

## A6.94 Razorbill *Alca torda* (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
<b>GB</b>	99,160	991	75,357 (76% of GB population)
<b>Ireland</b>	22,780	228	5,978 (26% of all-Ireland population)
<b>Biogeographic population</b>	575,000	5,750	81,335 (14% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: Lloyd et al. 1991

All-Ireland population source: Gibbons et al. 1993

Biogeographic population source: Lloyd et al. 1991

### 3. Distribution

Razorbills have a restricted global distribution, being endemic to the temperate and boreal coasts of the North Atlantic and associated seas. The population is centred on Iceland where over half the world population nests. The Razorbill is a polytypic species with two sub-species described: *A. t. islandica* and *A. t. torda*. The nominate sub-species occurs in north-east America and Greenland in the west, Bear Island in the north, and Denmark, Norway and the Kola Peninsula in the east (Cramp 1985). Birds nesting in Britain and Ireland belong to *A. t. islandica*, which has a more southerly distribution. This sub-species also breeds in Iceland, the Faeroes, Germany (Helgoland) and France (Brittany) (Cramp 1985).

The European distribution ranges from the Kola Peninsula in the north-east to Brittany in the south. In the UK, the principal breeding sites are in northern Scotland, including the Western Isles, Shetland, Caithness and Sutherland (Lloyd *et al.* 1991). The three largest Scottish concentrations (in 1985–1987) were Handa, Berneray and the Shiants. The principal breeding areas in England and Wales were Bempton (Humberside) and Skomer (Dyfed). The main breeding area in Northern Ireland was Rathlin Island (Antrim).

Nests are located on cliff ledges or in crevices in cliffs, boulders or scree slopes, sometimes in the absence of cliffs (Cramp 1985). At sea, Razorbills prefer continental-shelf waters of 51–100 m depth (Stone *et al.* 1995).

Outside the breeding season, Razorbills occur widely in coastal waters off western Britain and Ireland, and in the North Sea. In July, chicks leave the colonies before they can fly and swim out to sea to fledge. In the period July to September, major concentrations occur in inshore areas, especially off the east coast of Scotland. In mid-winter, Razorbills are more widely distributed in the southern North Sea and the Western Approaches, reflecting a general southward movement of most northerly breeding birds (Stone *et al.* 1995). In spring, they again move northwards towards the vicinity of the breeding colonies.

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

The size of the *A. t. islandica* population (the biogeographical population used for this review) is estimated at 575,000 pairs, with the largest colonies outside Iceland occurring in Britain (Lloyd *et al.* 1991).

Prior to the Operation Seafarer surveys of 1969–1970, there was very little information about the numbers of breeding Razorbills in the UK. Limited data suggested that decreases might have occurred in some colonies in south-west England (Cramp *et al.* 1974). Although differences in count methodology between the 1969–1970 and 1985–1987 (Seabird Colony Register) surveys make it impossible to assess regional and national population trends (Lloyd *et al.* 1991), there was relatively little change in distribution between the two surveys (Harris 1993).

Standardised census of many individual colonies during the national surveys showed that most had increased, particularly in Shetland, north-east Scotland and north-east England. A few in north and west Scotland showed trends that are more variable. Overall, colonies in southern Britain were stable (Lloyd *et al.* 1991). Monitoring plots have shown that Razorbill numbers in the Northern Isles and at some sites in eastern Scotland increased from the late 1960s up to the beginning of the 1980s, but then stabilised or declined. In southern England and Wales numbers have remained stable or declined (Lloyd *et al.* 1991).

Elsewhere in the international range of *A. t. islandica*, population trends are poorly known although past records indicate no recent large-scale changes in range (Nettleship & Evans 1985). In Iceland, the population is apparently increasing although many large colonies remain uncounted. The Faeroes population is apparently stable following large decreases early in the last century. Decreases have been noted for the breeding populations of France and Ireland (Hildén & Tasker 1997).

The exact reasons for recent increases in Razorbill numbers are unknown but food availability is an important influence on population changes (Lloyd *et al.* 1991). Mortality may be caused by either chemical or oil pollution (the latter possibly responsible for decreases of breeding numbers in Brittany), or by drowning in fishing nets (Hildén & Tasker 1997). Deaths in nets have increased in recent years (Mead 1989) and are, perhaps, responsible for breeding population decreases in Norway and south and west Ireland (Harris 1993; Hildén & Tasker 1997).

## 5. Protection measures for population in UK

### SPA suite

During the breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Razorbill supports, on average, 81,335 pairs. This amounts to about 76% of the British breeding population, about 26% of the all-Ireland population and about 14% of the international population. The SPA suite contains 19 sites (Table 6.94.1) where Razorbill has been listed as a qualifying species.

