

Northern gannet: 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, has 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 northern gannet *Morus bassanus* is a regularly occurring migratory bird in Europe. Also known as the gannet, it is between 87 and 100 cm long with a wingspan of 170-192 cm¹. The typical lifespan is 17 years, although birds have been reported to live up to 37 years².

Conservation status

UK amber-listed bird of conservation concern³.

Distribution and population

This species only breeds along the North Atlantic coasts. In the UK the population is concentrated in northern Scotland, with the largest colony at St. Kilda in the Outer Hebrides. There is also a large colony at Grassholm Island, Wales.



Northern gannets by Mike Meadows

Gannets are widely distributed in English seas during winter, but there is currently only one breeding colony in England, at Bempton Cliffs, Yorkshire.

The Seabird 2000 census estimated 59% of the global population of gannets nested in the UK with 226,500 *apparently occupied nests*⁴.

Northern gannet: species information for marine Special Protection Area consultations

The RSPB figure for the 2009 English breeding population was 7,859 *apparently occupied nests*⁵.

Migration/movements

Gannets are wide-ranging, with adult birds wintering offshore in UK waters, and perhaps as far as the Bay of Biscay, Iberia and Mediterranean Seas.

Younger birds can travel much further, including as far south as West African waters⁶.

Breeding

Northern gannets nest in colonies on steep cliffs and on the ground at offshore islands. They are often present at high densities. The nest is a large structure made of seaweed and rubbish collected from the sea, including fishing nets. They lay a single egg.

Foraging

Gannets feed by plunge-diving into the sea from heights of between 10-40 m⁷ either singly or in groups. The maximum recorded foraging depth is 34 m, and the mean foraging depth is 8.8 m⁸. They also sometimes swim with their heads immersed and dive for food from the sea surface. They are effective scavengers for discards, and can outcompete smaller species. They regurgitate food for their chicks.

They eat mid-sized schooling fish and squid, generally 2 – 30 cm in length⁷ as well as fish discarded by fishing boats.

Gannets feed in inshore and offshore continental shelf waters, in the North Sea often associated with deep-water depressions⁸.

The foraging range varies between colonies and with the season. They can travel long distances on foraging trips. The mean foraging range is 140 km, with a maximum foraging distance of 600 km recorded⁸.

Satellite tagging of individuals at Bempton Cliffs revealed that most foraging trips occurred within 50 - 100 km of the colony⁵.

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 Foraging ranges of northern gannets *Morus bassanus* in relation to proposed offshore wind farms in the UK (Langston, 2011)
- ⁶ Birds in England (Brown and Grice, 2005)
- ⁷ The Status of Seabirds in Britain and Ireland (Lloyd et al, 1986)
- ⁸ Bird Life International seabird wikispace - <http://seabird.wikispaces.com/Northern+Gannet>

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*
- TIN123: *Common guillemot 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*

Northern gannet: 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.

Copyright

This note is published by Natural England under the Open Government Licence for public sector information. You are encouraged to use, and re-use, information subject to certain conditions.

For details of the licence visit www.naturalengland.org.uk/copyright. If any information such as maps or data cannot be used commercially this will be made clear within the note.

© Natural England 2012