

## A6.56b Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* (non-breeding)

### 1. Status in UK

See section A6.56a.

### 2. Population data

	Population sizes (individuals)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
<b>GB</b>	359,000	3,600	183,049 (51% of GB total)
<b>Ireland</b>	50,000	500	11,849 (24% of all-Ireland total)
<b>Biogeographic population</b>	874,000	9,000	194,898 (22% of biogeographic population)

*GB population source: Cayford & Waters 1996*

*All-Ireland population source: Cranswick et al. 1999*

*Biogeographic population source: Rose & Scott 1997*

### 3. Distribution

Section A6.56a outlines the global distribution and taxonomy of Oystercatchers.

Non-breeding Oystercatchers are found exclusively in coastal habitats and, within the East Atlantic Flyway, most are concentrated around the North and Irish Seas. There are wintering areas as far south as the coasts of West Africa, which probably hold birds from the most northerly breeding areas in the north of Norway and around the White Sea.

In Britain, resident birds are joined in winter by birds mainly from Iceland, the Faroes and Norway (Smit & Piersma 1989). An estimated 45% of the European breeding population is thought to winter in Great Britain, where birds are found at many coastal sites, albeit concentrated on estuaries (Piersma 1986). In contrast to their dispersed nature in the breeding season, wintering Oystercatchers usually occur in high densities at a small number of key sites (often associated with estuaries with high productivity of shellfish – especially Cockles *Cerastoderma edule* and Mussels *Mytilus edulis*).

### 4. Population structure and trends

The biogeographic population of Oystercatcher is that of the East Atlantic Flyway (which also comprises the whole of the nominate sub-species). This population is currently increasing (Rose & Scott 1997), especially since the mid-1980s (Davidson 1998). Results from the International Waterbird Census show that almost exactly a third of the north-west European population occur in the UK (Delany *et al.* 1999).

Within the UK, despite between-year fluctuations (Cranswick *et al.* 1999), the trend has been a substantial increase in non-breeding numbers over the last decade. The estuarine population has increased by 24% between 1981–1985 and 1987–1992, and the non-estuarine population by 43% between 1984–1985 and 1987–1992 (Cayford & Waters 1996). Both the long-term

increase and short-term fluctuations have been linked to recent climatic improvement and changes in the density of prey during winter and in the breeding season (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997). This is partly manifest in the UK by the behavioural adaptation of breeding Oystercatchers to lowland agricultural habitats (Gibbons *et al.* 1993).

Local declines in numbers of Oystercatcher have been linked to low food abundance particularly in areas where Cockles *Cerastoderma edule*, a major prey item, are commercially farmed (Cranswick *et al.* 1999). Norris *et al.* (1998) found a positive correlation between the number of Oystercatchers in the spring and the biomass of cockles at the start of winter. Conversely, Oystercatcher numbers were negatively correlated with the amount of cockles landed by the fishery during the winter. Studies into the interaction of Oystercatchers and their principal prey (Goss-Custard *et al.* 1998) are ongoing and will contribute to a greater understanding of the impact of commercial interests, such as Cockle fishing, on Oystercatcher populations.

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

### **SPA suite**

In the non-breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Oystercatcher supports, on average, 194,898 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 51% the British population, about 24% of the all-Ireland population, and about 22% of the international flyway population. The suite comprises 30 sites at which Oystercatcher has been listed as a qualifying species (Table 6.56b.1).

