

# Great northern diver: 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 great northern diver, *Gavia immer*, is listed under Annex 1 of the Directive. Also known as the common loon (in the US), it is between 69 and 91 cm long with a wingspan of 127-147 cm<sup>1</sup>.

## Conservation status

- Listed in Annex 1 of EU Birds Directive (rare and vulnerable species); and
- UK amber-listed bird of conservation concern<sup>2</sup>.

## Distribution and population

The breeding range is largely within the sub-arctic zone in North America and Greenland, where birds breed on lakes of varying sizes<sup>1</sup>.



Great northern diver by Andy Elliot

The nearest breeding population to the UK is in Iceland. Winter distribution shifts to inshore areas, including UK waters. Widely distributed as a wintering bird, the majority of UK birds winter in north and west Scotland, particularly off Orkney, Shetland and the Outer Hebrides<sup>3</sup>. In England the main concentrations are in the south-west, particularly Cornwall<sup>4</sup>.

An estimated 2,500 birds are present in the UK over winter<sup>3</sup>. As this figure is in excess of the Icelandic population, the UK wintering population includes birds that have travelled from further

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afield, potentially Greenland and eastern Canada<sup>4</sup>. There are no recent estimates for the wintering population in English waters.

### Migration/movements

Wintering birds from further north arrive in English waters in autumn, with numbers building from late October onwards and usually declining from early April onwards as birds head back north<sup>5</sup>.

A small number of non-breeding birds are present in summer around northern Scotland.

### Foraging

Great northern divers are streamlined with feet set far back on the body, enabling them to pursuit dive from the sea surface using feet for propulsion. They occasionally use their wings underwater as well. They can detect prey by swimming with their heads submerged in water ('snorkelling') and can be found in waters anywhere out to 60 m depth.

They primarily catch fish, also crustaceans, squid and molluscs. They feed in coastal waters in winter, often on exposed coasts but also in bays and the mouths of large estuaries<sup>5</sup>. Inland records are more frequent for great northern compared to other divers, but are still uncommon<sup>4</sup>.

### References

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

<sup>2</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>3</sup> Waterbirds in the UK 2009/10: The Wetland Bird Survey (Holt *et al*, 2011)

<sup>4</sup> The Atlas of Wintering Birds in Britain and Ireland (Lack *et al*, 1986)

<sup>5</sup> Birds in England (Brown and Grice, 2005)

### 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*
- TIN129: *Proposals for a Special Protection Area between Falmouth Bay & St Austell*

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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