

A6.79 Arctic Skua *Stercorarius parasiticus* (breeding)

1. Status in UK

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

2. Population data

	Population sizes (pairs)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
GB	3,200	32	780 (24% of GB population)
Ireland			
Biogeographic population	30,000	300	780 (3% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: Walsh et al. 1995

Biogeographic population source: Lloyd et al. 1991

3. Distribution

Arctic Skuas have a circumpolar distribution, breeding on tundra and coastal moors between 82°N and 56°N. Within this distribution, the species is absent only from the very high Arctic and parts of east Greenland (Cramp & Simmons 1983; Furness 1987). The largest populations are found in Russia, Iceland, Svalbard, Norway and Sweden (Hagemeyer & Blair 1997). In the southern parts of its range the species is coastal, whilst in the Arctic it occurs as a widespread predator of the tundra. It is monotypic.

In Europe, Arctic Skuas breed in Iceland, along the northern coasts of Scandinavia south from the White Sea, and locally along parts of the northern coasts of the Baltic.

In Britain and Ireland, breeding Arctic Skuas are restricted to Scotland, particularly the Northern Isles, where they nest in colonies, being present from April to August. In the Orkney and Shetland archipelagos, Arctic Skuas are widely distributed, but further south they breed more locally at sites with a traditional history of occupancy. Sites in the Inner Hebrides are the most southerly in the Palearctic range of the species, and amongst the most southerly in the world. Birds breeding in Scotland are an important component of the North Atlantic range of Arctic Skua.

During the breeding season (April–July/August) Arctic Skuas occur in northern waters around Scotland, generally close to the nesting colonies. At the end of the breeding season (August–

October), they move south to inshore waters along British and Irish coasts (Stone *et al.* 1995) before migrating to the southern hemisphere, with some wintering off the coasts of South America and South Africa (Lloyd *et al.* 1991).

4. Population structure and trends

Because large numbers of Arctic Skuas nest in remote and relatively inaccessible parts of Russia, Canada and Alaska, the size of the world population is poorly known. However, the North-East Atlantic biogeographical population is known to comprise about 30,000 pairs, with the largest numbers in Norway (8,000 pairs) and Iceland (4,000 pairs). About 10% of the population (*i.e.* 3,200 pairs) nests in Scotland (Lloyd *et al.* 1996).

Some Arctic Skuas in Scotland nest on inland moors and heaths, but a lack of survey data for these areas prior to 1985_1987 makes it impossible to describe the historic population trend in UK. However, an analysis comparing total numbers from 1974_1975 and 1985–1986 in Shetland (where about 60% of the UK population nests) indicated little change over this period (Ewins *et al.* 1988). Sears *et al.* (1995) again found no change in a more recent census in 1992. However, colonies monitored by the UK Seabird Monitoring Programme have revealed consistent declines in breeding numbers since 1992 (*e.g.* Walsh *et al.* 1995; Thompson *et al.* 1999). These declines may be linked to a period of poor reproductive output during the late 1980s and early 1990s when the Shetland sandeel stock was very low. Arctic Skuas rely largely on stealing food from other seabirds.

Arctic Skuas have also been displaced from some breeding areas by the expansion of the Great Skua population. Elsewhere in the North Atlantic, the population on the Faeroes is believed to have declined (Furness 1987) due partly to human interference.

5. Protection measures for population in UK

SPA suite

In the breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Arctic Skua supports, on average, 780 pairs. This amounts to about 24% of the British breeding population, and about 3% of the international population. Arctic Skuas do not breed in Northern Ireland. The SPA suite contains seven sites (Table 6.79.1) where Arctic Skua has been listed as a qualifying species.

6. Classification criteria

No site in the UK holds more than 1% of the international population of Arctic Skua; thus no sites were selected under Stage 1.2. At six sites (Rousay; Fetlar; Foula; West Westray; Fair Isle; Hoy) Arctic Skua was identified as an important component of the breeding seabird assemblages at these localities. After consideration of Stage 2 judgements, all these sites were selected under Stage 1.3 (see section 5.3).

An additional 14 sites were assessed under Stage 1.4 to provide additional coverage of population size and range. Of these, the highest-density breeding colony in Britain (Papa Westray) was included in the SPA suite. A further ten sites in the Northern Isles, as well as colonies on the Lewis Peatlands, Handa and Coll, were not selected as these supported smaller or less dense populations..

Distribution map for breeding Arctic Skua SPA suite

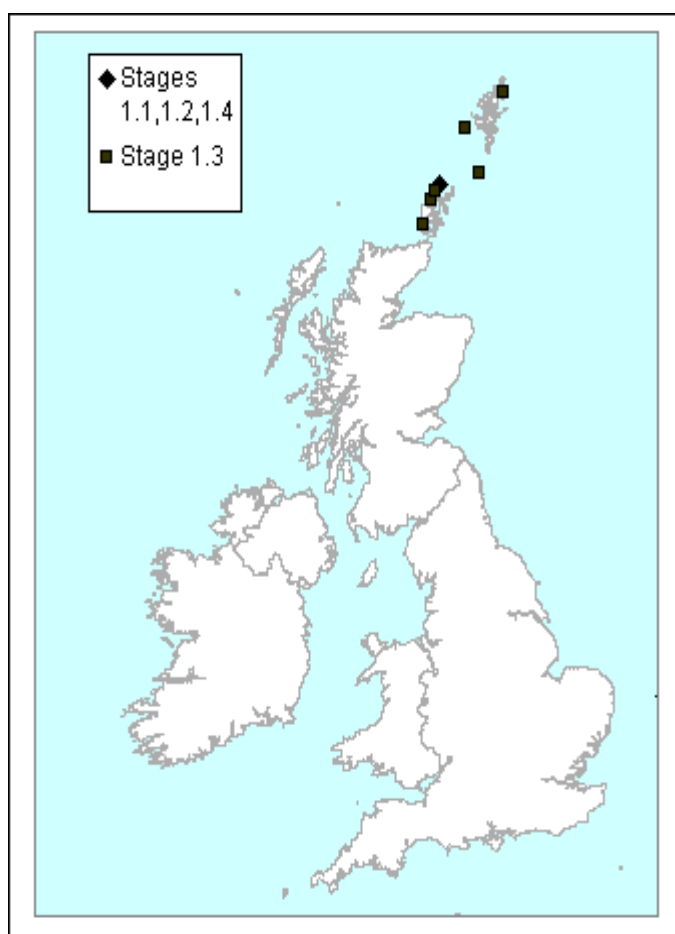


Table 6.79.1 – SPA suite

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Fair Isle	74	0.3	2.3	1.3
Fetlar	130	0.4	4.1	1.3
Foula	125	0.4	3.9	1.3
Hoy	59	0.2	1.8	1.3
Papa Westray (North Hill and Holm)	135	0.5	4.2	1.4
Rousay	180	0.6	5.6	1.3
West Westray	77	0.3	2.4	1.3
TOTALS	780	2.6%	24.4%	