

## A6.48 Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*

### 1. Status in UK

Biological status		Legal status		Conservation status	
Breeding	✓	Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981	General Protection Schedule 1(1) Schedule 4	Species of European Conservation Concern	SPEC 3 Unfavourable conservation status (rare) but not concentrated in Europe
Migratory		Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985	General Protection Schedule 1(1)	(UK) Species of Conservation Importance	Table 4
Wintering	✓	EC Birds Directive 1979	Annex I	All-Ireland Vertebrate Red Data Book	Extinct

### 2. Population data

	Population sizes (pairs)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
<b>GB</b>	400	4	60 (15% of GB population)
<b>Ireland</b>			
<b>Biogeographic population</b>	5,239	52	60 (1% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: DETR/JNCC Raptor Working Group 1998

Biogeographic population source: Hagemeyer & Blair 1997

### 3. Distribution

The Golden Eagle has a northern global breeding distribution that includes the Palearctic (as far south as northern Africa and south-east Asia), as well as North America. It occurs in a wide range of biotopes from the low Arctic, through boreal and temperate regions, to the deserts and semi-deserts of the tropics. Golden Eagles occur principally in mountainous regions, occupying most areas where woodland cover is not continuous, including, in North America, extensive grasslands. The species is polytypic with a number of sub-species. Two races occur in Europe: the nominate *A. c. chrysaetos*, which is found through western Eurasia east to western Siberia, and *A. c. homeyeri* which occurs in Iberia and North Africa, east to the Middle East, the Caucasus and Iran. A further four races are found in other parts of the world (Cramp & Simmons 1980)

All European countries with suitable mountainous habitat support breeding populations, although many birds in the Baltic countries breed in lowland peatlands. Golden Eagles thus occur in the mountains of Scotland, Fennoscandia, France and Spain, as well as widely through the Carpathian uplands (Hagemeyer & Blair 1997).

In the UK, the species is resident and sedentary, occurring primarily in uplands although there are several pairs that exploit coastal habitats. The vast majority of the population is found in the Scottish Highlands (Dennis *et al.* 1984; Green 1996b; Watson 1997).

#### 4. Population structure and trends

The world population has been estimated at 50,000 to 100,000 pairs, the wide range reflecting the degree of uncertainty over the size of the eastern Palearctic population (Watson 1997). The population in Europe is estimated at 5,239 to 5,616 pairs (Hagemeyer & Blair 1997). Spain holds the largest proportion, followed by Norway, Sweden and the UK. Other European countries supporting at least 200 pairs are Austria, Finland, France, Italy, Russia and Switzerland (Watson 1997 and references therein).

Population trends in about 80% of the European population appear to be stable or increasing, although declines are most evident and continuing in the eastern Baltic (Poland, Belarus) and in south-east Europe (Greece, FYR of Macedonia, Romania). Numbers in Spain, whilst now stable, are 30% lower than in the early 1960s. A decline has also been reported from Portugal. Populations in the Alps (Germany, Austria) and Finland have increased in recent decades. Population trends are unknown in a small number of European countries, including Italy (except Sicily where a decline has been reported) (Watson 1997 and references therein). Habitat destruction is probably responsible for declines in the Baltic lowlands, and human persecution and disturbance is the likely cause of declines in south-east Europe, Sicily and Portugal. The increase in alpine populations has come about primarily through greater protection from persecution and disturbance in these areas (Watson 1997 and references therein).

The British population is approximately 400 pairs (Green 1996b). Densities are highest in the western Highlands and Islands, but breeding success is greater in the eastern Highlands, although there are also highly successful pairs on the Hebridean islands (Green 1996; Watson *et al.* 1992; Watson 1997). High densities are related to a high availability of red deer and sheep carrion, and high breeding success is related to higher live prey availability (Watson *et al.* 1992). Prior to 1800, there were possibly 500 pairs in Scotland and at least 50 pairs in England and Wales (Brown 1976; Holloway 1996).

The UK population was reduced through persecution in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to a low point of only 80 regularly used eyries in the Scottish Highlands around 1870. The species was exterminated through persecution in Ireland, with the last bird killed in 1926 (Kennedy *et al.* 1954).

