

## A6.4a Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* (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	Migratory	All-Ireland Vertebrate Red Data Book

### 2. Population data

	Population sizes (pairs)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
<b>GB</b>	4,000	40	No SPAs selected in Great Britain
<b>Ireland</b>	2,074	20	500 (24% of all-Ireland population)
<b>Biogeographic population</b>	50,000	500	500 (1.0% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: Gibbons et al. 1993

Ireland population source: Gibbons et al. 1993

Biogeographic population source: Rose & Scott 1997

### 3. Distribution

The Great Crested Grebe has a temperate Holarctic distribution, with a breeding range extending across Europe, central/southern Asia to China. Disjunct populations occur in Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

The species is polytypic, with three sub-species described (Cramp & Simmons 1977). Only the nominate race *P. c. cristatus* occurs in Europe.

In Europe, breeding occurs from Spain, Britain and Ireland in the west, across Europe to Russia. The breeding distribution is not continuous, and is very patchy, especially in central Europe. Within Europe, Great Crested Grebes are absent as a breeding bird only from Iceland and other northern latitudes (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997). In the eastern and northern parts of their European range, Great Crested Grebes are totally migratory, with birds moving south and west in winter to avoid the severe continental winters. Ringing recoveries indicate significant movement between Scandinavian breeding areas and Black Sea wintering grounds (Adriaensen *et al.* 1993). Elsewhere in its European range, the species is a partial migrant, with some birds being resident, and others moving to coastal waters.

Within the UK, which lies at the north-west of the world range, Great Crested Grebes are widely, though thinly distributed. They occur throughout south-east England and the

Midlands, most of East Anglia, the Forth–Clyde corridor of Scotland, and the low wetland belt of Ireland, including Northern Ireland. In remaining parts of the UK range, Great Crested Grebe distribution is patchy (Gibbons *et al.* 1993).

Great Crested Grebes breed on large, shallow waters with some fringing vegetation, and can be found on still waters or in the reedy fringes of slow-flowing rivers in many parts of lowland Britain and Ireland.

#### **4. Population structure and trends**

The biogeographic population used in this review is Northwest Europe and is estimated at 50,000 breeding pairs, derived from Rose & Scott (1997). The European status of the Great Crested Grebe is categorised as secure by Tucker & Heath (1994). A marked increase in the European population between the 1950s and the 1960s-1970s has been attributed largely to eutrophication of standing waterbodies (which has increased their productivity thus improving food supplies for grebes), together with a reduction in hunting (Hagemeyer & Blair 1997).

The most recent complete survey in Great Britain, conducted in 1975 (Hughes *et al.* 1979), reported an estimated population of 6,813 pairs, representing a 47% increase in population size since a similar survey ten years previously (Prent & Mills 1966). More recent population estimates derived from tetrad counts during April to July in 1988-91 suggested 8,000 birds in Britain (Gibbons *et al.* 1993). Much of this population growth was concentrated in England and Wales, with an increase of only 9% being recorded in Scotland since the 1975 survey. A contributory factor to the increase in numbers breeding in England and Wales has been the increase in availability and suitability of gravel pits, especially in south England. Great Crested Grebes have progressively filled preferred breeding habitat and there has been an increasing tendency to breed on lowland rivers (Gibbons *et al.* 1993).

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

##### **SPA suite**

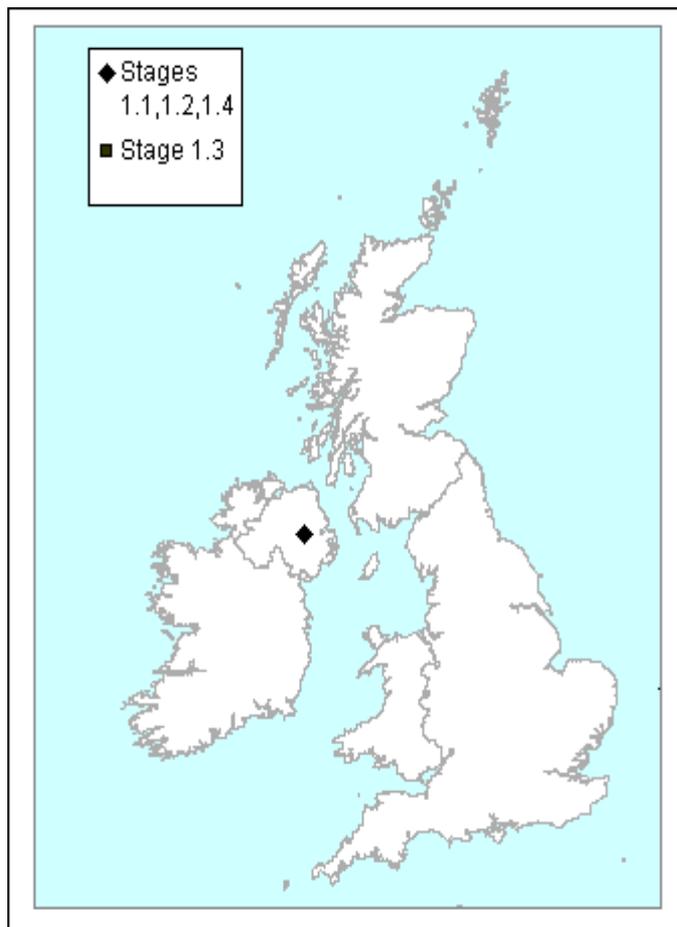
In the breeding season, the single site (Lough Neagh and Lough Beg in Northern Ireland — Table 6.4a.1) in the UK's SPA suite for Great Crested Grebe supports an average of 500 pairs. This amounts to over 24% of the all-Ireland breeding population and 1% of the international population.

#### **6. Classification criteria**

The SPA suite in the breeding period comprises Lough Neagh and Lough Beg in Northern Ireland (Table 6.4a.1), selected under Stage 1.2. There is a long history of occupancy by Great Crested Grebes on Lough Neagh and Lough Beg and a generally high breeding success there. Accordingly, the site makes an important contribution to maintaining the European range of this species.

No other site in the UK holds comparable numbers and given that the species has a wide distribution in Britain, an increasing population trend, and is not ranked as a Species of European Conservation Concern (Tucker & Heath 1994), there was no case to consider additional sites under Stage 1.4.

**Distribution map for breeding Great Crested Grebe SPA suite**



**Table 6.4a.1 – SPA suite**

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Lough Neagh and Lough Beg	500	1.0	24%	1.2
<b>TOTALS</b>	500	1.0%	24.1% (Ire)	