

A6.46 Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

1. Status in UK

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

2. Population data

	Population sizes (females)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
GB	157	2	116 (74% of GB population)
Ireland			
Biogeographic population	25,955	259	116 (0.4% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: Stone et al. 1997

Biogeographic population source: Hagemeijer & Blair 1997

3. Distribution

The Marsh Harrier has a wide breeding distribution throughout temperate regions of the Palearctic, from western Europe and the tip of northern Africa throughout Asia to Pacific coasts on Sakhalin and northern Japan. The species is highly migratory, and outside the breeding season, it moves south to winter in Africa, India and south-east Asia. There are sedentary populations in parts of New Guinea, Australia and New Zealand, as well as on Madagascar (Cramp & Simmons 1980). The species is polytypic: the nominate race *C. a. aeruginosus* occurs throughout the western Palearctic east to northern Mongolia, whilst *C. a. harterti* breeds in northern Africa and possibly into the extreme southern part of Spain. A further six races occur in eastern Asia, New Guinea, Australasia and the Pacific region.

Marsh Harriers occur throughout Europe, discontinuously in the west, but with larger numbers and a more continuous distribution in eastern and central Europe. The population and distribution is especially patchy in southern European countries. Birds breeding in eastern and central Europe are migratory, whilst those occurring in the west (France, Spain, Portugal and the Mediterranean tend to be sedentary).

In Britain, most breeding Marsh Harriers occur in England, with the main concentrations in the coastal areas of Norfolk and Suffolk as well as the Broads, and north Kent. Smaller numbers are present in Lincolnshire, Humberside, Lancashire and at several localities in southern and eastern Scotland.

Marsh Harriers require open freshwater wetlands with dense, tall vegetation (particularly reedbeds) for nesting. They favour brackish or freshwater equally and occur on marshes, ponds, lakes, lagoons and riverbanks. In some locations, they have adapted to drier habitats and breed in hedges and fields (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997). In England and Scotland they breed in reedbeds and – increasingly – in intensive arable farmland, with 21% of the total population nesting in winter cereals in 1995 (Gibbons *et al.* 1993; Underhill-Day 1998).

Marsh Harriers hunt over many types of open areas, including reedbeds, grazing and saltmarshes, heathlands and farmland. They prey on a wide range of small birds and mammals when hunting over farmland (Underhill-Day 1985). Most of the British population is migratory and, apart from small numbers in Broadland, Suffolk and Kent, most birds move to winter in southern Europe and Africa.

4. Population structure and trends

Between 25,955 and 34,675 pairs breed in Europe, with more than 5,000 pairs breeding in each of Ukraine, Poland and Germany (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997).

Historically, Marsh Harriers were much more widespread in Britain, occurring widely throughout Britain and Ireland (Holloway 1996). They were adversely affected by prolonged persecution and wetland destruction during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, Marsh Harrier numbers began to increase in the 1970s throughout much of Europe, particularly in the Baltic States, Fennoscandia, Denmark, The Netherlands and Britain. The increase is largely attributed to the banning of pesticides such as DDT that allowed populations in north, east and western Europe to recuperate, as well as a lessening of levels of former persecution (in the UK) and reduced hunting pressure in southern Europe. This increase was further encouraged by the development of huge reedbeds in the polders of The Netherlands. The deliberate flooding of large coastal areas in eastern England for defensive purposes during World War II created extensive areas of reedbed. Along with other species, Marsh Harriers benefited significantly from the creation of this wetland habitat. However, there is still a general decline in the south of the species' European range, including Spain (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997).

In Britain, although once almost certainly a widespread and perhaps even locally numerous breeding bird, the Marsh Harrier has been scarce or absent for much of the last 200 years. It was extinct as a breeding species between 1899 and 1911 when recolonisation occurred (Holloway 1996). The recent population increase elsewhere in Europe, especially in The Netherlands, has almost certainly assisted the current increase in Britain. Following an average annual increase of 19.6% from 1971 (when just one pair bred) to 1991, the British population is currently estimated to be about 157–160 breeding females. However, breeding Marsh Harrier numbers still remain far below historic levels in Britain. They have been extinct in Ireland and Northern Ireland since at least 1917, although were formerly abundant there (Holloway 1996).

Current threats to the European population include the loss of wetland habitats in eastern Europe and the drying out of wetlands generally, as well as lead poisoning in France due to the ingestion of spent lead gunshot (Pain *et al.* 1993).

Marsh Harriers depend on well-managed and scrub-free reedbeds and the species has benefited from reedbed enhancement and creation schemes organised by a partnership of conservation organisations in Norfolk and Suffolk. As an increasing proportion of the population nests on arable farmland outside protected areas, in the future the attitudes of farmers may become a critical factor. Although indications show that Marsh Harriers and modern farming can co-exist, with most young fledging before crops are harvested, more active conservation is required in some years and in certain circumstances. For example, the RSPB and English Nature have employed a warden in one important arable area to locate nests, alert farmers to their presence, deter egg collectors and limit disturbance. Further wardening schemes may be required elsewhere if the species continues its expansion into arable areas. Continuing illegal persecution is also being addressed.

