

A6.85 Herring Gull *Larus argentatus* (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 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	160,000	1,600	50,613 (32% of GB population)
Ireland	44,700	447	4,037 (9% of all-Ireland population)
Biogeographic population	940,000	9,400	54,650 (6% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: Lloyd et al. 1991

All-Ireland population source: Gibbons et al. 1993

Biogeographic population source: Lloyd et al. 1991

3. Distribution

The Herring Gull has a wide and complex distribution through the northern hemisphere, with three main centres: north-west Europe, including Iceland; eastern Arctic Russia from the eastern part of the Taimyr to the Bering Sea; and the northern part of North America. Herring Gull is a polytypic species with an extremely complex taxonomy¹. The north-west European Herring Gulls are of two sub-species. The nominate race *L. a. argentatus* breeds from Denmark, through Scandinavia to the White Sea and Kola Peninsula. Birds breeding elsewhere in Europe (mainly France, Britain, Ireland, Iceland and the Low Countries) belong to the race *L. a. argenteus*. Each of the two other centres of distribution is occupied by other races of Herring Gull (Cramp & Simmons 1983).

Through most of its European range, the Herring Gull is largely a coastal breeder, although in some Baltic countries and especially in Finland and north-western Russia (Kola Peninsula) it has an extensive inland breeding distribution. The species breeds around most of the coast of the UK, being absent only from a few areas in eastern England (Gibbons *et al.* 1993).

The Herring Gull is a very adaptable and successful species. It breeds in a wide variety of habitats including steep cliffs, scree slopes, rocky outcrops and small islands, as well as beaches and inland sites such as moorland and, more recently, buildings (Cramp & Simmons 1983). The main centres of the breeding population are found in north-east Caithness and on the western seaboard in Argyll, Bute, Cumbria, and Down in Northern Ireland. In 1985–

¹ “Systematics of the Herring Gull and its close relatives represent one of the most complex challenges in ornithology, and typify the discord between evolution, biogeography, reproductive isolation, and taxonomy” del Hoyo *et al.* 1996.

1987, colonies holding 4,000 or more breeding pairs were found on Inchkeith in the Firth of Forth (4,100 pairs) and, on the east coast of Ireland, on Rathlin Island (4,000 pairs), the Copeland Islands (7,000 pairs), and Lambay (5,500 pairs).

Outside the breeding season, Herring Gulls range widely in the seas around northern Europe, especially in inshore waters around the southern North Sea (including the English Channel) and the Kattegat (Stone *et al.* 1995).

4. Population structure and trends

The Herring Gull is the most numerous of the larger gulls breeding in Britain and Ireland. The European breeding population (of both *L. a. argentatus* and *L. a. argentatus*) amounts to 757,945–830,567 pairs (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997).

Within north-west Europe, Britain and Ireland has the greatest number of breeding Herring Gulls, with over 178,000 pairs or about 20% of the birds breeding in Europe (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997). Large numbers also occur in Norway (*c.* 175,000 pairs). Numbers on the coasts of the Barents and White Seas are not known but are probably between 100,000 and 200,000 (Golovkin 1984). The world population is probably almost 2 million pairs.

Overall, numbers of Herring Gulls increased in Britain at an estimated 10–13% per year from the 1940s until the mid-1970s. Many existing colonies expanded and new ones were established, and the species colonised many inland and urban sites during this period. The Herring Gull's success, like many other gull species, has been attributed to the relaxation of human persecution and new food resources such as fishing boats, rubbish tips, sewage outfalls, and fish factories. Overwinter survival may have been enhanced (Harris 1970) and some birds that fed at rubbish tips and fish docks may have bred more successfully (Davis 1974). In many areas, the availability of abundant discarded fish at sea will have resulted in increases in numbers (Hudson & Furness 1988; Camphuysen *et al.* 1995).

Lloyd *et al.* (1991) estimated that 204,000 pairs of Herring Gulls bred in Britain in 1985–1987. About half of these bred in Scotland and over 20% in England. Herring Gull numbers declined throughout all areas of Britain and Ireland between the two population censuses of 1969–1970 (which found 335,000 pairs) and 1985–1987. The major declines appeared to be in colonies in the west where numbers were estimated to have more than halved in north and west Scotland, the south-east and south-west of Ireland, Wales and south-west England (Lloyd *et al.* 1991).

In the west of Scotland, Lloyd *et al.* (1991) found the species' status to be less clear; some colonies increased after 1969 whilst others declined. By 1985–1987 however, there had been an overall decrease of between 20% and 25% in the number of pairs breeding. In the south-west of Scotland all the colonies that had held over 500 pairs in 1969–1970 either remained stable or had declined, *e.g.* Treshnish Islands, west Jura, Inchmarnock Island. Only Little Cumbrae in the Firth of Clyde had expanded from 700 pairs in 1969–1970 to 3,500 pairs in 1985–1987.

In contrast, a survey of gulls nesting in urban areas (Monaghan & Coulson 1977) found 3,000 pairs of Herring Gulls on buildings in Britain. Numbers had increased by 17% since 1969 and other records would seem to indicate that this increase continued into the 1980s. The situation is clearly complex, for there are also inland sites that show declines.

