

A6.39a Common Scoter *Melanitta nigra* (breeding)

1. Status in UK

Biological status		Legal status		Conservation status	
Breeding	✓	Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981	General Protection Schedule 1(1)	Species of European Conservation Concern	
Migratory	✓	Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985	General Protection Schedule 1(1)	(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	Extinct

2. Population data

	Population sizes (females)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
GB	75	1	37 (49% of GB population)
Ireland	[Redacted]		
Biogeographic population	530,000	5,300	37 (<0.1% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: Underhill et al. 1998

Biogeographic population source: Rose & Scott 1997

3. Distribution

The global range of the Common Scoter extends from western Alaska, westwards across Arctic Russia to Iceland, Britain and Scandinavia. The species has a low Arctic breeding range, being found between about 60°–70°N. There are a few localised and isolated breeding areas in Arctic Canada in the regions of Hudson Bay, Labrador and Newfoundland (Snow & Perrins 1998).

Two sub-species are recognised. The nominate race (*M. n. nigra*) occurs throughout northern Europe eastwards to the Olenek River (c. 120°E), whilst *M. n. americana* occurs in northern Russia east of the Yana River (c. 134°E) and in North America (Cramp & Simmons 1977). The nominate sub-species comprises a single biogeographic population which migrates westwards to winter mainly in the Baltic (where about 75% of the population occurs), as well as along the Atlantic and North Sea coasts of Europe, where smaller numbers occur (Cramp & Simmons 1977; Scott & Rose 1996).

The UK breeding distribution is concentrated in western Northern Ireland, western Scotland and the extreme north of Scotland (Gibbons *et al.* 1993; Underhill *et al.* 1998). The preferred breeding habitats range from remote lochans in the Scottish Flow Country (Stroud *et al.* 1987;

Fox *et al.* 1989) to (formerly) limestone lakes in Northern Ireland. The habitat in the Flow Country resembles the tundra that characterises most of the world breeding range, whilst the former habitat in Northern Ireland is atypical (Gibbons *et al.* 1993). Studies in Caithness and Sutherland in late summer have shown a strong preference for waterbodies with high pH and conductivity within these oligotrophic peatland ecosystems (Fox *et al.* 1989).

4. Population structure and trends

The UK breeding population is a component of the western Siberia/western and northern Europe/north-west Africa population, which comprises 1,600,000 individuals (equating to 530,000 pairs – see Appendix 4) (Rose & Scott 1997; Pihl & Laursen 1996).

Overall breeding distribution within the UK changed little between the periods of the two Breeding Bird Atlases (1968–72 and 1988–91) but there were significant changes in local populations (Gibbons *et al.* 1993). The population on Lower Lough Erne in Northern Ireland was once the UK stronghold but has suffered a severe decline due to deterioration of water quality reducing invertebrate food availability (Partridge 1989). The most recent surveys have shown that the species no longer occurs at this site (Gittings & Delany 1996; Underhill *et al.* 1998). Predation by Mink and competition for food with coarse fish have also been highlighted as reasons for local declines in numbers (Underhill *et al.* 1998).

In Scotland, the Flow Country population is now the most important in the UK with approximately 55 pairs. In the absence of monitoring, are poorly known, although Underhill *et al.* (1998) have suggested that there have been declines here in recent decades.

Another important area in Scotland includes the foothills and glens north of Fort William (35 pairs), where the population is thought to have increased slightly since 1968–72 (Gibbons *et al.* 1993). The most recent estimate suggests a UK breeding population of 76–89 pairs in 1995 (Underhill *et al.* 1998). The European breeding population has been stable at 100,000–120,000 pairs since the mid 1960s (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997).

5. Protection measures for population in UK

SPA suite

In the breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for breeding Common Scoter supports an average of about 37 pairs. This amounts to about 49% of the British breeding population. Common Scoters no longer breed in Northern Ireland (Gittings & Delany 1996). The UK suite of two sites (Table 6.39a.1) contains less than 0.1% of the international population (numbers breeding in the UK are very small in comparison to those in Scandinavia and Russia).

Other measures

A Biodiversity Action Plan has been drafted for this species (Biodiversity Steering Group 1998) and is being implemented as part of the UK's national response to the Biodiversity Convention. Additionally, birds breeding within the Flow Country will benefit from an EU LIFE-Nature project and SNH's Peatland Management Scheme.

6. Classification criteria

No site in the UK supports more than 1% of the international population of Common Scoters. The UK Biodiversity Action Plan for this species plan highlights the need (action 5.2.2) to designate breeding, moulting and wintering sites as SSSI/ASSIs and SPAs. Accordingly, sites were considered under Stage 1.4.

Two sites, identified under Stage 1.4 as regularly supporting 1% or more of the Great Britain population, were selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements. The sites are both in Scotland, one in the extreme north of the Scottish mainland (Caithness and Sutherland peatlands), the other in the Inner Hebrides (Rinns of Islay). The principal habitats within both are blanket bog and small bodies of open water. Most importantly, they are largely free from disturbance. There is a long history of occupancy by Common Scoters at both sites, both of which are multi-species SPAs.

Significant numbers of Common Scoters still occur in Ross-shire north of the Great Glen (Underhill *et al.* 1998), but it was not possible to identify a discrete site for these birds.

Distribution map for breeding Common Scoter SPA suite

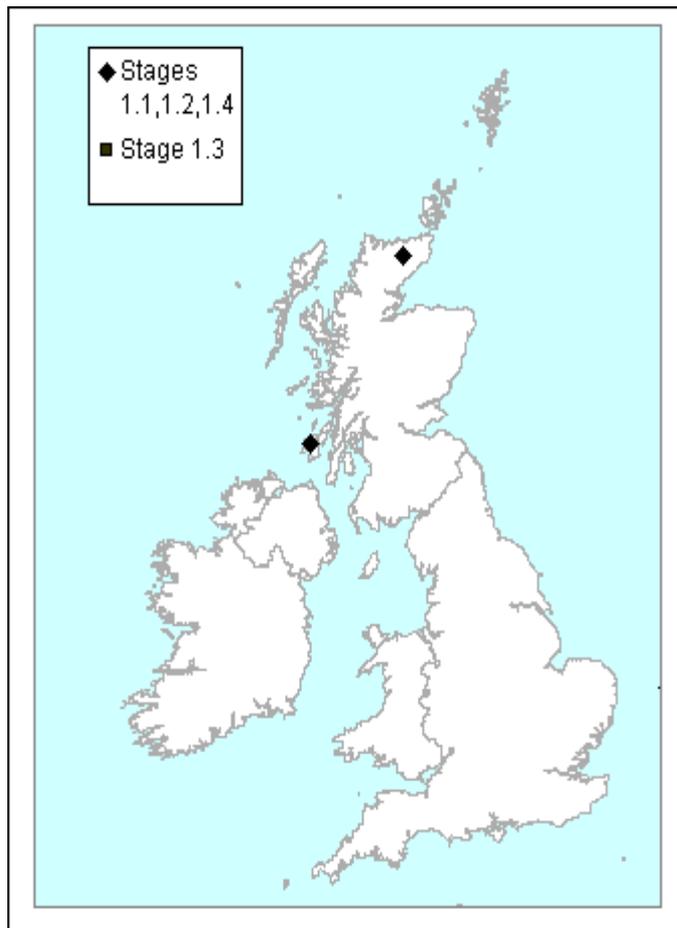


Table 6.39a.1 – SPA suite

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands	27	<0.1	36	1.4
Rinns of Islay	10	<0.1	13	1.4
TOTALS	37	<0.1%	49%	