

Greater scaup: 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 SPAs in English waters to Defra for classification. This and other related information notes have been prepared and will be available at meetings and online so that anyone who might be interested in why the SPA is being considered for classification can find out more about the birds that may be protected. 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 I of the Directive); and
- regularly occurring migratory bird species.

The greater scaup, *Aythya marila*, is a regularly occurring migratory bird in Europe. Also known simply as the scaup, it is between 42 and 51 cm long with a wingspan of 72-84 cm¹. A typical lifespan is 3 years. The oldest recorded individual was over 8 years old².

Conservation status

- SPEC3W (unfavourable conservation status in winter in Europe)³; and
- UK red-listed bird of conservation concern⁴.

Distribution and population

Greater scaup breed on a range of freshwater wetlands across the far north of America, Asia and Europe. Their wintering range is further

south of the breeding range. They mainly winter in coastal waters, including landlocked seas⁵.



Greater scaup © Nigel Clark

Greater scaup are present along most UK coastlines in the winter, but the population is highly concentrated in a small number of Scottish firths and sea lochs, including both the English and Scottish sides of the Solway Firth. The Cumbrian Solway hosts the majority of English wintering birds.

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Greater scaups also winter inland on lakes, gravel pits and reservoirs, but in low numbers. They are an extremely rare breeder in the UK, attempting to do so less than annually.

UK population

The UK wintering population of greater scaup is estimated to be 5,200 individuals⁶. The population has declined sharply since the mid-1970s, when over 25,000 individuals wintered in the Firth of Forth alone⁷. Improvements to distillery/brewery and sewage outfalls in the Firth of Forth are likely to have made a major contribution to this population slump. There are no recent estimates for the English wintering population.

Migration/movements

Ringling recoveries have shown that greater scaups wintering in the UK have travelled from breeding grounds in Iceland, Scandinavia and Russia⁸. The majority of wintering birds arrive from October and depart from March, although small numbers are present outside this period, including flocks of moulting non-breeders in the summer. They form large, dense flocks in favoured areas.

Foraging

Greater scaup is a diving duck that forages over sandy or muddy substrates in shallow waters, regularly feeding at night⁸. They use their webbed feet to propel themselves through the water, allowing them to dive as deep as 20 feet for up to 60 seconds⁹.

They mainly eat molluscs, particularly mussels, but they have a varied diet that includes crustaceans, worms, small fish and insects.

They prefer shallow waters, usually less than 10 m deep, leading to a preference for estuaries and shallow bays. Large flocks can be attracted to distillery/brewery and sewage outfalls, either because of food contained within the outfalls or due to high densities of aquatic invertebrates attracted by the nutrients.

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 in the European Union: a status assessment (BirdLife International, 2004)
- ⁴ 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)
- ⁵ BirdLife International species factsheet: www.birdlife.org/datazone/speciesfactsheet.php?id=482
- ⁶ Overwintering Population Estimates of British Waterbirds (Musgrove *et al*, British Birds, Vol 104, 364-397)
- ⁷ Waterbirds in the UK 2009/10: The Wetland Bird Survey (Holt *et al*, 2011)
- ⁸ Birds in England (Brown and Grice, 2005)
- ⁹ National Audubon Society website - birds.audubon.org/species/gresca

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*

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

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