

A6.83 Common Gull *Larus canus* (breeding)

1. Status in UK

Biological status		Legal status		Conservation status	
Breeding	✓	Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981	General Protection	Species of European Conservation Concern	SPEC 2 Unfavourable conservation status (declining) and concentrated in Europe
Migratory	✓	Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985	General Protection	(UK) Species of Conservation Importance	Table 4
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	68,000	680	18,264 (26% of GB population)
Ireland	3,600	36	264 (7% of all-Ireland population)
Biogeographic population	124,000	1,240	18,264 (15% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: Lloyd et al. 1991

All-Ireland population source: Gibbons et al. 1988

Biogeographic population source: Lloyd et al. 1991

3. Distribution

The Common Gull has a wide global distribution, breeding in temperate and sub-Arctic areas throughout the Palearctic (from Iceland, Britain and Ireland in the west, to the coasts of the Bering Sea in the east) as well as in north-west North America. The Common Gull is a polytypic species. Two sub-species occur in Europe: the nominate race *L. c. canus*, which is found from north-west Europe east to the White Sea, and *L. c. heinei* which breeds from the Kanin Peninsula, east to the Lena River. Two other races occur in other parts of the world range (*L. c. kamtschatschensis* in north-east Siberia and *L. c. brachyrhynchus* in north-west North America) (Cramp & Simmons 1983).

In Europe, the Common Gull only breeds in northern regions. In the Low Countries, Denmark, Germany and Poland, its breeding distribution is scattered and localised. In more northerly regions, such as Scotland and Scandinavia, Common Gull breeding distribution is more continuous. In Europe, the largest numbers of the nominate sub-species are in Norway and Sweden where most colonies are on, or near, the coast. Each of these countries holds about 14,000 pairs.

Within Britain and Ireland, the Common Gull is very much a breeding bird of the north and west, with only a few colonies being found in England and Wales. Over 90% occur in Scotland with a large proportion of these in Shetland and Orkney (Lloyd *et al.* 1991). Overall in Britain and Ireland, only about a fifth of Common Gulls breed on the coast, with the rest nesting inland. They are widely but sparsely distributed through inland Scotland, especially in the north, and there are many sites in north-west Ireland, as well as a few in the north of England.

Outside the breeding season, Common Gulls occur mainly at sea, as well as locally inland in parts of central Europe (Snow & Perrins 1998). There are particular concentrations in inshore waters of the southern North Sea, especially the international Wadden Sea and other parts of the Danish coast – notably the Kattgat (Stone *et al.* 1995).

4. Population structure and trends

Lloyd *et al.* (1991) estimated the world population at between 578,000–585,000 pairs, although this seems to be a significant underestimate, since Hagemeyer & Blair (1997) estimated between 416,157–558,316 pairs in Europe alone. The biogeographic population used in this review is that of North-west and Central Europe, the Atlantic and the Mediterranean which amounts to 124,000 pairs.

During 1985–1987, the British Common Gull population was estimated at about 68,000 pairs, of which 53,000 occurred inland. For Ireland, the figure was 3,600 pairs and of these 2,700 were inland (Lloyd *et al.* 1991). Together the British and Irish populations comprise some 15% of the overall European population.

The Common Gull showed a marked population expansion in most parts of its range during the 20th century. This increase would appear to have slowed in some countries, whilst others, such as Denmark, have recently begun to show a decline. In Britain and Ireland, there has been an increase and spread since 1900. Cramp *et al.* (1974) mention new breeding sites at Scolt Head, Norfolk and an increase in numbers at Dungeness, Kent as evidence of the species continuing to extend its range southwards. Birds breeding in south-east England are believed to derive from the European continental population that migrates to Britain in the winter (Sharrock 1976).

Lack of complete census data from previous years makes it difficult to assess any likely changes in populations. Colonies for which past counts or estimates are available appear to show an increased or stable population since the mid-1970s. One colony on the Correen Hills (Tips of Corsemaul) was thought to hold 4,000–5,000 pairs of Common Gulls in 1976 (Bourne *et al.* 1978), whilst a more detailed survey in 1987 gave an estimate of 13,599–24,000 pairs (Tasker *et al.* 1991). Nearby, a large colony in the Mortlach Hills (Tom Mor) where 1,300 pairs were found in 1978 (A.F.G. Douse in Knox & Bell 1979), held between 5,000–6,700 pairs in 1988 (Tasker *et al.* 1991). In contrast, a survey of inland Common Gull colonies in the west of Ireland in 1977–1978, partially resurveyed in 1983, indicated a stable population (Whilde 1978, 1983).

