

A6.19 Russian White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons albifrons*

1. Status in UK

Biological status		Legal status		Conservation status
Breeding		Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981	General Protection Schedule 2(1)	Species of European Conservation Concern
Migratory	✓	Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985	General Protection	(UK) Species of Conservation Importance Table 4
Wintering	✓	EC Birds Directive 1979	Annex II/2 Annex III/2 Migratory	All-Ireland Vertebrate Red Data Book

2. Population data

	Population sizes (individuals)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
GB	6,100	60	4,586 (76% of GB total)
Ireland			
Biogeographic population	600,000	6,000	4,586 (0.8% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: Kirby 1995a

Biogeographic population source: Rose & Scott 1997

3. Distribution

White-fronted Geese have a circumpolar distribution, breeding from Kanin Peninsula (44°E) in the eastern Russian Arctic, 4,500 km west to the Kolyma River (155°E). They additionally breed discontinuously in Alaska and across high Arctic Canada, as well as in west Greenland. Six sub-species are recognised, two of which (*A. a. albifrons* and *A. a. flavirostris*) occur in Europe. SPA provision for the latter sub-species is presented in section 6.20.

The Russian White-fronted Goose winters in five distinct areas in Europe: north-west Europe (Baltic – North Sea group); which includes Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany; central Europe (Pannonic group), which includes Yugoslavia, Hungary and Italy; Southeast Europe (Pontic group), including Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey; central Turkey (Anatolian group); and eastern Turkey (Caspian group) (Cramp & Simmons 1977; Owen *et al.* 1986; Madsen 1991; Madsen *et al.* 1999). All these breed in the tundra of northern Russia and there appears to be considerable mixing of birds from the Western Palearctic breeding range during migration, staging and wintering (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997; Mooij *et al.* 1999).

The north-west European population migrates along the Baltic coasts and uses staging areas in southern Sweden and eastern Germany where numbers peak in November, before moving

west into the Netherlands and Britain where numbers peak in January (Owen *et al.* 1986; Mooij *et al.* 1999). Severe weather may cause additional westward movements into Britain of birds wintering in the Netherlands (Owen *et al.* 1986). Spring migration is easterly, with birds staging in southern Russia for up to a month before moving north in May to their breeding grounds (Owen *et al.* 1986). In Britain, large wintering flocks occur in just a few coastal or estuarine areas, but small numbers of passage and wintering birds are recorded throughout England and Wales (Owen *et al.* 1986; Lack 1986).

The most important wintering areas are in south Wales, including the Severn Estuary, and along the south, south-east and east coasts of England (Lack 1986). In winter, Russian White-fronted Geese show a preference for grasslands, especially low-lying wet pastures bordering coastal marshes and in river valleys, where the main foods are grasses and clover (Cramp & Simmons 1977; Lack 1986; Owen *et al.* 1986). Like other geese, the Russian White-fronted Goose has adapted to changes in land use, utilising grain from stubbles and potatoes as important additional foods in some areas, particularly staging sites. Roost sites include coastal waters, estuarine sandbanks and lakes, and tend to be close to foraging areas (Cramp & Simmons 1977; Owen *et al.* 1986).

4. Population structure and trends

The Northwest European population of Russian White-fronted Geese is estimated to be 600,000 individuals (Rose & Scott 1997) with about 6,100 of those regularly wintering in Britain (Kirby 1995a). The Northwest European population has increased tenfold since the late 1960s (Madsen 1991; Cramp & Simmons 1977; Mooij *et al.* 1999). The reason for this increase is unclear, but redistribution of birds from other biogeographic populations elsewhere in Europe may be a major cause (Mooij *et al.* 1999). In addition, improved winter survival because of better forage availability and tighter hunting regulations in many countries may have contributed (Cramp & Simmons 1977; Owen *et al.* 1986; Mooij *et al.* 1999).

Numbers wintering in Britain fluctuate from winter to winter, and can be significantly increased by influxes of birds from continental Europe during severe weather conditions, with counts as high as 13,000 recorded in some years (Lack 1986). However, there has been a general decrease since regular counts began in the mid-1960s (Pollitt *et al.* 2000; Mooij *et al.* 1999). This is thought to be due to birds remaining in wintering sites further east ('short-stopping'), especially in The Netherlands, possibly due to improved feeding opportunities, reduced hunting pressure, and mild winters in many recent years (Owen *et al.* 1986).

