

A6.105 Assemblages of breeding seabirds

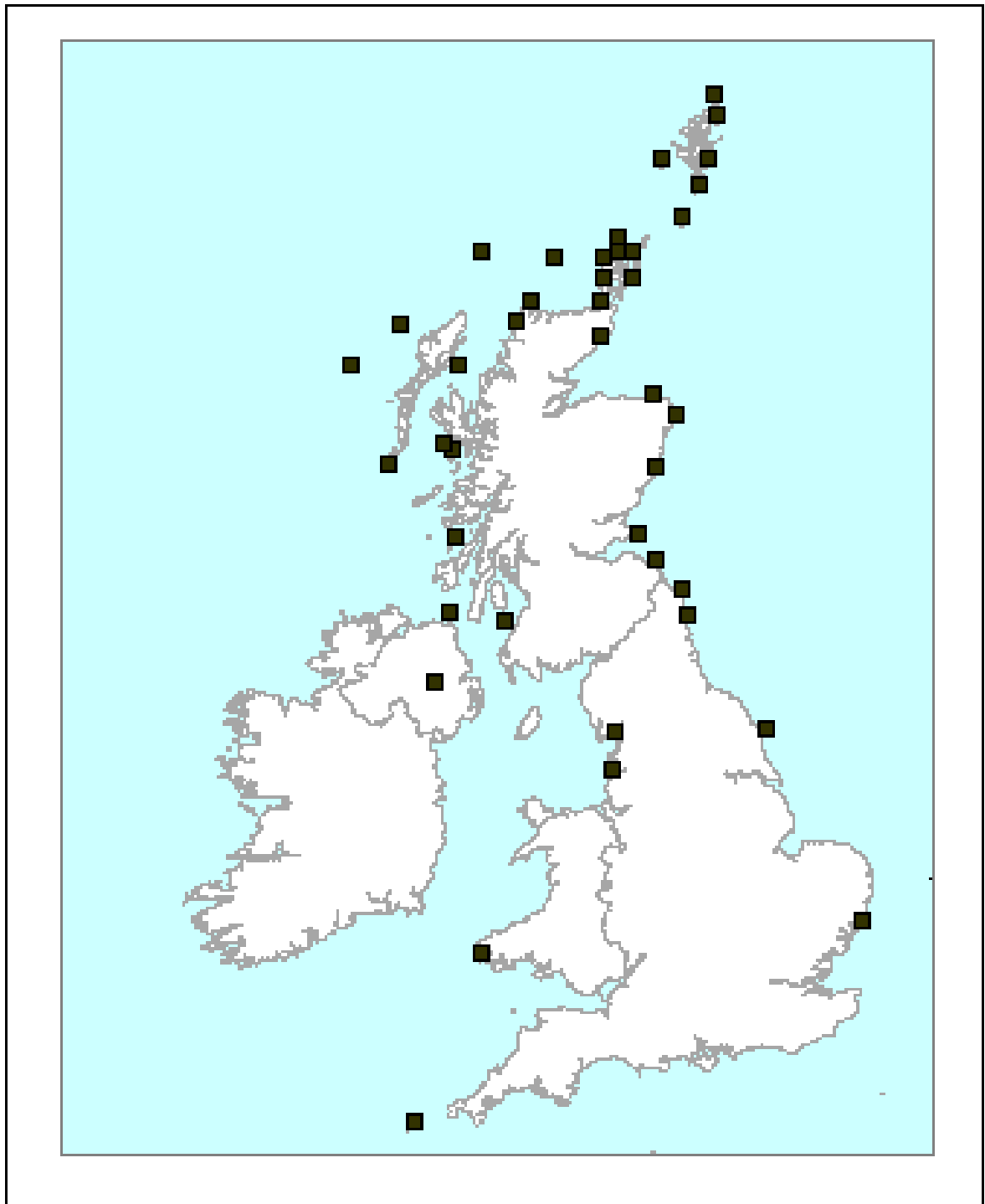


Figure 6.105.1. Distribution of SPAs selected for holding internationally important assemblages of breeding seabirds.

The UK is notable for the outstanding international importance of its populations of breeding seabirds (Cramp *et al.* 1974; Lloyd *et al.* 1991). Internationally important assemblages of

breeding seabirds have been selected under Stage 1.3 to represent this interest (Figure 6.105.1).

A total of 41 sites have been selected (Table 6.105.1). Each of these sites holds more than 10,000 pairs of seabirds (*i.e.* >20,000 individuals). In order to identify the important components of these assemblages, all species occurring at levels of more than 1% of national populations (or where there are more than 2,000 individuals present) were identified (section 4.3.1). These components are highlighted in the respective species accounts.

