

A6.9 Leach's Petrel *Oceanodroma leucorhoa* (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 3 Unfavourable conservation status (localised) but not concentrated in Europe
Migratory	✓	Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985	General Protection	(UK) Species of Conservation Importance	Table 4
Wintering	✓	EC Birds Directive 1979	Annex 1 Migratory	All-Ireland Vertebrate Red Data Book	

2. Population data

	Population sizes (pairs)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
GB	55,000	550	55,000 (100% of GB population)
Ireland			
Biogeographic population	955,000	9,550	55,000 (5.8% of the biogeographic population)

GB population source: Lloyd *et al.* 1991

Biogeographic population source: Lloyd *et al.* 1991

3. Distribution

Leach's Petrels have a wide global distribution. Breeding occurs in both the North Atlantic and North Pacific Oceans, and they have recently been found on islands in the Southern Ocean. The taxonomy of Leach's Petrel is complex and changing, although four sub-species are currently recognised (del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). Of these, only the nominate race occurs in European waters.

The East Atlantic/European distribution is highly restricted — with single localities in Ireland, Norway and the Faeroes, and two sites in southern Iceland. The remaining seven sites occur on remote offshore islands of the north and west of Scotland close to feeding areas near the continental shelf.

The birds are present at their colonies in Britain from May to September. During this time, they feed at sea close to their breeding islands (Stone *et al.* 1995). During September to November, some sporadically occur in British waters (Stone *et al.* 1995), but the bulk of the population migrates south to over-winter in tropical waters. There is a major movement down the west coast of Africa into the South Atlantic, and some reach the Indian Ocean (del Hoyo *et al.* 1992).

4. Population structure and trends

The world population size is estimated at seven to nine million pairs, with the majority on islands in Alaska (Lloyd *et al.* 1991).

Owing to the great difficulty in surveying this species, which nests in burrows and crevices on offshore islands and possibly cliffs, very little is known about its population size. All population estimates, with the exception of a few islands subjected to relatively intense study, have a very low degree of accuracy; most being little more than informed guesses. The midpoint of the estimate of the North Atlantic biogeographic population is 955,000 pairs, but numbers may be as high as 1,135,000 pairs (Lloyd *et al.* 1991).

Owing to the study difficulties, it is extremely difficult to judge how overall numbers of Leach's Petrels may have changed during this century. Leach's Petrels nest mostly on islands free from rats, cats and other mammalian predators. It seems likely that numbers on Foula in Shetland have declined since the arrival of cats. Leach's Petrels are also preyed upon by Great Skuas, and Phillips *et al.* (1999) suggested that Leach's Petrels on St Kilda may be declining as a consequence of this predation.

Surveys undertaken during the *Seabird 2000* initiative have been targeted at obtaining better estimates for this species at many of its haunts. Thus, a much more precise estimate for most breeding sites can be anticipated when these data are available.

5. Protection measures for population in UK

SPA suite

In the breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Leach's Petrel supports about 55,000 pairs. This amounts to the whole of the British breeding population and about 6% of the international population. The species does not breed in Northern Ireland. This total is contained within six sites (Table 6.9.1) for which Leach's Petrel has been listed as a qualifying species.

It should be noted that both the national population estimate and site totals have a significant degree of uncertainty attached to them, a consequence of the major logistical and methodological difficulties of assessing numbers of this enigmatic, nocturnal bird on highly remote offshore islands. The results of fieldwork carried out at most sites as part of the *Seabird 2000* survey will enhance our knowledge of numbers.

6. Classification criteria

The suite comprises all known breeding sites in the UK. Two SPAs (St Kilda, and North Rona and Sula Sgeir) were selected under Stage 1.1, whilst the remaining four colonies were selected under Stage 1.4. This was in light of the recommendation of the 1988 ICBP-EC Working Group on the selection of SPAs (see Appendix 3 of Stroud *et al.* 1990) that all breeding sites of six very poorly known seabirds in Europe be selected as SPAs. Of these six, only Leach's Petrel occurs in the UK.

