

Northern fulmar: 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.

Also known as fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis* northern fulmars are a regularly occurring migratory bird in Europe.

They are 40-50 cm long with a wingspan of 102 - 112 cm¹. The oldest reported individual was over 50 years old², and the typical lifespan may be around 44 years³.

Conservation Status

UK amber-listed bird of conservation concern⁴.

Distribution

Northern fulmars are widely distributed in the North Atlantic, including the UK, and also in the North Pacific. The Seabird 2000 census estimated the UK to have 501,600 *apparently occupied sites*, or pairs equivalent to 8% of global population in 2004⁵.



Northern fulmar by Mike Meadows

The majority of UK birds breed in north and west Scotland. Despite only first breeding in England in 1922, northern fulmars now breed on many English coastlines, though the main concentrations are in the North-East and South-West.

The largest colony is at Flamborough Head and Bempton Cliffs in Yorkshire. The English breeding population was estimated by the Seabird 2000 census as 6,291 *apparently occupied sites*⁶.

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Migration/movements

Northern fulmars disperse offshore after the breeding season, although they remain widespread in UK waters. Young birds disperse most widely, throughout North Atlantic and European Arctic waters⁷.

Breeding

Fulmars mainly nest on ledges on steep cliffs or crags, but can use spaces on exposed building sides, low banks or even the ground. Occasionally they nest a short distance inland.

On softer nest sites they create a shallow depression to lay a single egg, otherwise the egg is laid directly onto rock.

They breed at lower densities than some seabirds for example, gannet, guillemot. Fulmars will vomit over potential predators to defend their nests.

Foraging

Food is seized from the sea surface whilst swimming or in flight. They can dive up to 3 m⁸.

They are opportunistic feeders and use their strong sense of smell to locate foraging opportunities. They can quickly form large flocks over concentrations of food. They eat planktonic crustaceans, squid and small fish. They also scavenge offal and discards from trawlers.

They generally forage in offshore waters. During the breeding season the edge of the continental shelf is favoured as a foraging area in North-west European waters⁹.

The foraging range varies between colonies and with the season. Fulmars have a large foraging range, with birds departing colonies for 4 to 5 days⁷, although trips of 0.5 to 1.5 days are more frequent. The maximum recorded range is 664 km, with a mean foraging range of 69 km⁸.

References

- ¹ The Birds of the Western Palearctic (Snow and Perrins, 1998)
- ² www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Petrels.aspx
- ³ BTO Bird Facts website - www.bto.org/about-birds/birdfacts
- 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, 296-342)
- ⁵ Seabird Populations of Britain and Ireland (Mitchell et al, 2004)
- ⁶ JNCC Seabird Monitoring Programme webpages - <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-2898>
- ⁷ Birds in England (Brown and Grice, 2005)
- ⁸ Bird Life International seabird wikispace - <http://seabird.wikispaces.com/Northern+Fulmar>
- ⁹ The Distribution of Auks and Procellariiformes in North-west European Waters in Relation to Depth of Sea (Stone et al, Bird Study, 1995)

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*
- 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*

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

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