

# Razorbill: species information for marine Special Protection Area consultations

The UK government has committed to identifying a network of Special Protection Areas (SPAs) in the marine environment by 2015. Natural England is responsible for recommending potential SPAs in English waters to Defra for classification. This and other related information notes have been written to provide further information to coastal and marine stakeholders about the bird species we are seeking to protect through Marine SPAs. For more information about the process for establishing marine SPAs see TIN120 *Establishing Marine Special Protection Areas*.

## Background

The Birds Directive (EC Directive on the conservation of wild birds (79/409/EEC)) requires member states to identify SPAs for:

- rare or vulnerable bird species (as listed in Annex I of the Directive); and
- regularly occurring migratory bird species.

Razorbills *Alca torda* are a regularly occurring migratory bird species in Europe. They are 37–39 cm long with a wingspan of 63–68 cm<sup>1</sup>. Their typical lifespan is 13 years and the oldest reported individual was over 41 years old<sup>2</sup>.

## Conservation Status

UK amber-listed bird of conservation concern<sup>3</sup>.

## Distribution and population

Razorbills only breed along North Atlantic coasts, including the UK.

The Seabird 2000 census lists the UK breeding population at 187,100 individuals, 20% of global population<sup>4</sup> with 11,144 individuals breeding in England<sup>5</sup>.



Razorbill by Andy Brown

The majority of UK birds nest in the north and west of Scotland. In England, razorbills breed on coasts and islands in the north and south-west.

The largest English colony is at Flamborough Head and Bempton Cliffs in Yorkshire.

## Migration/movements

Adults and dependent young disperse offshore from colonies in July – August, with adults becoming flightless during this period due to moult. Widely distributed in winter in European seas during the winter, but with a somewhat more inshore distribution in English

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waters compared to common guillemots and Atlantic puffins<sup>6</sup>.

### Breeding

Generally colonial, razorbills nest at relatively low densities in crevices, ledges or amongst boulders at the base of steep cliffs. They also breed on islands, offshore rocks and stacks. They lay a single egg and there is usually no nest, although sometimes small stones are accumulated around an egg.

### Foraging

The foraging method used by razorbills is pursuit-diving from the sea surface, using their wings to propel them through the water. They can dive up to 140 m to catch prey, although most dives are not deeper than 30 m<sup>7</sup>.

Prey is smaller schooling fish, particularly sandeels. They will steal food from puffin at some colonies. Razorbills carry multiple fish sideways in their bills when feeding chicks.

Their foraging habitat is inshore and offshore waters and their range varies between colonies and with season. They have a more restricted foraging range than guillemot and puffin, with a mean foraging range of 10 km. A maximum foraging distance of 51 km has been recorded, but most feed within a few km of their colonies<sup>7</sup>.

### References

<sup>1</sup> The Birds of the Western Palearctic (Snow and Perrins, 1998)

<sup>2</sup> BTO Bird Facts website - [www.bto.org/about-birds/birdfacts](http://www.bto.org/about-birds/birdfacts)

<sup>3</sup> Birds of Conservation Concern 3: the population status of birds in the United Kingdom, Channel Islands and the Isle of Man (Eaton et al, British Birds Vol 102, 296-341)

<sup>4</sup> Seabird Populations of Britain and Ireland (Mitchell et al, 2004)

<sup>5</sup> JNCC Seabird Monitoring Programme webpages - <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-2898>

<sup>6</sup> Birds in England (Brown and Grice, 2005)

<sup>7</sup> Bird Life International seabird wikispace - <http://seabird.wikispaces.com/Common+Guillemot>

### Further information

Natural England Technical Information Notes are available to download from the Natural England website: [www.naturalengland.org.uk](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk). In particular see:

- TIN120: *Establishing marine Special Protection Areas*
- TIN121: *A review of the Flamborough Head and Bempton Cliffs Special Protection Area*
- TIN122: *Northern gannet species information for marine Special Protection Area consultations*
- TIN123: *Common guillemot species information for marine Special Protection Area consultations*
- TIN125: *Atlantic puffin species information for marine Special Protection Area consultations*
- TIN126: *Northern fulmar species information for marine Special Protection Area consultations*

For further information contact the Natural England Enquiry Service on 0300 060 0863 or e-mail [enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk).

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