

Executive summary

- This report presents the UK network of Special Protection Areas (SPAs) identified to meet UK obligations under Article 4 of the European Union's Directive on the conservation of wild birds (EC/79/409 as modified) ('the Birds Directive').
- The SPA network presented in this report is the result of a review undertaken by the UK Joint Nature Conservation Committee together with the Environment and Heritage Service of Northern Ireland, the Countryside Council for Wales, Scottish Natural Heritage and English Nature. The network of sites has been formally recommended to government by the Joint Committee.
- Publication of this review has been guided by a Steering Group comprising representatives of the statutory conservation agencies as well as the National Assembly for Wales, the Scottish Executive and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.
- This review updates the assessment of UK SPAs published in 1992. Since that time, there has been a range of new ornithological surveys undertaken throughout the UK, especially in the uplands and related to a number of species that were highlighted as being poorly represented in the national network proposed in the early 1990s. In view of new information and possible gaps, Government requested JNCC to review the UK SPA network with a view to recommending a definitive list of sites, identified against explicit selection guidelines.
- JNCC has derived guidelines for selecting SPAs, building on existing UK and international practice and precedent. In the absence of agreed European guidelines, there may be scope for their use elsewhere.
- The guidelines have been used to assess the conservation requirements of species listed in Annex I of the Birds Directive and/or migratory species regularly occurring in the UK, and to identify an appropriate suite of SPAs for each species. For Annex I species, assessments have been made at either national scale (Great Britain) or, in the case of Northern Ireland, in an all-Ireland context. For migratory species not listed on Annex I, assessments have been made at an international scale (*i.e.* the relevant biogeographic or flyway populations).
- The SPA suites for each species collectively form the UK SPA network – a contribution to the European Union's Natura 2000 network – that comprises 243 sites. The network extends to c. 1,454,500 ha (see map below).
- Appendix 6 of this report presents accounts for 103 species for which SPAs have been selected. These accounts summarise the species' conservation requirements in the different seasons in which they are present in the UK. They also outline the reasoning underlying the selection of each species' SPA suite.
- Appendix 7 describes each site in the UK's SPA network in a standard format indicating for which species the site has been selected, the features that are important for these species, and the proportion of national or international populations supported.
- The review has been based on best-available data for sites and populations from the first half of the 1990s. The data were the most current and comprehensive that were available at the commencement of the review. They thus provide a comparative assessment for a limited period, and a fixed baseline, even though more recent data have since become available.

- The UK is of major international importance for several groups of birds. These include: breeding seabirds, wintering and passage wildfowl and waders, birds of Britain's distinctive uplands, and birds of the Caledonian pine-forest. A high proportion – in some cases all – of the national and international populations of such species utilise the UK SPA network. In summer, the network holds over 4,946,000 breeding seabirds, whilst in winter it supports an average of over 2,186,000 non-breeding waterbirds. The habitat protection provided for these birds is a major contribution to their international conservation.
- Those species of greatest conservation concern (in the context of the Birds Directive) tend to have the highest proportions of their populations within the UK SPA network, as do those that have the smallest geographic ranges (in summer and winter), and those where the UK holds a high proportion of international numbers.
- SPAs are inappropriate for some UK bird species and thus for these, SPAs have not been selected. This report documents those populations which are broadly and/or sparsely dispersed or where are other reasons why site-protection measures under the Birds Directive are inappropriate, this report documents these. The special protection measures for these species are instead provided by legal protection, together with a range of wider-countryside conservation policies and other initiatives.
- It has not been possible to identify a full SPA suite for a small number of species because of currently changing status or lack of data. Monitoring schemes are being developed to give feedback on changing population status of species within each SPA as well as at national level. This, together with an ever-increasing knowledge of conservation requirements, will allow the UK to modify the SPA network if essential.
- There are minor differences between the UK list of SPAs and BirdLife International's Important Bird Areas inventory. This is unsurprising – indeed, it is to be expected – since different selection guidelines, criteria, and priorities have been used to identify the respective site networks. The UK SPA list more accurately reflects the obligations under the Birds Directive.
- The carefully selected SPA network is of large size, contains a wide variety of habitats and includes sites spread throughout the UK. The network is logically and scientifically derived, collectively robust, and will make an enduring contribution to the conservation of Britain's birds.
- The SPA network presented here provides for the site-based requirements of Birds Directive Annex I and migratory species that regularly occur in the UK. It will enable the UK to meet fully its obligations under the Directive to conserve its internationally important bird fauna.