Generally, there are insufficient data available to assess population trends since inland sites have received little survey attention in recent years. Gibbons *et al.* (1993), for example, found only a small change in the population since 1968–1972. The only comprehensive data available were for the coastal population of Britain and Ireland that had increased from 13,000 to 15,700 between 1969–1970 and 1985–1987 (Lloyd *et al.* 1991). As this population only constitutes 20% of the overall total of the British and Irish population, the significance of this change is not known.

5. Protection measures for population in UK

SPA suite

In the breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Common Gulls supports, on average, 18,264 pairs. This amounts to about 26% of the British breeding population, and about 7% of the all-Ireland population. The suite contains about 15% of the international population, and comprises three sites (Table 6.83.1) where Common Gull has been listed as a qualifying species.

6. Classification criteria

The single Common Gull colony in the UK that supports more than 1% of the international breeding population (Tips of Corsemaul and Tom Mor) was considered under Stage 1.2, and was selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements. This site is the largest known Common Gull breeding colony in the world and has a very long recorded history of occupancy, being known from at least the end of the 19th century (Buckland *et al.* 1990).

Additionally, Lough Neagh and Lough Beg, and Rathlin Island were selected under Stage 1.3 (see section 5.3), since Common Gulls were identified at those sites as forming an important component of a wider breeding seabird assemblage. Lough Neagh and Lough Beg, and Rathlin Island are both multi-species SPAs, important for a range of other seabirds, although Tips of Corsemaul and Tom Mor has been selected solely on the basis of its importance for Common Gulls.

The suite encompasses sites in Northern Ireland and Scotland. Common Gulls elsewhere occur at relatively low densities in the UK and are widely dispersed. Accordingly, and as the selection of sites under Stages 1.2 and 1.3 resulted in a suite which gives adequate coverage of the population and breeding range in the UK, there was no case to select additional sites using Stage 1.4.

Distribution map for breeding Common Gull SPA suite

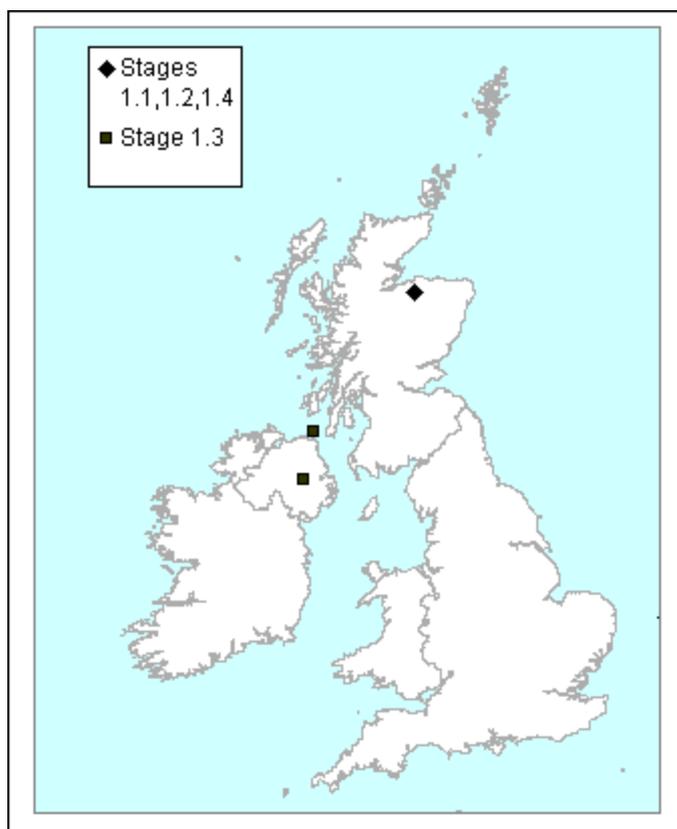


Table 6.83.1 – SPA suite

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Lough Neagh and Lough Beg	200	0.2	5.6 (Ire)	1.3
Rathlin Island	64	<0.1	1.8 (Ire)	1.3
Tips of Corsemaul and Tom Mor (formerly Correen/Mortlach Hills)	18,000	14.5	26.5	1.2
TOTALS	18,264	14.7%	26.5% 7.3% (Ire)	