

A6.57b Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta* (non-breeding)

1. Status in UK

See section A6.57a.

2. Population data

	Population sizes (individuals)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
GB	1,270	50 (see section 5.1.2 for rationale)	2,225 (c. 100% of GB total) ¹
Ireland			
Biogeographic population	67,000	700	2,225 (3% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: Cayford & Waters 1996

Biogeographic population source: Rose & Scott 1997

3. Distribution

The global range of the Avocet is outlined in section A6.57a.

In Europe, birds breeding in the Wadden Sea move south and west to the coasts of western France, Spain and Portugal. Birds breeding in Britain stay within the country in winter. There is, however, movement from breeding areas in East Anglia, to the estuaries along the Channel and southern North Sea coasts of England, where there are concentrations in Devon/Cornwall and Suffolk (Lack 1986; Cadbury *et al.* 1989; Pollitt *et al.* 2000). The preferred non-breeding habitat is estuaries where the substrate is largely composed of fine silt (Lack 1986).

4. Population structure and trends

Those Avocets wintering in the UK are a component of the Western Europe/Western Mediterranean biogeographical population, currently estimated to number 67,000 individuals (Rose & Scott 1997).

Avocets began wintering in the UK regularly in 1947, the same year that the species recolonised as a regular breeder (Lack 1986). Until the mid-1970s, the majority of the UK breeding population had left the country by the end of October, leaving only a few to overwinter (Lack 1986). Since then, an increasing proportion of what is presumably the UK breeding population has over-wintered, with 385 birds in winter 1983/1984 (Lack 1986). Subsequently, the population has increased more rapidly with a maximum of 3,859 recorded in December 1997. There has been a 99% increase in the annual index value between 1976/77 and 1997/98 (Cranswick *et al.* 1999).

¹ Numbers of Avocets wintering in the UK continue to increase (Pollitt *et al.* 2000); hence, the more contemporary estimate of numbers within the SPA suite exceeds the national population estimate used for this review.

These population increases have been mirrored in other European countries including Belgium and Italy where, as in the UK, the increases are related to better protection, extension of breeding habitat and improved feeding conditions (Tucker & Heath 1994). However, one of the largest wintering populations in France is reported to be in decline (Tucker & Heath 1994), with no obvious cause identified.

The species is susceptible to cold winter weather, and those wintering on the east coast of England are the most northerly wintering Avocets in the world. Accordingly, they are susceptible to prolonged periods of freezing conditions that can cause substantial mortality. This appears to have been the cause of declines in a variety of European countries following the cold weather of winter 1996 (Delany *et al.* 1999).

5. Protection measures for population in UK

SPA suite

In the non-breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Avocet supports, on average, 2,225 individuals (calculated using WeBS January 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 substantially all the British, and about 3.2% of the international flyway populations. Avocets do not regularly occur in winter in Northern Ireland. The suite comprises 16 sites at which Avocet has been listed as a qualifying species (Table 6.57b.1).

6. Classification criteria

All 16 sites in the UK that were known to support more than 50 Avocets were considered under Stage 1.1, and all were selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements.

The sites within the suite are distributed throughout the range of the population in the UK, from The Wash and the North Norfolk Coast in the north-east to the Tamar and Exe estuaries in the south-west. Most sites are multi-species SPAs, of importance also for a range of other waterbirds, although the Deben Estuary was selected solely for this species. There is a relatively long recorded history of occupancy at most of these sites, with birds having wintered at the Tamar Estuary since the recolonisation of Britain by this species in 1947 (Prater 1981). On the Exe Estuary wintering commenced in 1973/4 (Cadbury & Olney 1978).

As the selection of sites under Stage 1.1 resulted in a suite which gives comprehensive coverage of the population and range of non-breeding Avocet in the UK, it was not considered necessary to select additional sites using Stage 1.4.

Distribution map for non-breeding Avocet SPA suite

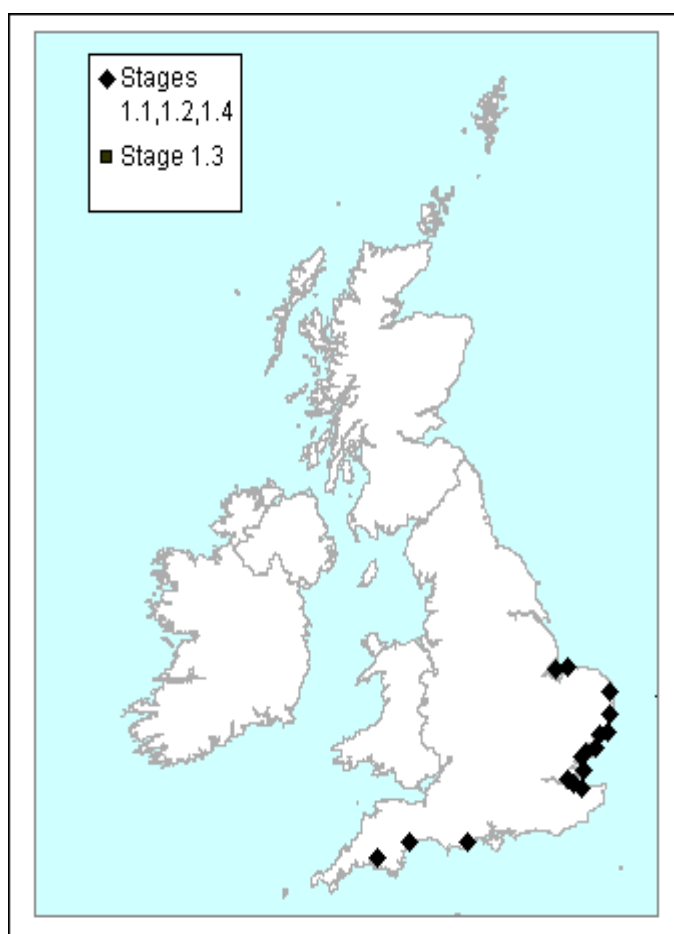


Table 6.57b.1 – SPA suite

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Alde-Ore Estuary	766	1.1	60.3	1.1
Blackwater Estuary	76	0.1	6.0	1.1
Breydon Water	33	<0.1	2.6	1.1
Colne Estuary	75	0.1	5.9	1.1
Deben Estuary	95	0.1	7.5	1.1
Exe Estuary	359	0.5	28.3	1.1
Foulness	100	0.2	7.9	1.1
Hamford Water	317	0.5	25.0	1.1
Medway Estuary and Marshes	314	0.5	24.7	1.1
Minsmere-Walberswick	278	0.4	21.9	1.1
North Norfolk Coast	153	0.2	12.1	1.1
Poole Harbour	459	0.7	36.1	1.1
Tamar Estuaries Complex	201	0.3	15.8	1.1

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Thames Estuary and Marshes	276	0.4	21.7	1.1
The Swale	89	0.1	7.0	1.1
The Wash	110	0.2	8.7	1.1
TOTALS	2,225 (in January)	3.2%	c. 100%	