

A6.55 Coot *Fulica atra* (non-breeding)

1. Status in UK

Biological status		Legal status	Conservation status
Breeding	✓	Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981	Species of European Conservation Concern
		General Protection	
		Schedule 2(1)	
		Schedule 3(3)	
Migratory	✓	Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985	(UK) Species of Conservation Importance
Wintering	✓	EC Birds Directive 1979	All-Ireland Vertebrate Red Data Book
		Annex II/1	
		Annex II/2	
		Migratory	

2. Population data

	Population sizes (individuals)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
GB	114,100	1,100	15,070 (14% of GB total)
Ireland	25,000	250	3,980 (16% of all-Ireland total)
Biogeographic population	1,500,000	15,000	19,050 (1% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: Kirby 1995

All-Ireland population source: Cranswick et al. 1999

Biogeographic population source: Rose & Scott 1997

3. Distribution

Coots have a wide global distribution, occurring from Europe and northern Africa in the west, through the Middle East, and across Eurasia, east to the Pacific coasts of China and Japan. The species also occurs in India, south-east Asia and Australasia (Taylor & van Perlo 1998). It is polytypic and four sub-species are recognised. The nominate race *F. a. atra* occurs through Eurasia and northern Africa. In temperate and sub-tropical regions, Coots are resident, but populations in northern and eastern Europe move south to winter from the North Sea south to the Middle East, as well as in parts of North Africa (del Hoyo *et al.* 1996).

Coots have a wide breeding range in Europe, occurring in lowland areas of all countries in the region.

Coots are widespread in the UK in both winter and summer; a fact reflected in the small number of sites holding more than 1% of the biogeographical population. The non-breeding distribution shows a close similarity to that in summer (Horsfall 1986). Abberton Reservoir

in eastern England holds by far the largest non-breeding numbers of this species – approximately double that of any other UK site (Pollitt *et al.* 2000). Colour-marking studies have indicated that individual Coots may move large distances between sites in the UK during the course of a winter, although breeding birds may be more site faithful (Horsfall 1986).

Coots generally favour large, still or slow-moving eutrophic or mesotrophic waterbodies, such as lakes, ponds, gravel pits, canals, slow-moving rivers, open marshes, and lagoons (Horsfall 1986; del Hoyo *et al.* 1996; Taylor & van Perlo 1998). They also exploit temporary waterbodies both when breeding and in winter (Taylor & van Perlo 1998). They feed primarily on vegetation, such as algae and other aquatic plants, as well as occasionally on terrestrial plants (del Hoyo *et al.* 1996), and favour fairly shallow waters with deeper water for diving, and aquatic vegetation cover (Taylor & van Perlo 1998). In many parts of Europe the Zebra Mussel *Dreissena polymorpha* is a particularly important source of food during the winter (Horsfall 1986).

4. Population structure and trends

In Europe, two populations are recognised, one in north-west Europe, numbering *c.* 1,500,000 birds, and one in the Black Sea and Mediterranean, numbering *c.* 2,500,000 (Rose & Scott 1997). Numbers wintering in Britain are estimated at 114,100, representing 7.6% of the biogeographic population (Kirby 1995a).

Populations of Coot in many areas of Europe have shown marked fluctuations due to hard weather, but overall the species has expanded its range since the late 19th century. The main reasons for this increase are believed to be eutrophication, the creation of new habitats by man and adaptation to urban environments (del Hoyo *et al.* 1996; Gorban & Stanevicius 1997). The overall trend between 1974 and 1996 in the Northwest and Central Europe was of stability, although numbers in the Baltic and Nordic areas have declined very significantly (Delany *et al.* 1999). In large part this seem to be due to the failure of numbers to recover in Sweden following a major population crash in 1978–1979 (caused by a very severe winter). There also appear to have been decreases in the West Mediterranean (Delany *et al.* 1999).

In the UK, overall numbers have varied little over the last 15 years, with declines at particular sites attributed to the redistribution of birds (Cranswick *et al.* 1999). Numbers at sites in Ireland have fluctuated markedly through the 1990s, further supporting the idea that Coots show low site fidelity between winters (Colhoun 2000). There are no indications from count data of hard weather movements of Coots to the UK, yet there may be some movements at a more local scale within the UK (Ridgill & Fox 1990).