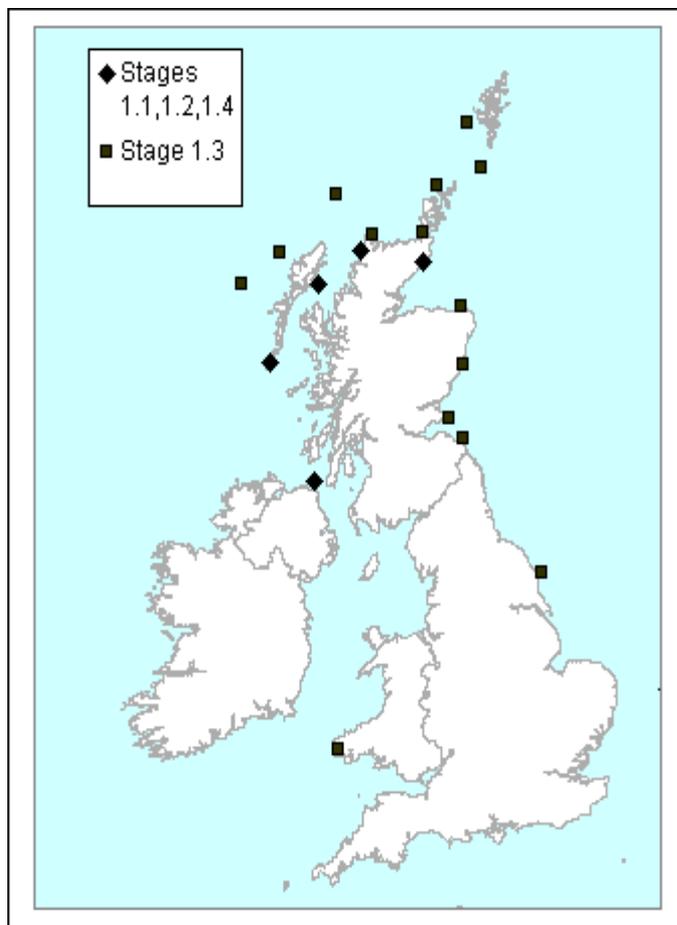
## 6. Classification criteria

The five Razorbill colonies in the UK that support more than 1% of the international breeding population (East Caithness Cliffs; Handa; Mingulay and Berneray; Rathlin Island; and Shiant Isles) were considered under Stage 1.2, and all were selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements. An additional 14 sites were selected under Stage 1.3 (see section 5.3), with Razorbill identified as an important component of breeding seabird assemblages at these localities.

All the sites selected are multi-species SPAs, important for a range of other seabirds. Many have a very long recorded history of occupancy, with written records from at least the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Holloway 1996).

The suite encompasses sites in Northern Ireland, England, Wales and Scotland. As the selection of sites under Stages 1.2 and 1.3 resulted in adequate coverage of the range and numbers of this colonial species in the UK, it was not considered necessary to select additional sites using Stage 1.4.

### Distribution map for breeding Razorbill SPA suite



**Table 6.94.1 – SPA suite**

<b>Site name</b>	<b>Site total</b>	<b>% of biogeographical population</b>	<b>% of national population</b>	<b>Selection stage</b>
Cape Wrath	1,206	0.2	1.2	1.3
East Caithness Cliffs	9,259	1.6	9.3	1.2
Fair Isle	2,044	0.4	2.1	1.3
Firth of Forth Islands	2,693	0.5	2.7	1.3
Flamborough Head and Bempton Cliffs	5,133	0.9	5.2	1.3
Flannan Isles	2,117	0.4	2.1	1.3
Foula	4,154	0.7	4.2	1.3
Fowlsheugh	4,576	0.8	4.6	1.3
Handa	10,432	1.8	10.5	1.2
Mingulay and Berneray	11,323	2.0	11.4	1.2
North Caithness Cliffs	2,212	0.4	2.2	1.3
North Rona and Sula Sgeir	1,541	0.3	1.6	1.3
Rathlin Island	5,978	1.0	26.2 (Ire)	1.2
Shiant Isles	7,337	1.3	7.4	1.2
Skomer and Skokholm	2,854	0.5	2.9	1.3
St Abb's Head to Fast Castle	1,407	0.2	1.4	1.3
St Kilda	2,546	0.4	2.6	1.3
Troup, Pennan and Lion's Heads	3,216	0.6	3.2	1.3
West Westray	1,307	0.2	1.3	1.3

<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>81,335</b>	<b>14.2%</b>	<b>76.0%</b> <b>26.2% (Ire)</b>
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