

A6.69 Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* (non-breeding)

1. Status in UK

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

2. Population data

	Population sizes (individuals)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
GB	100,000	1,000	2,097 (2% of the GB population)
Ireland	Unknown		No SPAs selected in Northern Ireland
Biogeographic population	20,000,000	200,000	2,097 (0.1% of the biogeographic population)

GB population source: Cayford & Waters 1996

Biogeographic population source: Rose & Scott 1997

3. Distribution

The Snipe has an extensive global range that includes northern and central Eurasia from Iceland to the Bering Strait, North America, South America and eastern and southern Africa. There are also disjunct breeding populations in Kashmir and Mongolia. South American and African populations are sedentary. Snipe breeding in temperate and boreal regions of North America and Eurasia, however, move south in winter to milder climates (although also wintering in any part of the breeding range that remains unfrozen – Tuck 1972).

The species is polytypic – nine sub-species having been described. Of these, two occur in Europe: the nominate subspecies *G. g. gallinago* is found throughout the Palearctic except for where the subspecies *G. g. faeroeensis* occurs, *i.e.* Iceland, the Faeroes, Orkney and Shetland (Cramp & Simmons 1983).

In Europe, Snipe winter in small numbers in southern Scandinavia, but occur principally in Britain and Ireland, the Low Countries and south to the Mediterranean basin (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997). Considerable numbers also winter in Africa, south of the Sahara.

The winter distribution of Snipe is determined by availability of suitable habitats, as well as the influence of migration routes and weather. British breeding birds are mainly sedentary, central European populations are partially sedentary, whilst the Russian, Fennoscandian and Icelandic populations are mainly migratory.

Snipe have a widespread winter distribution in Britain and Ireland, resulting from both the southward movements of birds fledged in northern parts of Britain and Ireland, and the arrival of overseas migrants. They have a close association with lowland areas in southern Britain and the bogs of southern Ireland (Lack 1986). Recoveries of ringed Snipe show a strong loyalty by individuals to particular migration routes and winter quarters (Lack 1986). During periods of frost, birds may shift to milder coastal areas (Snow & Perrins 1998). Prolonged cold spells cause a movement of birds south and west (Lack 1986).

The basic habitat requirement (for both breeding and non-breeding birds) is soft, accessible, organic soil, rich in food organisms just below the surface, with frequent clumps or patches of herbage or shrub cover affording good visibility of approaching danger. Commonly, this equates to marshes, bogs, water-meadows and damp grassland. Outside the breeding season, there is more use of artificial habitats such as sewage farms and rice fields (Snow & Perrins 1998).

4. Population structure and trends

Six biogeographical populations of Snipe have been described (Rose & Scott 1997). Of these, two occur in Europe: the European breeding population of *G. g. gallinago* and the whole population of *G. g. faeroeensis*. Both these populations occur in the UK.

The cryptic nature of Snipe in winter, and their wide, low-density distribution, means that it is very difficult to estimate numbers. There are a wide range of technical problems with designing appropriate surveys for this species, and knowledge of abundance and trends of Snipe (and Jack Snipe *Lymnocyptes minimus*) in winter is accordingly very poor. Reliable estimates of population size are limited as the species commonly occurs inland, and being both secretive and well camouflaged, it is rarely seen unless flushed (Devort 1977). The European breeding (and non-breeding) population has been estimated at >20,000,000 (Rose & Scott 1997, based on Beintema & Müskens 1983). Numbers of *G. g. faeroeensis* are estimated at 750,000 (Rose & Scott 1997), and of these about 6,900 pairs (range 5,300–10,650) are estimated to breed in Orkney and Shetland (BTO unpublished). Although Icelandic Snipe of *G. g. faeroeensis* move south in winter, it is not possible to separate these populations in winter within the UK.

Britain is estimated to support 55,000 breeding pairs with a further 10,000 in Ireland (Gibbons *et al.* 1993; Piersma 1986). There is uncertainty as to the size of non-breeding populations of Snipe; in Britain this is estimated as being significantly greater than 100,000 (Cayford & Waters 1996; Stone *et al.* 1997). According to the last winter atlas (Lack 1986), non-breeding Snipe of Britain and Ireland must number many hundreds of thousands.