5. Protection measures for population in UK

SPA suite

In the breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Marsh Harrier supports, on average, 116 females. This amounts to about 74% of the British breeding population. Marsh Harriers do not breed any longer in Northern Ireland. The suite contains about 0.4% of the international population (numbers in the UK are very small in comparison to those elsewhere in Europe). This total is contained within 10 sites (Table 6.46.1) where Marsh Harriers have been listed as a qualifying species.

As males commonly pair with more than one female, the UK SPA population is expressed as number of females.

6. Classification criteria

All sites for breeding Marsh Harriers in the UK that were known to support more than 1% of the national breeding population were considered under Stage 1.1, and all were selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements. The sites are concentrated in coastal areas of Norfolk, Suffolk, North Kent and the Norfolk Broads with outlying sites on the Humber Estuary and in Lancashire and eastern Scotland. The distribution of SPAs closely matches the distribution of the main breeding concentrations. There is a very long recorded history of occupancy at many of these sites: breeding was known in the late 18th and early 19th century (Holloway 1996), although by the end of the 19th century intense persecution had resulted in extinction at most locations. Since the 1950s, these sites have been recolonised. Away from the SPA suite, the species' distribution in Britain is mostly scattered and consists of isolated pairs associated with small fragmented reedbeds and intensively managed arable crops.

In recent years, Marsh Harriers have remained in Broadland during the winter, with birds hunting throughout the SPA and roosting in Horsey Mere, as well as at Breydon Marshes in the Thurne Valley. No specific winter suite of SPAs has been identified.

All the sites in the suite have a high degree of naturalness, and all are multi-species SPAs. Indeed, most are in the ownership of nature conservation organisations and are subject to active conservation management.

Distribution map for Marsh Harrier SPA suite

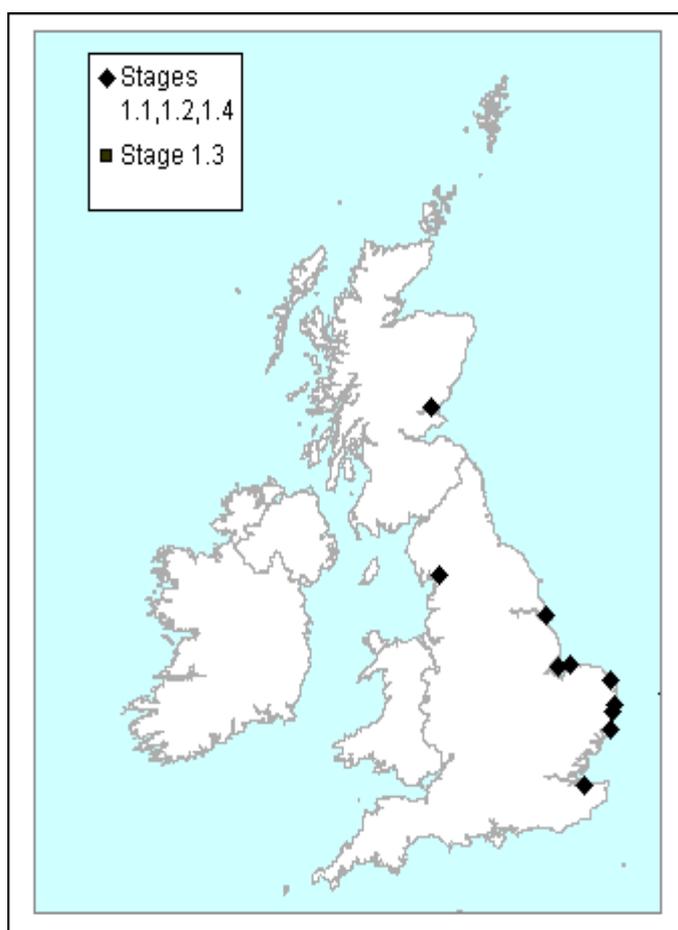


Table 6.46.1 – SPA suite

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Alde-Ore Estuary	3	<0.1	1.9	1.1
Benacre to Easton Bavents	6	<0.1	3.8	1.1
Broadland	21	<0.1	13.4	1.1
Firth of Tay and Eden Estuary	4	<0.1	2.6	1.1
Humber Flats, Marshes and Coast	11	<0.1	7.0	1.1
Leighton Moss	2	<0.1	1.3	1.1
Minsmere - Walberswick	16	<0.1	10.2	1.1
North Norfolk Coast	14	<0.1	8.9	1.1
The Swale	24	<0.1	15.3	1.1
The Wash	15	<0.1	9.6	1.1

TOTALS	116	0.4%	74%
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