

Black-legged kittiwake: 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 (2009/147/EC)) requires member states to identify SPAs for:

- rare or vulnerable bird species (as listed in Annex 1 of the Directive); and
- regularly occurring migratory bird species.

The black-legged kittiwake, *Rissa tridactyla*, is a regularly occurring migratory bird in Europe. Also known simply as the kittiwake, it is between 38 and 40 cm long with a wingspan of 95 - 120 cm¹. The typical lifespan is 20 years, although birds have been reported to live up to 28 years².

Conservation status

UK amber-listed bird of conservation concern³.

Distribution and population

This species is widespread across the north Atlantic and north Pacific oceans.



Kittiwake by Mike Meadows

In the UK the species breeds on all coastlines where geology creates cliffs with hard ledges, although they can also use man-made structures such as jetties, buildings and even the Tyne Bridge in Newcastle.

Black-legged kittiwakes nest colonially, often at high densities, occupying narrow ledges from a few to hundreds of metres above water. They build nesting mounds made of mud, grass and seaweed, with a depression formed in the centre to hold two eggs.

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These mounds are replenished annually.

Most of the UK population breeds in northern Scotland and along the North Sea coast south to Flamborough Head, which holds the largest colony in the UK.

The Seabird 2000 census estimated that 8% of the global population of kittiwakes nested in the UK, with 378,000 apparently occupied nests⁴. In England there were 76,281 apparently occupied nests recorded⁵.

Outside the breeding season black-legged kittiwakes are highly pelagic, with few birds present in UK inshore waters except after storms at sea.

Migration/movements

This species generally returns to UK colonies from March, with young birds mostly fledging from July. Black-legged kittiwakes disperse widely after the breeding season, becoming highly nomadic, and often feeding and roosting several hundred kilometres from land. The majority remain within 500 km of colony, but some individuals, particularly immature birds, may wander as far as Greenland and North Africa to winter⁶.

Foraging

Black-legged kittiwakes are surface-feeders, taking prey through dipping into the water. They are also capable of shallow plunge-diving, though these dives are unlikely to be more than a metre in depth⁷. They follow ships and can scavenge offal and bycatch from fishing vessels.

They generally feed on small shoaling fish, particularly sand eels, but also herrings and sprats. During the breeding season black-legged kittiwakes can also forage on intertidal crustaceans and molluscs.

Their foraging strategy during the breeding season can involve roaming over large areas of sea to find food. A maximum foraging distance of 231 km has recently been recorded⁸, with a mean maximum foraging range of 60 km⁹. High densities can be present in areas of high

productivity, such as cold water upwellings, fronts between water masses and sandbanks.

Foraging birds are often associated with flocks of common guillemot and razorbill, which when pursuing prey underwater can drive fish to the surface where black-legged kittiwakes can access them.

References

- ¹ The Birds of the Western Palearctic (Snow and Perrins, 1998)
- ² BTO Bird Facts website - www.bto.org/about-birds/birdfacts
- ³ 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)
- ⁴ Seabird Populations of Britain and Ireland (Mitchell *et al*, 2004)
- ⁵ JNCC Seabird Monitoring Programme webpage - <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-2898>
- ⁶ Birds in England (Brown and Grice, 2005)
- ⁷ Bird Life International seabird wikispace - <http://seabird.wikispaces.com/Black-legged+Kittiwake>
- ⁸ Future of the Atlantic Marine Environment (FAME) project website - www.fameproject.eu/en/results/united-kingdom/
- ⁹ Seabird foraging ranges as a preliminary tool for identifying candidate Marine Protected Areas (Thaxter *et al*, Biological Conservation, 2012)

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Further information

Natural England Technical Information Notes are available to download from the Natural England website: 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*

For further information contact the Natural England Enquiry Service on 0300 060 0863 or e-mail enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk.

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