Only a few sites ran counter to the downward trend between 1969–1970 and 1985–1987. At Orfordness in Suffolk numbers grew from 150 pairs in 1969 to nearly 1,400 in 1973 (Lloyd *et al.* 1991). The colony remained more or less stable until 1981 and increased again to 3,390 pairs in 1986. A census in 1993 found 3,691 pairs present (Crewe 1994) which by 1999 had reached 4,750 pairs (Cormack & Lohar 1999). The only other places where Herring Gulls were seen to increase between 1969–1970 and 1985–1987 were in south-west Scotland (Isle

of Skye to Kyle and Carrick) and on the adjacent coast of Northern Ireland. The increase in Ireland was due mainly to several large colonies on islands off the coast of Down. These increases occurred against a general decline in all other Irish colonies.

5. Protection measures for populations in UK

SPA suite

In the breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Herring Gulls supports, on average, 54,650 pairs. This amounts to about 32% of the British breeding population and 9% of the all-Ireland population. The suite contains about 6% of the international population within 12 sites (Table 6.85.1) where Herring Gull has been listed as a qualifying species.

6. Classification criteria

The two Herring Gull colonies in the UK that support more than 1% of the international breeding population (East Caithness Cliffs and Morecambe Bay) were considered under Stage 1.2, and both were selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements. At an additional ten sites (Ailsa Craig; Alde-Ore Estuary; Buchan Ness to Collieston Coast; Canna and Sanday; Firth of Forth Islands; Flamborough Head and Bempton Cliffs; Fowlsheugh; Rathlin Island; St Abb's Head to Fast Castle; and Troup, Pennan and Lion's Head), Herring Gull was identified as an important component of a wider breeding seabird assemblage. Accordingly, these sites were selected under Stage 1.3 (see section 5.3), after consideration of Stage 2 judgements. All sites selected are multi-species SPAs, important for a range of other seabirds.

The suite encompasses sites in Northern Ireland, both the west and east coasts of Scotland, as well as western and eastern England. Herring Gulls have a wide breeding distribution in the UK 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, it was not considered necessary to select additional sites using Stage 1.4.

Distribution map for breeding Herring Gull SPA suite

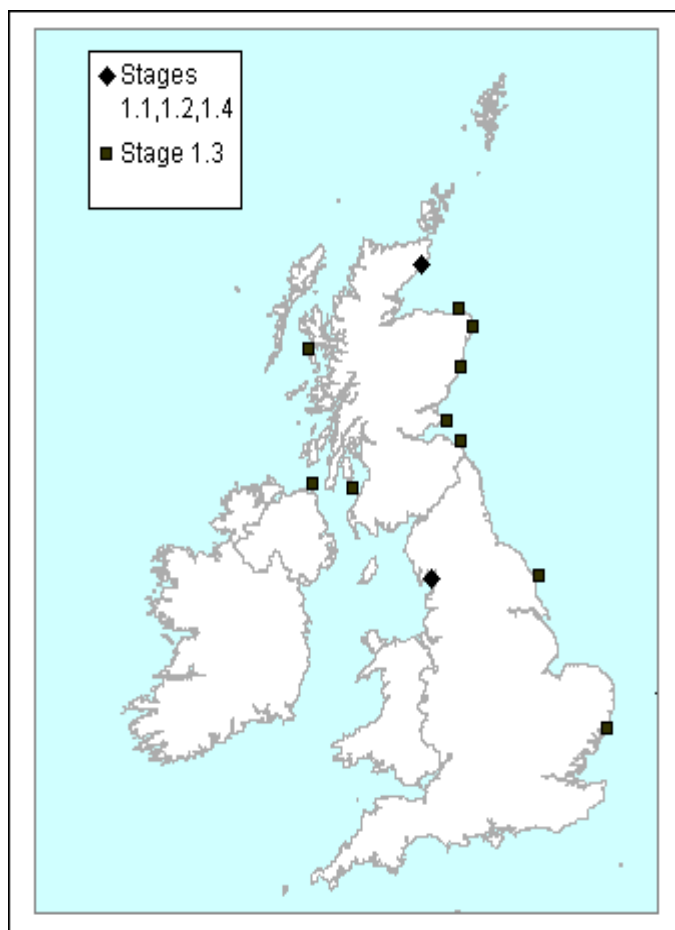


Table 6.85.1 – SPA suite

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Ailsa Craig	2,250	0.2	1.4	1.3
Alde-Ore Estuary	6,050	0.6	3.8	1.3
Buchan Ness to Collieston Coast	4,292	0.5	2.7	1.3
Canna and Sanday	1,391	0.2	0.9	1.3
East Caithness Cliffs	9,370	1.0	5.9	1.2
Firth of Forth Islands	6,600	0.7	4.1	1.3
Flamborough Head and Bempton Cliffs	1,110	0.1	0.7	1.3
Fowlsheugh	3,190	0.3	2.0	1.3
Morecambe Bay	11,000	1.2	6.9	1.2
Rathlin Island	4,037 ²	0.4	9.0 (Ire)	1.3
St Abb's Head to Fast Castle	1,160	0.1	0.7	1.3
Troup, Pennan and Lion's Heads	4,200	0.5	2.6	1.3
TOTALS	54,650	5.8%	31.7% 9.0% (Ire)	

² Surveys in 1999 found a massive decline in numbers at this site with just 14 breeding pairs present.