

# UK SPA SCIENTIFIC WORKING GROUP

## 8 May 2002

### SPAs for Ring Ouzels

#### Status of Ring Ouzels

Ring Ouzels are not listed in Annex I of the Birds Directive but are a regularly occurring migratory species during the breeding season. Accordingly they are considered under SPA selection Guideline 1.2 and Article 4.2 of the Birds Directive, where areas for consideration as SPAs should hold >1% of the biogeographical population.

Ring Ouzels are categorised by BirdLife International<sup>1</sup> at SPEC 4 – that is, the species has favourable conservation status but is globally concentrated in Europe. In the UK the species is amber listed in Birds of Conservation Concern<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the 1999 national survey<sup>3</sup> highlighted a continuing contraction in range. In particular it is suspected that Ring Ouzels are extinct as a breeding bird in Northern Ireland; there has been a population decline of approximately 50% since 1972 in Wales; and evidence of declines in northern England (particularly the North York Moors and Pennines), southwest England, and generally in Scotland. This continuing range contraction and likely population decline since the 1988-91 atlas have led to the suggestion that the species may qualify for inclusion on the red list of the Birds of Conservation Concern<sup>2</sup>.

#### Biogeographical populations

The European population is estimated by the EBCC<sup>4</sup> as between 247,032 – 355,281 pairs. However, there are three subspecies of Ring Ouzel breeding within Europe. Nominate *Turdus torquatus torquatus* breeds in Scandinavia, the British Isles and Brittany; *T. t. alpestris* in montane regions of central and southern Europe; and *T. t. amicum* in the Caucasus<sup>5</sup>. Since there is no overlap in breeding ranges between the three subspecies, the wintering ranges only overlap slightly (but with some altitudinal separation), and there are plumage differences<sup>5</sup>, these can be considered as separate biogeographical populations.

#### Derivation of 1% threshold

According to population estimates from relevant countries<sup>3,6</sup>, the breeding population of *T. t. torquatus* is 19,567 – 118,199 pairs, with the broad range attributable to low confidence estimates from Norway and Sweden. Taking the minimum estimate, this would translate to a 1% biogeographical threshold of 200 pairs. The British population of Ring Ouzels is estimated from the 1999 national survey as 6,157-7,549 territories<sup>3</sup>. Again, taking the minimum estimate this would give a 1% GB threshold of 60 pairs. A breeding site in Britain would thus need to hold just over 3% of the British population to exceed 1% of the biogeographical population and qualify as being of European importance under Guideline 1.2.

#### Key areas

Data from national surveys do not lend themselves to the identification of specific sites and it is beyond the scope of this review to carry out an extensive trawl of available site-specific data. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify key areas using the data from the 1999 national survey and the 1988-91 atlas that may be suitable for consideration as SPAs. Areas that stand out as potentially holding “significant” populations include the Lake District, north and south Pennines, Southern Uplands, Ben Lawers area, Deeside, Cairngorms, Glen Affric, Wester Ross and northwest Sutherland.

It is extremely unlikely that all of these sites will (or will be shown to) support greater than 1% of the biogeographical population. The question then arises as to whether there is there a special case to be made under Guideline 1.4 to select important sites holding <1% of the biogeographical population? Since the UK may support as much as a third of the biogeographical population and there is evidence of a range contraction (and possibly population decline), it could be argued that we have an international responsibility for the species conservation. If application of Guideline 1.2 does not provide adequately for the conservation of Ring Ouzels in the UK, it may be necessary to select sites using Guideline 1.4 to achieve favourable conservation status.

The use of Guideline 1.4 would usefully allow Ring Ouzel to be listed on existing SPAs (following appropriate consideration of stage 2 judgments) with smaller populations, perhaps those outside the core breeding areas, and thereby contribute to the maintenance of the species breeding range.

## Are site-based conservation measures appropriate?

Ring Ouzels occur at very low densities in the British uplands.

Results from the 1999 sample survey show that 57% of all tetrads where birds were recorded held less than 2 pairs/tetrad (Figure 1). A few tetrads did hold relative high densities (five held densities of 8-10 pairs/tetrad) although this comprised only about 4% of total tetrads surveyed. These areas can be considered as hotspots. They are in the Lake District (NY2808, SD2698), the Rhinogs (SH6622), Snowdonia (SH6644), and the Cader Idris area (SH7012, SH7212). High densities (2-3 pairs/km<sup>2</sup>) have been found in intensive study areas in Glen Clunie (Aberdeenshire) and Glen Esk (Tayside). There are also density estimates for the Moorfoot Hills (Lothian), and The Long Mynd (Shropshire), which will have lower, but still relatively high, breeding densities.

Whilst far lower densities than are typical for wintering waterbirds, breeding seabirds and breeding birds of lowland heathland, the typical densities found for breeding Ring Ouzel are within the same order of magnitude for those of other dispersed upland species, such as Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*. Since SPA suites have been identified for such species, low breeding density should not be considered as an immediate obstacle to selecting sites for breeding Ring Ouzel. Indeed, many of the key tracts of upland habitat will already have been classified as SPAs for upland breeding raptors and waders. However, listing of Ring Ouzels on citations for any existing SPAs could only be carried out after appropriate consideration of the relevant SPA selection guidelines.

Some have suggested<sup>7</sup> that declines in the British uplands may be a consequence of degradation of wintering habitat in the Atlas Mountains and other north African areas. However, there is no hard evidence that there is a wintering problem. Other European populations, which also winter in the Atlas Mountains, are apparently stable (though the accuracy of the data are perhaps questionable). This may suggest that the problem lies on the breeding grounds.

Within Britain, some populations are apparently stable (e.g. Glen Clunie, Glen Esk), whereas others have declined (e.g. Moorfoot Hills, Long Mynd). This might suggest that detrimental factors are operating locally. If so, there would be clear benefits from being able to target areas with formal Conservation Objectives that could only be delivered through statutory protection.

There would appear to be a number of arguments for and against the suitability of site-based conservation measures for Ring Ouzel. A more detailed ecological assessment and work to identify regularly occurring "hotspots" will be necessary before the question can be properly answered.

## Conclusions

- It is likely that relatively few sites will qualify under selection guideline 1.2 by supporting more than 1% of the biogeographical population. Only the largest tracts of upland habitat in the Pennines (possibly the Lake District) and upland areas of Scotland show potential to exceed the 1% threshold.
- There may be a case for the selection of SPAs using guideline 1.4, especially as the UK may hold a significant proportion of the biogeographical population.

## Recommendations

The UK SPA Scientific Working Group is asked to:

1. **Agree** the relevant biogeographical population and 1% threshold.
2. **Agree** to defer a decision on the suitability of site protection for Ring Ouzels until more detailed ecological assessments and attempts to identify hotspots have been carried out.
3. **Discuss** an outline approach for identifying sites that may qualify, including assessment of existing data sets and the need for any further survey.

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**Figure 1. Frequency distribution of breeding densities of Ring Ouzels as recorded by the 1999 national survey.**