5. Protection measures for population in the UK

SPA suite

In the non-breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Coot supports, on average, 19,050 individuals (calculated using WeBS November 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 14% of the British non-breeding population, and about 16% of the all-Ireland population. The suite holds about 1% of the international flyway population at six sites where Coots have been listed as a qualifying species (Table 6.55.1).

6. Classification criteria

No sites in the UK regularly support more than 1% of the international Coot population in winter (Stage 1.2). However, six sites in the suite were identified under Stage 1.3 (see section 5.3), with Coot an important component of the non-breeding waterbird assemblages at these localities. The sites thus identified (Abberton Reservoir; Broadland; Ouse Washes and Rutland Water in England; and Strangford Lough, and Lough Neagh and Lough Beg in Northern Ireland) were included within the suite. By definition, these sites are multi-species SPAs, of importance also for a range of other waterbirds. There is a very long recorded history of occupancy at most of these sites (Boyd in Atkinson-Willes 1963).

As the selection of sites under Stage 1.3 resulted in a suite which includes the main population centres of non-breeding Coot in the UK, it was not considered necessary to select additional sites using Stage 1.4.

Distribution map for non-breeding Coot SPA suite

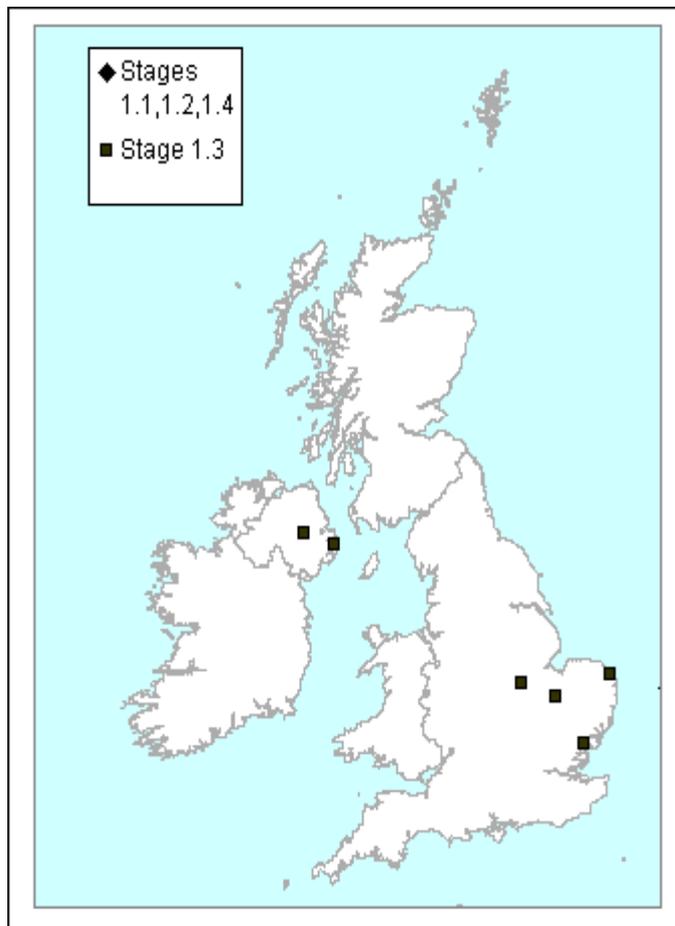


Table 6.55.1 – SPA suite

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Abberton Reservoir	12,602	0.8	11.0	1.3
Broadland	5,747	0.4	5.2	1.3
Lough Neagh and Lough Beg	6,993	0.5	28.0 (Ire)	1.3
Ouse Washes	2,201	0.2	1.9	1.3
Rutland Water	3,962	0.3	3.5	1.3
Strangford Lough	392	<0.1	1.6 (Ire)	1.3

TOTALS	19,050 (in November)	1.3%	13.7% 15.9% (Ire)
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