Most sites selected are multi-species SPAs, important for a range of other seabirds, although Ramna Stacks and Gruney, and the Flannan Islands have been selected solely for this species. The sites have a high degree of naturalness, with Leach's Petrel selecting nest sites in natural

crevices on these locations – in contrast to Storm Petrels which are often found nesting in human artefacts such as old walls, ‘brochs’ (ancient dry-stone fortifications) or dikes.

Most UK SPAs for this species have a very long recorded history of occupancy (Holloway 1996). The first record of this species in the UK came from St Kilda in 1818 (being at that time only the fourth specimen known to science), although breeding was not confirmed until 1841. On North Rona, the first record was in 1883 (Swinburne 1884) and on nearby Sula Sgeir it was discovered in 1939 by Atkinson & Ainslie (1940). It was first recorded from the Flannans by W. Eagle Clarke in 1904. There were records from Sule Skerry and Sule Stack in 1933 (Robinson 1934) and from Foula in the 1950s (Wilson 1958). There are few historical records from Ramna Stacks and Gruney where the species was first located in 1980 (Fowler 1982) and numbers at that site have always been thought to be low.

Distribution map for breeding Leach’s Petrel SPA suite

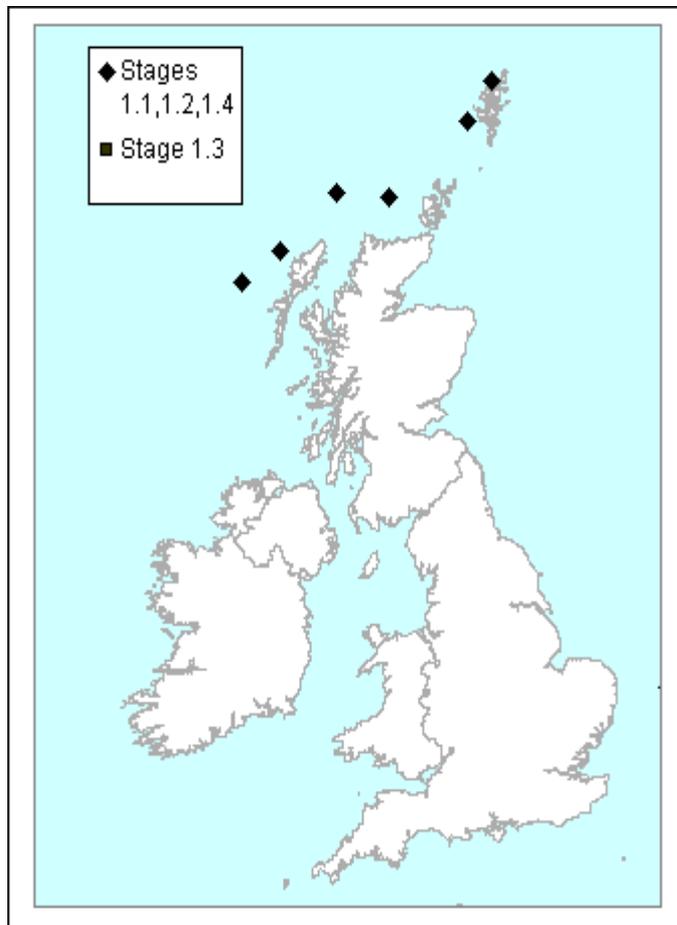


Table 6.9.1 – SPA suite

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Flannan Isles	100	<0.1	0.2	1.4
Foula	50	<0.1	<0.1	1.4
North Rona and Sula Sgeir	2,750	0.3	5.0	1.1
Ramna Stacks and Gruney	22	<0.1	<0.1	1.4
St Kilda	52,073	5.5	94.7	1.1
Sule Skerry and Sule Stack	5	<0.1	<0.1	1.4
TOTALS	55,000	5.8%	100%	