5. Protection measures for population in UK

SPA suite

The UK's SPA suite for the Russian population of White-fronted Geese supports, on average, 4,586 individuals (calculated using WeBS January site totals for the period 1992/93 to 1996/97 – see section 4.4.1 and Appendix 2 for further explanation). This total amounts to about 76% of British wintering numbers and about 0.8% of the international population. Russian White-fronted Geese do not regularly occur in Northern Ireland. The suite comprises eight sites at which geese of this sub-species have been listed as a qualifying species (Table 6.19.1).

6. Classification criteria

There are no sites in the UK that support more than 1% of the international population of Russian White-fronted Geese (the UK lies at the western edge of their range). A total of eight sites were considered and selected under Stage 1.3 (see section 5.3), as Russian White-fronted Goose was identified as an important component of the non-breeding waterbird assemblages at these locations.

Collectively, the suite of SPAs includes most major areas used on a regular basis by significant numbers of Russian White-fronted Geese. The selected sites are distributed through the core winter range of the population, notably including many of the east coast estuaries of England. By definition, all sites are multi-species SPAs, of importance also for a range of other waterbirds. There is a very long recorded history of occupancy at many of these sites (Boyd 1957).

Distribution map for Russian White-fronted Goose SPA suite

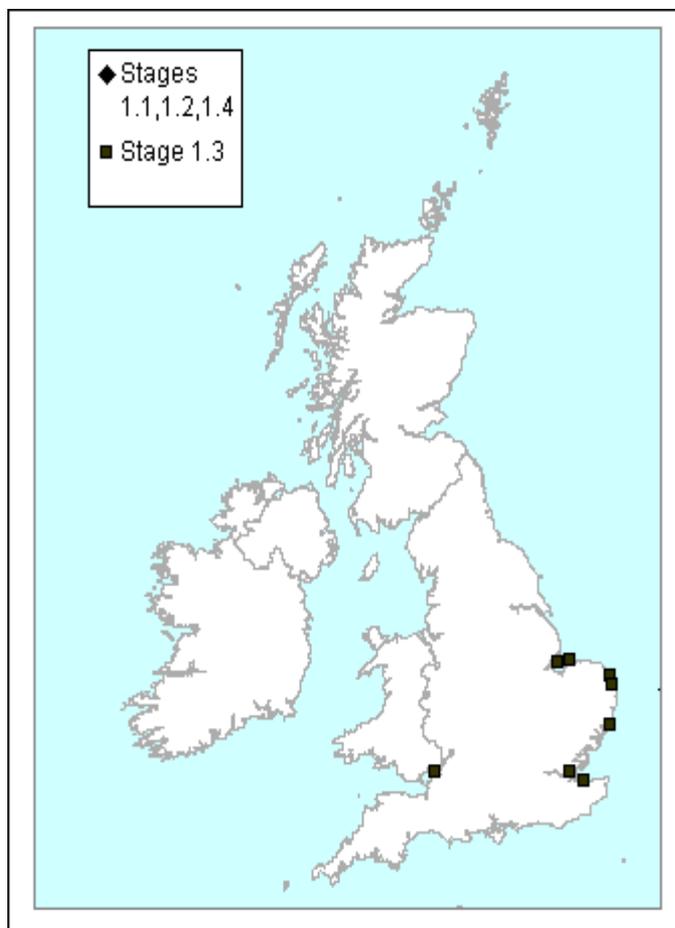


Table 6.19.1 – SPA suite

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Alde-Ore Estuary	97	<0.1	1.6	1.3
Breydon Water	164	<0.1	2.7	1.3
Broadland	746	0.1	12.4	1.3
North Norfolk Coast	352	<0.1	5.8	1.3
Severn Estuary	2,664	0.4	43.7	1.3
Thames Estuary and Marshes	88	<0.1	1.4	1.3
The Swale	1,309	0.2	21.5	1.3
The Wash	100	<0.1	1.6	1.3

TOTALS	4,586 (in January)	0.8%	76.4%	
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