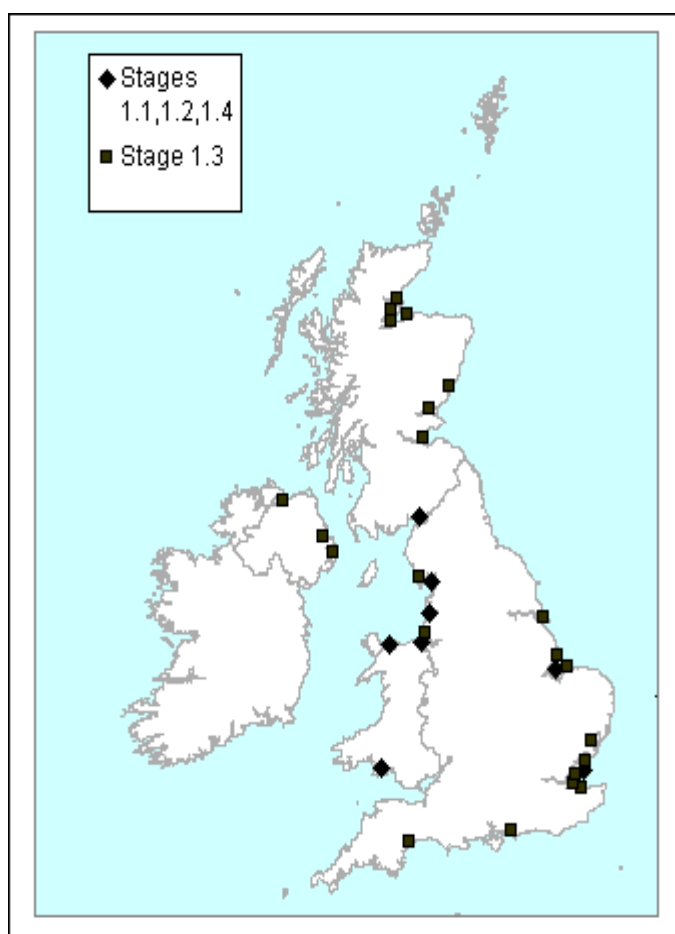
## **6. Classification criteria**

All seven sites in the UK that were known to support more than 1% of the international population of Oystercatcher were considered under Stage 1.2. All were selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements (Burry Inlet; Foulness; Morecambe Bay; Ribble and Alt Estuaries; the Dee Estuary; The Wash; and the Upper Solway Flats and Marshes). A further 22 sites were considered and selected under Stage 1.3 (see section 5.3), with Oystercatcher forming an important component of the non-breeding waterbird assemblages at these localities.

One additional site, Traeth Lafan/Lavan Sands was considered and selected under Stage 1.4 because of the important role that the site plays as a cold weather refuge for major concentrations of Oystercatchers from the nearby Dee Estuary. In severe winter weather conditions, the Dee can freeze, displacing birds to feed on the milder, open coast of Traeth Lafan/Lavan Sands.

The sites within the suite are distributed throughout the range of the population in the UK, from Northern Ireland and Wales, to the Dornoch Firth in northern Scotland, and sites on the English south coast. Most sites are multi-species SPAs, of importance also for a range of other waterbirds, although Traeth Lafan/Lavan Sands was selected solely for this species. There is a long recorded history of occupancy at most of these sites (Prater 1981).

### Distribution map for non-breeding Oystercatcher SPA suite



**Table 6.56b.1 – SPA suite**

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Belfast Lough	5,963	0.7	11.9 (Ire)	1.3
Benfleet and Southend Marshes	2,484	0.3	0.7	1.3
Burry Inlet	13,590	1.6	3.8	1.2
Chichester and Langstone Harbours	2,595	0.3	0.7	1.3
Cromarty Firth	2,509	0.3	0.7	1.3
Dengie	2,193	0.3	0.6	1.3
Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet	3,270	0.4	0.9	1.3
Duddon Estuary	6,463	0.7	1.8	1.3
Exe Estuary	4,265	0.5	1.2	1.3
Firth of Forth	8,931	1.0	2.5	1.3
Firth of Tay and Eden Estuary	4,215	0.5	1.2	1.3
Foulness	11,756	1.4	3.3	1.2
Gibraltar Point	3,951	0.5	1.1	1.3

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Humber Flats, Marshes and Coast	5,149	0.6	1.4	1.3
Inner Moray Firth	3,063	0.4	0.9	1.3
Lough Foyle	2,028	0.2	4.1 (Ire)	1.3
Medway Estuary and Marshes	3,672	0.4	1.0	1.3
Mersey Narrows and North Wirral Foreshore	3,452	0.4	1.0	1.3
Montrose Basin	2,368	0.3	0.7	1.3
Moray and Nairn Coast	2,171	0.3	0.6	1.3
Morecambe Bay	47,572	5.4	13.3	1.2
North Norfolk Coast	3,048	0.4	0.9	1.3
Ribble and Alt Estuaries	16,159	1.9	4.5	1.2
Stour and Orwell Estuaries	2,176	0.3	0.6	1.3
Strangford Lough	5,243	0.6	10.5 (Ire)	1.3
The Dee Estuary	28,434	3.2	7.9	1.2
The Swale	3,731	0.4	1.0	1.3
The Wash	25,651	2.9	7.2	1.2
Traeth Lafan/Lavan Sands, Conway Bay	4,931	0.6	1.4	1.4
Upper Solway Flats and Marshes	34,694	4.0	9.7	1.2

TOTALS	194,898 (in November)	21.7%	50.8% 23.7% (Ire)
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