

## A6.57a Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta* (breeding)

### 1. Status in UK

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

### 2. Population data

|                                 | Population sizes (pairs) | Selection thresholds | Totals in species' SPA suite         |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <b>GB</b>                       | 592                      | 6                    | 549 (93% of GB population)           |
| <b>Ireland</b>                  |                          |                      |                                      |
| <b>Biogeographic population</b> | 26,800                   | 268                  | 549 (2% of biogeographic population) |

GB population source: Ogilvie & RBBP 1996

Biogeographic population source: Hagemeijer & Blair 1997

### 3. Distribution

The global range of the Avocet is quite discontinuous, with a series of isolated breeding areas extending south from western Europe, through the Mediterranean to eastern and southern Africa, and east through the Black Sea and southern Asia to eastern Asia (Cramp & Simmons 1983; del Hoyo *et al.* 1996). In Africa, the Avocet is sedentary, but other populations are migratory. North-west European breeding birds move south-west to winter mainly on the coasts of Iberia, (although some remain on the estuaries of eastern and southern England) whilst other European birds move to North Africa and the Arabian Gulf. Central Asian breeding birds move south to wintering grounds in Pakistan and the coast of China. The species is monotypic.

In Europe, breeding occurs around the southern coasts of the North Sea (the most northerly breeding area in the world – Fleet *et al.* 1994), on the west coast of France, and locally along the north coast of the Mediterranean Sea, from Portugal in the west to Turkey in the east.

Inland breeding occurs in Spain, Austria and Yugoslavia, whilst Avocets also breed along the north coast of the Black Sea, from Bulgaria to the Gulf of Sivash.

In the UK, the breeding population is concentrated on the coasts of East Anglia and north Kent, where the preferred habitat is shallow, brackish coastal lagoons with bare or sparsely vegetated low islands (Gibbons *et al.* 1993). Principal breeding concentrations are found along the north coast of Norfolk, the Suffolk coast and the north Kent coast. In recent years, nesting has occurred on the coasts of Lincolnshire, Yorkshire and Sussex, and attempted breeding has occurred inland in the London area, at Rutland Water and on the Ouse Washes (Cambridgeshire/Norfolk). This indicates a continuing range expansion (Ogilvie & RBBP 1999).

The species does occasionally use alternative habitats when competition for nest sites is high. At Old Hall Marshes RSPB reserve in Essex, several pairs have nested successfully along the margins of borrow dykes in which the water level has been artificially raised, and in wet fields grazed by sheep.

### **3. Population structure and trends**

Two of the six biogeographical populations of Avocet occur in Europe: the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean population, and the Western Europe/Western Mediterranean population – of which UK birds are a component (Rose & Scott 1997). Numbers breeding in Europe are currently estimated at between 26,762–29,435 pairs (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997). Numbers in Europe have increased markedly over the course of the last century, notably since the 1940s (Fleet *et al.* 1994; Hötker in prep).

Having been absent from the UK as a breeding species for 100 years, Avocets became re-established in Suffolk in 1947 and bred regularly in that county alone for the next 20 years (Cadbury & Olney 1978; Cadbury *et al.* 1989). During World War II, human disturbance in coastal areas was much reduced and many areas of the claimed coast were re-flooded for defence purposes. Avocets began to breed on the resulting brackish lagoons, free from human disturbance (Sharrock 1976).

There has been considerable range expansion and population increase since the mid 1970s and the species now breeds regularly in Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex and Kent (Gibbons *et al.* 1993). The 1996 breeding population was estimated to be 592 pairs (Ogilvie & RBBP 1998), representing a 374% increase since 1974 when there were 125 pairs (Sharrock & RBBP 1975). The principal reasons for the increase are reduced human disturbance and appropriate habitat management at key breeding sites (Gibbons *et al.* 1993). Similarly, a large increase has also occurred in The Netherlands, where the breeding population doubled in 15 years, probably as a result of eutrophication in the Wadden Sea, which increased the food supply, and the creation of artificial breeding sites in the Delta area (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997).

It is likely that the considerable population growth and range expansion witnessed in England has been supplemented by immigration from The Netherlands and Denmark, where large increases were noted during the same period (Sharrock 1976; Hagemeijer & Blair 1997). Research shows that pairs breeding at newly colonised sites have a higher level of productivity than those at established sites, where occupancy of breeding habitat has reached 'pair carrying capacity' (Hill 1988). This process is likely to stimulate continuing range expansion and, possibly, use of alternative breeding habitat.

