

Balearic shearwater: 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 Balearic shearwater, *Puffinus mauretanicus*, is listed under Annex I of the Birds Directive. Also known as the Mediterranean shearwater, it is between 34 and 38 cm long with a wingspan of 83-93 cm¹. There is little information available on the lifespan of this species.

Conservation status

- IUCN red-listed as critically endangered² due to a rapid population decline;
- SPEC1 (species of global conservation concern)³;
- listed in Annex 1 of EU Birds Directive (rare and vulnerable species); and
- UK red-listed bird of conservation concern⁴.



Balearic shearwater © Tom Brereton

Distribution and population

This species breeds exclusively on a small number of the Balearic islands in the Mediterranean Sea, dispersing into the Atlantic following the breeding season, including into UK waters⁵.

UK population

The global breeding population was only 3,193 pairs in 2009, although non-breeding surveys indicate that the population may be larger, between 13,000-20,000 individuals⁶.

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The number of Balearic shearwaters using UK waters is unclear. Surveys from a number of UK and Irish headlands between 2007 and 2009 recorded an average annual maximum of 5,100 birds, although this figure involves a large number of duplicate sightings⁷.

Migration/movements

Balearic shearwaters breed between February and June. After the breeding season they move out of the Mediterranean into Atlantic waters, where they complete their moult off Portugal, Spain and within the Bay of Biscay. After the moult the majority of Balearic shearwaters return to the Mediterranean Sea, sometimes by the late autumn, although large numbers winter off the Spanish Atlantic coast⁶.

Since the 1990's, a greater number of birds have used the coastal waters of north-west France and south-west England in the late summer and autumn⁸. The majority of birds in English waters are seen off Cornwall, Devon and Dorset, but small numbers also reach the North Sea, including as far north as Scandinavia.

Foraging

Balearic shearwaters feed by day, either alone or in flocks, sometimes numbering thousands of birds. They are often seen associating with other seabirds.

They have a range of foraging strategies, including plunge-diving, short spells of pursuit-diving when they use their wings to 'fly' underwater, seizing prey from the water surface and also feeding on discards from trawlers⁸.

They plunge-dive from a height of 1 or 2 m, with a maximum recorded dive depth of 26 m and a mean depth of 5.6 m. The majority of dives are shallower than 10 m⁹.

Balearic shearwaters mostly eat small fish, such as herring, sprat, sardines and anchovy. They will also eat squid, small crustaceans and offal scavenged from trawlers.

Little is known about the habitat preferences of Balearic shearwaters in UK waters. More generally, their preferred foraging habitat tends

to be at the continental shelf and other locations where planktonic blooms provide a rich source of food which attracts large numbers of pelagic fish⁸.

References

- ¹ The Birds of the Western Palearctic (Snow and Perrins, 1998)
- ² IUCN red list website - www.iucnredlist.org/details/160030026/0
- 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 RSPB website - www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/birdguide/name/b/balearicshearwater/index.aspx
- ⁶ BirdLife International species factsheet: www.birdlife.org/datazone/speciesfactsheet.php?id=30026
- ⁷ Seawatch South West Annual Report 2009 (Wynn *et al*, 2009)
- ⁸ The changing status of Balearic shearwater in northwest European waters (Wynn and Yesou, British Birds Vol 100, 392-406)
- ⁹ BirdLife International seabird wikispace – seabird.wikispaces.com/Balearic+Shearwater

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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