona and Sula Sgeir	733	0.8	3.9	1.3
TOTALS	4,457	4.7%	23.5%	