

A6.14 Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* (non-breeding)

1. Status in UK

Biological status		Legal status		Conservation status
Breeding	✓	Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981	General Protection	Species of European Conservation Concern
Migratory	✓	Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985	General Protection	(UK) Species of Conservation Importance
Wintering	✓	EC Birds Directive 1979	Annex I Migratory	All-Ireland Vertebrate Red Data Book

2. Population data

	Population sizes (individuals)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
GB	500	50 (see section 5.1.2 for rationale)	225 (45% of GB total)
Ireland			
Biogeographic population	125,000	1,250	225 (0.2% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: BTO in litt.

Biogeographic population source: Rose & Scott 1997

3. Distribution

The Little Egret has an extensive global breeding distribution that includes Europe, Africa, Asia and Australasia. Four subspecies have been recognised with only the nominate *E. g. garzetta* occurring in Europe (as well as in south Asia, east, south and north-west Africa). Most birds from the Western Palearctic breed in the south of the Iberian Peninsula, in southern and western France, and through northern Italy and the Balkans to the coast of the Black Sea. These birds winter in Africa or southern Europe (Cramp & Simmons 1977).

Britain lies at the northern limit of the European breeding range, with the closest nesting areas being in the western part of Brittany (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997). The Little Egrets that winter in the UK occur primarily on southern estuaries from Pembrokeshire in South Wales to the Thames. Individuals also occur away from this area, typically as autumn or spring vagrants (Combridge & Parr 1992; Smiddy & O'Sullivan 1998). Those that occur in the non-breeding season in the UK may also include birds that originate from north-west France. There are movements within Britain in the course of the non-breeding season – Combridge & Parr (1992) noted a tendency for birds to move from the vicinity of the Solent to south-west England in late winter.

Three English sites are of notable importance for Little Egrets – Chichester and Langstone Harbours, Poole Harbour and the Tamar Estuaries Complex. The species is still comparatively rare in Scotland and Northern Ireland (Fraser *et al.* 1997; Smiddy & O'Sullivan 1998). The Little Egret is primarily an estuarine bird in the UK in winter,

although it may also occur in freshwater habitats. Birds typically feed along muddy creeks and river channels, roosting in trees or saltmarsh. Nocturnal roosts may be at considerable distance from foraging areas (A. Musgrove pers. comm.). Individuals may be strongly site-faithful during winter (Rogers *et al.* 1990).

4. Population structure and trends

During the period from 1958 to 1988, the average number of Little Egrets recorded each year in the UK was under 15, with most records coming in spring (Fraser *et al.* 1997). An influx occurred in the autumn of 1989, however, and records from the following winter indicated a peak of at least 18 birds (Combridge & Parr 1992). Numbers in the UK have increased markedly since then (Lock & Cook 1998), and an autumn total of 800, and a winter total of 500 was estimated in 1998 (BTO unpublished data). This estimate was based on Wetland Bird Survey counts, a pilot roost survey in January 1998, and additional data from county bird reports.

Peak numbers of Little Egrets in the UK occur in autumn, as juveniles and adults disperse from breeding colonies in north-west France (Combridge & Parr 1992). Numbers then fall as some of these birds return to the continent to winter. Autumn numbers have risen progressively since a major influx in the autumn of 1989 (Combridge & Parr 1992). There were over 100 records in August 1989, rising to over 600 in August 1993 and nearly 1,000 in August 1995 (Fraser *et al.* 1997). Peak autumn (July to October) numbers at Poole Harbour have increased from 32 in 1993 to 107 in 1997 and at Chichester and Langstone Harbours from 57 to 137. Numbers on the Tamar Estuary have been more stable. Coincident with the increases in the UK, numbers of Little Egrets in the autumn have also risen in Ireland (Smiddy & O'Sullivan 1998).

Peak winter numbers at Poole Harbour SPA increased from 25 in 1993/94 to 83 in 1997/98. Numbers at the Tamar Estuary and Chichester and Langstone Harbours SPAs peaked in the winter of 1995/96 at 76 and 144 respectively.