Distribution of seabird assemblages

Unsurprisingly, the distribution of SPAs identified for important assemblages closely reflects the distribution of major seabird colonies in the UK (Lloyd *et al.* 1991; Gibbons *et al.* 1993). There are significant clusters of SPAs in the archipelagos of Shetland and Orkney, as well as the Atlantic islands of St Kilda, the Flannans, North Rona and Sula Sgeir, and Sule Stack and Sule Skerry.

Seabird SPAs have been identified along most of the coast of the North Sea, from the far north of Shetland, down the east coast of Scotland, to eastern England (with the Alde-Ore Estuary being the most southerly on this coast). In the south-west, the concentrations of seabirds on the Isles of Scilly and Skomer, Skokholm and Middleholm have been included. Further north, sites are located through the Inner Hebrides to the Minch.

One inland colony of seabirds (dominated by gulls) has been identified – Lough Neagh and Lough Beg in Northern Ireland.

The sites identified contain a wide range of habitats. Whilst many important seabird colonies occur on cliffs, especially in the north and west of Britain, in other areas seabirds breed on moorland (for example, in Shetland at sites such as Hermaness, Saxa Vord and Valla Field, and Foula), or on soft coastal environments. Several of the English sites include sand dunes and shingle beaches (for example, the Alde-Ore Estuary, the Ribble and Alt Estuaries, and Morecambe Bay). Where low coastal islands, such as the Farne Islands in north-east England, have remained free of land predators, these often hold large numbers of breeding seabirds.

There are a wide range of types of cliff, determined by geology and patterns of exposure. These range from hyper-oceanic exposed stacks and islands such as those found at St Kilda, Sule Skerry and Sule Stack in the Atlantic, through to eroded sandstone cliffs, with horizontal bedding planes (such as are found in Orkney at sites such as Marwick Head), and to low cliffs in relatively sheltered areas (for example, the Shiant Isles in Scotland, and Skomer and Skokholm in Wales). The variety of cliff types and locations results in a range of differing assemblages of breeding seabirds.

Size of breeding seabird SPAs

The largest seabird SPA, by a significant margin, is the St Kilda archipelago, which holds about 600,000 individual breeding seabirds. Other sites holding more than 200,000 individual breeding seabirds during the period of this review are Flamborough Head and Bempton Cliffs (305,784 breeding individuals), East Caithness Cliffs (300,000), Foula (250,000), Handa (200,000), and the Shiant Islands (200,000). In total, all the sites identified under Stage 1.3 for breeding seabirds hold 4,724,078 individual breeding seabirds.

Total number of breeding seabirds on the UK SPA network

To the total of seabirds occurring on sites holding major seabird assemblages (4,724,078 individuals) can be added those species that occur as qualifying species at sites where total numbers are less than 10,000 pairs. This amounts to a further 222,470 pairs of 14 species at 51 further SPAs, bringing the total number of seabirds breeding in the SPA network to 4,946,548 individuals. Note, however, that this is a minimum estimate of the number of breeding seabirds that benefit from the general habitat conservation provisions on seabird SPAs. This is because the total excludes non-qualifying seabird species which breed at sites classified for seabirds but where there are less than 10,000 pairs.

Table 6.105.1. SPAs holding more than 20,000 individual breeding seabirds.

Site	Number of individual breeding seabirds
Ailsa Craig	65,000
Alde-Ore Estuary	59,118
Buchan Ness to Collieston Coast	95,000
Calf of Eday	30,000
Canna and Sanday	21,000
Cape Wrath	50,000
Copinsay	70,000
Coquet Island	33,448
East Caithness Cliffs	300,000
Fair Isle	180,000
Farne Islands	142,490
Fetlar	22,000
Firth of Forth Islands	90,000
Flamborough Head and Bempton Cliffs	305,784
Flannan Isles	50,000
Foula	250,000
Fowlsheugh	170,000
Handa	200,000
Hermaness, Saxa Vord and Valla Field	152,000
Hoy	120,000
Isles of Scilly	26,616
Lough Neagh and Lough Beg	67,690
Marwick Head	75,000
Mingulay and Berneray	110,000
Morecambe Bay	61,858
North Caithness Cliffs	110,000
North Colonsay and Western Cliffs	30,000
North Rona and Sula Sgeir	130,000
Noss	100,000
Rathlin Island	66,000

Site	Number of individual breeding seabirds
Ribble and Alt Estuaries	29,236
Rousay	30,000
Rum	130,000
Shiant Isles	200,000
Skomer and Skokholm	67,278
St Abb's Head to Fast Castle	79,560
St Kilda	600,000
Sule Skerry and Sule Stack	100,000
Sumburgh Head	35,000
Troup, Pennan and Lion's Heads	150,000
West Westray	120,000
Total seabirds at assemblage sites	4,724,078
Total seabirds at non-assemblage sites	222,470
Total seabirds in UK SPA network	4,946,548