

A6.13b Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* (non-breeding)

1. Status in UK

See section A6.13a.

2. Population data

	Population sizes (individuals)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
GB	100	1 ¹	50 (50% of GB total)
Ireland			
Biogeographic population	25,000	250	50 (0.2% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: Lack 1986

Biogeographic population source: Rose & Scott 1997

3. Distribution

The global and European distribution of Bitterns is described in section A6.13a. Birds in the south and west of the European range tend to be sedentary, whilst those in the north and east tend to be migratory. These move south-westwards in search of ice-free feeding areas and small numbers arrive in the UK each autumn or winter, most departing again in spring.

British reedbeds are likely to be of particular European significance during severe weather, when ice-free waters may provide a refuge for unusually high numbers of birds which might ordinarily winter in continental Europe. The European population is estimated at 25,000 individuals in the non-breeding season.

4. Population structure and trends

Numbers of non-breeding Bitterns in Britain vary each year with a larger influx when severe weather affects the near continent (Bibby 1981). Bitterns are extremely secretive and silent outside the breeding season, thus they tend to be under-recorded by birdwatchers and rarely figure amongst Wetland Bird Survey data (*e.g.* Cranswick *et al.* 1999). Hence, the estimated total of 30 to 100 individuals wintering in Britain cannot be treated with entire confidence.

No comprehensive information is available on between-year variation in population size, nor on long-term trends in the winter population. However, as the number of breeding Bitterns has declined both in Britain and in Europe as a whole (Tucker & Heath 1994), the non-breeding population is also likely to have declined.

¹ The convention of adopting a threshold of 50 individuals for the selection of SPAs for wintering waterbirds (section 4.1.2) has not been adopted for Bittern in light of its status on the shortlist of Globally Threatened Declining Species of the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (Biodiversity Steering Group 1995).

Habitat loss through wetland drainage continues to be a major cause of loss in some areas, as is the accumulation of reed litter that causes reedbeds to progressively dry out, rendering them unsuitable for foraging Bitterns.

5. Protection measures for population in UK

SPA suite

In winter, the UK's SPA suite for Bitterns supports, on average, 50 individuals. This amounts to about 50% of the British non-breeding population whilst the suite contains about 0.2% of the corresponding international population. Bitterns do not regularly occur in winter in Northern Ireland. The total is contained within ten sites (Table 6.13b.1) where Bittern has been listed as a qualifying species.

Other measures

Several targeted conservation management measures are being undertaken to better manage Bittern habitat throughout the year (see section 6.13a for details). A UK Biodiversity Action Plan has been drafted for this species (Biodiversity Steering Group 1995) and is being implemented as part of the UK's national response to the Biodiversity Convention.

6. Classification criteria

All sites in the UK that were known to regularly support more than 1% of the national total of Bitterns in winter were considered under Stage 1.1, and all were selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements. The ten sites are distributed through the winter range of Bitterns in the UK. These include extensive coastal wetlands in East Anglia and elsewhere which are under active conservation management for this species.

Distribution map for non-breeding Bittern SPA suite

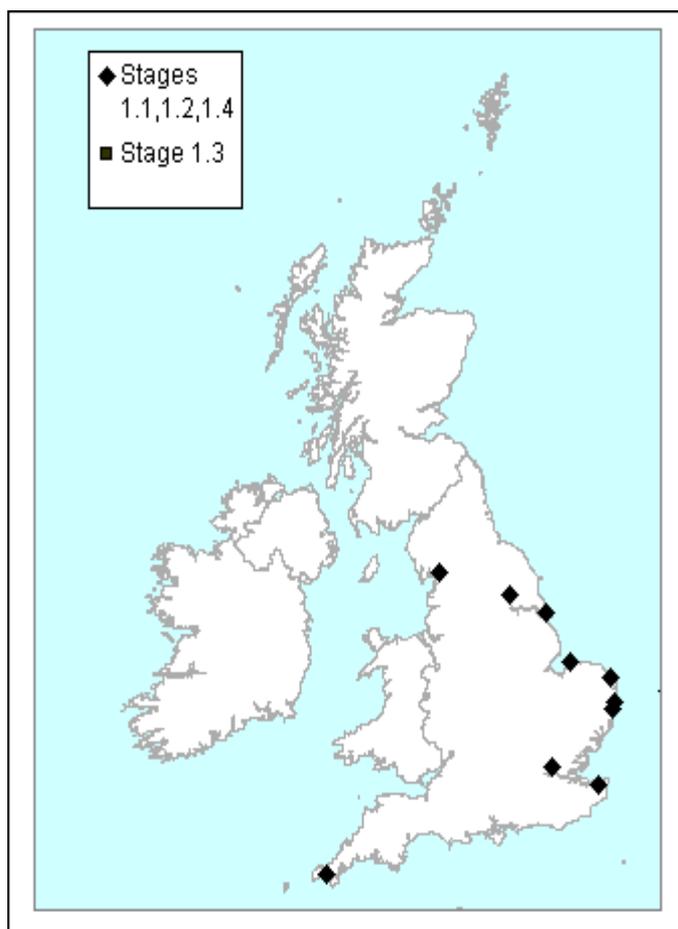


Table 6.13b.1 – SPA suite

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Benacre to Easton Bavents	2	<0.1	2	1.1
Broadland	6	<0.1	6	1.1
Humber Flats, Marshes and Coast	2	<0.1	2	1.1
Lee Valley	6	<0.1	6	1.1
Leighton Moss	8	<0.1	8	1.1
Lower Derwent Valley	3	<0.1	3	1.1
Marazion Marsh	2	<0.1	2	1.1
Minsmere – Walberswick	14	<0.1	14	1.1
North Norfolk Coast	5	<0.1	5	1.1
Stodmarsh	2	<0.1	2	1.1
TOTALS	50	0.2%	50%	