The increase in UK numbers has come as a result of the extension of the species' breeding distribution into northern France and the Low Countries. Breeding first took place in northern France in 1978 and in The Netherlands in 1979 (Combridge & Parr 1992; Lock & Cook 1998). Little Egrets bred for the first time in Great Britain at Poole Harbour in 1996 (Lock & Cook 1998) and breeding has since occurred at one or two other sites in southern England and in Co. Cork and probably Co. Wexford in Ireland (Milne & O'Sullivan 1999; Smiddy & O'Sullivan 1998).

Increases in numbers in the non-breeding season, associated with the spread in the species' breeding distribution, have also been recorded in Ireland, northern and western coasts of France and northern Spain (Combridge & Parr 1992; Milne & O'Sullivan 1999; Smiddy & O'Sullivan 1998). This spread may partly be the result of milder winters. Little Egrets have previously been shown to suffer heavy mortality during severe cold weather (Hafner *et al.* 1994).

5. Protection measures for population in UK

SPA suite

In the non-breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Little Egret supports, on average, 225 individuals. This total amounts to about 45% of the British population and about 0.2% of the international flyway population. Little Egrets do not regularly winter in Northern Ireland.

The suite is comprised of three sites where Little Egret has been listed as a qualifying species (Table 6.14b.1).

6. Classification criteria

The three sites in the UK that support more than 1% of the national population in the non-breeding seasons were considered for selection under Stage 1.1, and all were selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements (Chichester and Langstone Harbours; Poole Harbour; and the Tamar Estuaries Complex).

Distribution map for non-breeding Little Egret SPA suite

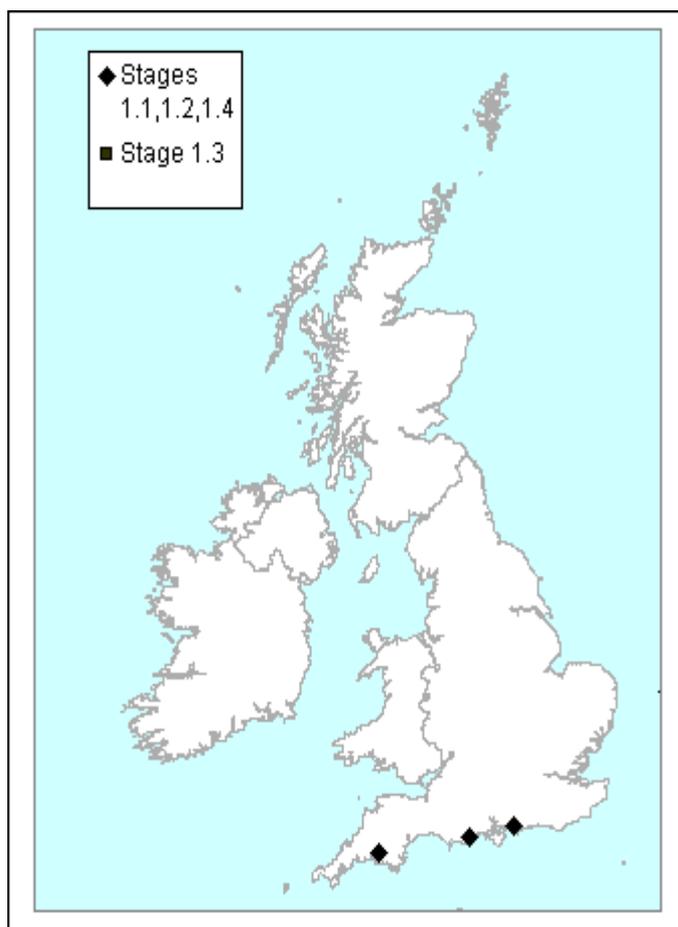


Table 6.14b.1 – SPA suite

Site name	Site population	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Chichester and Langstone Harbours	100	<0.1%	20.0	1.1
Poole Harbour	83	<0.1%	16.6	1.1
Tamar Estuaries Complex	42	<0.1%	8.4	1.1
TOTALS	225	0.2%	45.0%	