

Common guillemot: 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.

The common guillemot *Uria aalge* is a regularly occurring migratory bird in Europe. Also known as the common murre (US), it is between 38 and 41 cm long with a wingspan of 64-70 cm¹. The typical lifespan is 21 years, although the oldest reported individual was over 31 years².

Conservation Status

UK amber-listed bird of conservation concern³.

Distribution and population

Common guillemots are widely distributed across the North Atlantic and Pacific.

In the UK guillemots breed where the underlying geology creates steep cliffs with hard ledges.

The majority of UK birds nest in North and West Scotland. In England, guillemots breed on coasts and islands in the North and South West.



Common guillemot by Andy Brown

The largest English colony is at Flamborough Head and Bempton Cliffs in Yorkshire, with large numbers also present at the Farne Islands, Northumberland.

In the UK the Seabird 2000 census estimated 1,416,300 individuals, 13% of the global population⁴, with 91,886 individuals recorded⁵ for the English breeding population.

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Migration/movements

Adults and dependent young disperse offshore from colonies in July – August. Adults become flightless during this period due to moulting. Guillemots are widely distributed in North Sea and the north-east Atlantic during the winter⁶.

Breeding

Guillemots are colonial, and nest on ledges of steep mainland cliffs, usually over 30 m high. They also nest on stacks and islands. They often breed at high densities.

A single egg is laid directly onto a ledge. It is tapered at one end to reduce the risk of it rolling off the ledge.

Foraging

Guillemots dive from the sea surface and use their wings to propel them through the water in pursuit of their prey. They eat smaller schooling fish such as sandeels and sprats.

Common guillemots can dive up to 200 m to catch prey, although most dives are less than 50 m⁷. They may form dense feeding flocks in areas of high prey availability, herding shoals of fish at the surface.

They carry a single fish lengthways in their bills when returning to feed chicks.

Guillemots feed in inshore and offshore waters and their foraging range varies between colonies and with season. A maximum foraging distance of 200 km has been recorded, with a mean foraging range of 24 km⁷. Most foraging occurs within 50 km of a colony⁸.

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 webpages - <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/Common+Guillemot>

⁸ The Status of Seabirds in Britain and Ireland (Lloyd et al, 1986)

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*
- TIN122: *Northern gannet species information for marine Special Protection Area consultations*
- TIN124: *Razorbill 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.

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