## 5. Protection measures for population in UK

### SPA suite

In the breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Avocets supports, on average, 549 pairs. This amounts to about 93% of the British breeding population. The suite contains about 2% of the international population. The species does not breed in Northern Ireland. The SPA suite total is contained within six sites (Table 6.57a.1) where Avocets have been listed as a qualifying species.

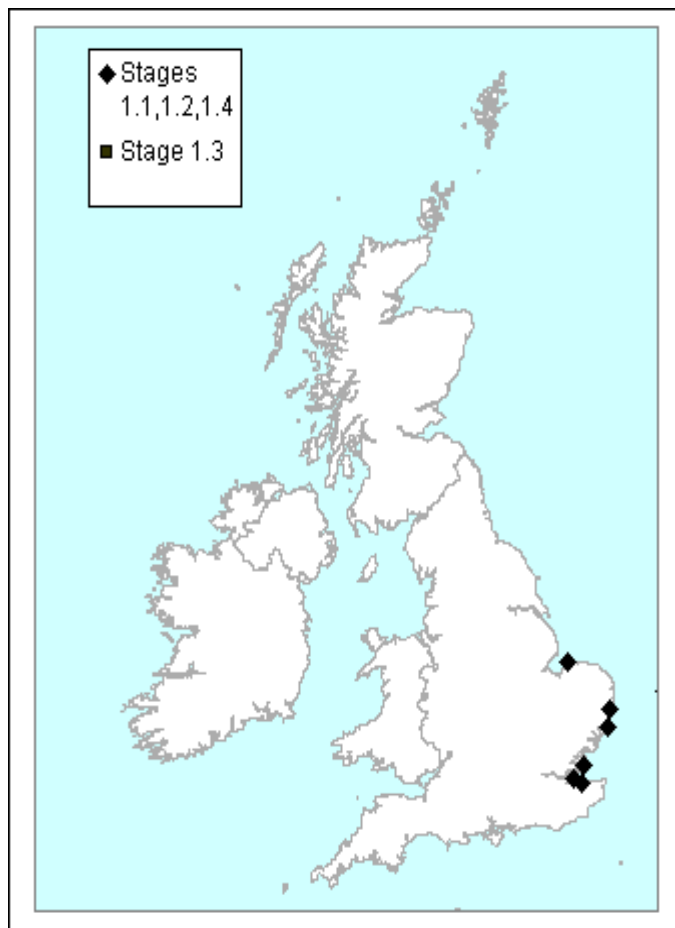
## 6. Classification criteria

All sites in the UK that were known to support more than 1% of the national Avocet breeding population were considered under Stage 1.1, and all were selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements. As the selection of sites under Stage 1.1 resulted in a suite giving comprehensive coverage of the Avocet population and range in England, it was not considered necessary to select additional sites using Stage 1.4.

Some of the sites have a long history of occupancy, although other sites have been more recently colonised. The Alde–Ore Estuary contains Havergate Island, where Avocets first re-established themselves as a British breeding species in 1947 (Cadbury *et al.* 1989).

Most of the sites in the suite have a high degree of naturalness, and all are multi-species SPAs. Many of the areas used by Avocets are in the ownership of nature conservation organisations and are subject to active conservation management so as to facilitate the specific habitat requirements of this species.

### Distribution map for breeding Avocet SPA suite



**Table 6.57a.1 – SPA suite**

| <b>Site name</b>           | <b>Site total</b> | <b>% of biogeographical population</b> | <b>% of national population</b> | <b>Selection stage</b> |
|----------------------------|-------------------|--|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| Alde-Ore Estuary           | 104               | 0.4                                    | 17.6                            | 1.1                    |
| Foulness                   | 46                | 0.2                                    | 7.8                             | 1.1                    |
| Medway Estuary and Marshes | 28                | 0.1                                    | 4.7                             | 1.1                    |
| Minsmere - Walberswick     | 91                | 0.3                                    | 15.4                            | 1.1                    |
| North Norfolk Coast        | 177               | 0.7                                    | 29.9                            | 1.1                    |
| The Swale                  | 103               | 0.4                                    | 17.4                            | 1.1                    |
| <b>TOTALS</b>              | <b>549</b>        | <b>2.1%</b>                            | <b>92.7%</b>                    |                        |