In Europe, reliable trends are limited, but Snipe populations are thought to be declining throughout much of Europe, probably through loss of breeding habitat, especially because of drainage (Hötter 1991; Hagemeyer & Blair 1997). Loss of suitable moulting grounds in The Netherlands due to agricultural development and drainage (Beintema & Müskens 1983) is a factor probably affecting many north European populations (Beintema *et al.* 1997). A study in south-west Finland shows a highly significant decrease in the density of breeding birds probably as a result of habitat loss through the cessation of cattle-grazing on shore meadows, allowing the encroachment of reeds and shrubs (Hagemeyer & Blair 1997). Recent decreases in breeding range have been reported in Britain, Ireland, France, Switzerland and Ukraine.

Relatively little is known of the large breeding populations in remote areas of Finland and Sweden.

Experimental and large-scale management of wetlands in several countries shows that it is possible to reverse such declines with appropriate hydrological management (Green & Robins 1993; Self *et al.* 1994; Beintema *et al.* 1996).

In Britain and Ireland, there has been a decline in breeding numbers in both the lowlands and margins of uplands (Snow & Perrins 1986). Less is known of trends in the winter populations. However, a decrease in the resident breeding population and an overall reduction of suitable habitat points to a decline in non-breeding populations in Britain and Ireland. The all-Ireland 1997/98 maximum was the lowest yet recorded by the Irish Wetland Birds Survey (Colhoun 2000).

5. Protection measures for population in UK

SPA suite

In the non-breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Snipe supports, on average, 2,097 individuals. This total amounts to about 2% of the British non-breeding population. Within an all-Ireland context, there have been no SPAs selected in Northern Ireland. The suite holds about 0.1% of the international flyway population and is comprised of the single site where non-breeding Snipe has been listed as a qualifying species (Table 6.69.1).

6. Classification criteria

Snipe are widely distributed across the UK in winter. Conservation in winter is thus best effected through a range of wider countryside conservation measures. However, the single UK site (Somerset Levels and Moors) known to support more than 2,000 individuals was considered under Stage 1.3 (since the site supports a multi-species assemblage of more than 20,000 waterbirds), and was selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements.

Snipe are monitored where they occur on wetland sites, but due to current reliance on the UK's Wetland Bird Survey (the principal monitoring scheme for non-breeding waterbirds in the UK), some important concentrations regularly occurring on agricultural habitats are not routinely counted. Work is being undertaken to address these monitoring needs.

Distribution map for non-breeding Snipe SPA suite

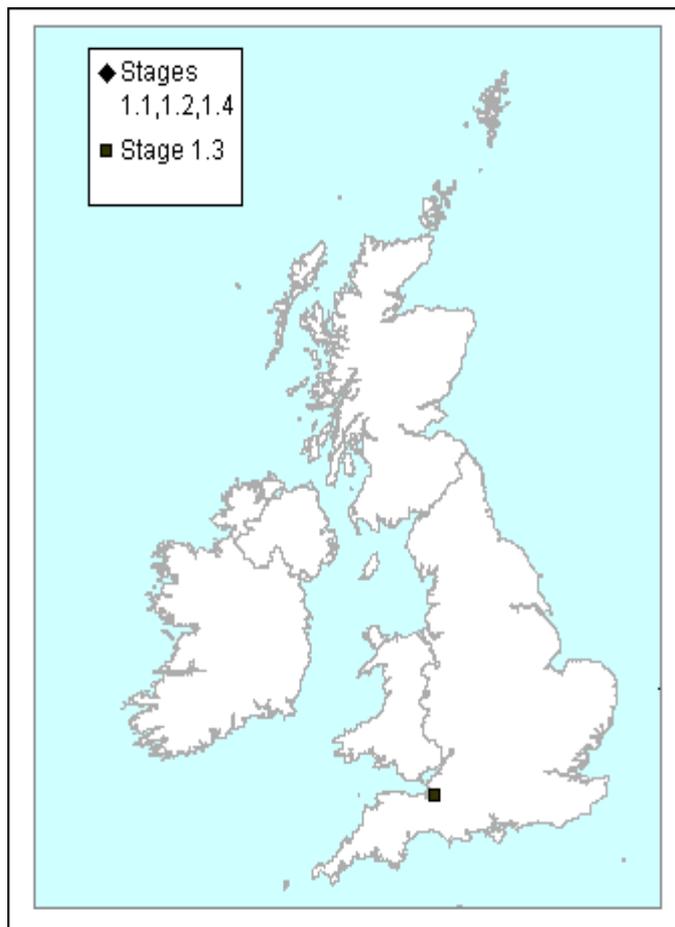


Table 6.69.1 – SPA suite

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Somerset Levels and Moors	2,097	0.1	2.1	1.3
TOTALS	2,097	0.1%	2.1%	