Population recovery in Britain began with a decline in persecution in the 1870s (Holloway 1996). The British population is thought to have increased since the 1950s following introduction of protective legislation, notably the Protection of Wild Birds Act 1954. Overall, the similarity of the national survey estimates in 1982 and 1992 masks localised changes in numbers (Dennis *et al.* 1984; Green 1996). Since the 1950s, a small number of former breeding sites in southern Scotland and northern England have been re-occupied, but recently the southern Scottish population has contracted and there is no evidence of any marked further expansion in England (Watson 1997; Whitfield 2000). Commercial afforestation appears to be responsible for losses of several breeding pairs in Argyll and Kintyre (Watson 1992; Gregory 1996) as well as southern Scotland (Marquiss *et al.* 1985), and can reduce breeding success (Watson 1997; Whitfield 2000). However, illegal killing is thought to be the main factor preventing population expansion in Britain (Watson 1997; DETR/JNCC Raptor Working Group 2000).

## **5. Protection measures for population in UK**

### **SPA suite**

In the breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Golden Eagles supports, on average, 60 pairs. This amounts to about 15% of the British breeding population, and about 1% of the international population. Golden Eagles do not regularly occur in Northern Ireland and no longer breed there. The SPA suite contains eight sites (Table 6.48.1) where Golden Eagle has been listed as a qualifying species.

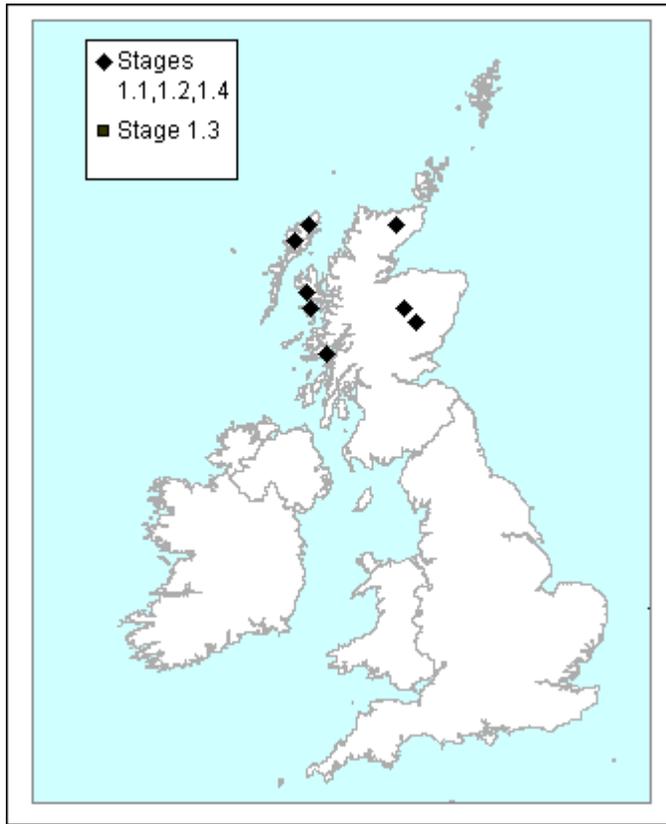
## **6. Classification criteria**

All ten sites in the UK that were known to support more than 1% of the national breeding population were considered under Stage 1.1, and of these, eight were selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements. Special attention was given to the Stage 2 factors of population size, breeding density, multi-species interest and range. The Cairngorms was included as the site supporting the largest single population and because it lies at the eastern edge of the species' range in Britain. Cuillins, Rum, Cnuic agus Cladach Mhuile (Mull Coast and Hills), Caenlochan and North Harris were included as they support large, and/or high-density populations. North Harris also lies at the western edge of the range in Britain. Lewis Peatlands and the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands were included as they support low-density populations important to the range; both are multi-species sites.

Central Highland Hills and Glens was not selected as an SPA as it holds only small numbers and does not contribute significantly to maintenance of range. Sutherland Montane Plateaux was not selected as the small population supported by this site was not considered to add significantly to the coverage already provided by the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands.

All the sites are of high naturalness and have a long history of occupancy by Golden Eagles. Five of the sites (Cairngorms, Lewis Peatlands, Caenlochan, Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands, Rum) are also multi-species sites.

## Distribution map for Golden Eagle SPA suite



**Table 6.48.1 – SPA suite**

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Caenlochan	6	0.1	2	1.1
Cairngorms	12	0.2	3	1.1
Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands	5	0.1	1	1.1
Lewis Peatlands	6	0.1	2	1.1
Cnuic agus Cladach Mhuile (Mull Coast and Hills)	9	0.2	2	1.1
North Harris Mountains	7	0.1	2	1.1
Rum	4	0.1	1	1.1
Cuillins	11 <sup>1</sup>	0.2	3	1.1
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>1.2%</b>	<b>15%</b>	

<sup>1</sup> Site boundaries still to be determined and thus total may change.