

Little gull: 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 little gull, *Hydrocoloeus minutus*, is listed under Annex I of the Birds Directive. The world's smallest gull species, it is between 25 and 27 cm long with a wingspan of 75-80 cm¹. The typical lifespan is not known, but the oldest recorded individual was nearly 11 years old².

Conservation status

- SPEC3 (unfavourable conservation status in Europe)³;
- listed in Annex 1 of EU Birds Directive (rare and vulnerable species); and
- UK amber-listed bird of conservation concern⁴.



Little gull © Andy Mason

Distribution and population

The little gull has a scattered distribution as a breeding bird in Holland, Scandinavia, the Baltic states and east to Siberia, nesting in marshes and river valleys. It is also a breeding bird in the Great Lakes of North America.

Outside the breeding season, little gulls appear to be widely distributed in European coastal waters, including the Mediterranean, Black and Caspian Seas⁵, although limited information is available about their non-breeding distribution, particularly offshore.

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In England, little gulls are a scarce winter visitor to coastal waters, with larger numbers noted in late summer and after autumn storms. They primarily use English waters on their migration during spring and autumn, when favoured coastal locations can support large numbers of birds.

In late summer, Hornsea Mere in east Yorkshire can support thousands of evening-roosting little gulls, with a maximum of 21,500 recorded in September 2007⁶. Numbers in UK coastal waters appear to be increasing, perhaps associated with a westward shift in their breeding range and migration route⁷. Little gull are also seen using inland wetlands in spring and autumn.

UK population

There is currently no UK or English population estimate for little gull. The European population is estimated to be between 12-25,000 pairs³.

Migration/movements

Little gulls return to their breeding sites from late April to late May and depart from late July⁵. In England, birds are usually encountered during their spring passage in April and then between July to September. In addition, large numbers can be seen off North Sea coasts following storms in October and November. Lower numbers appear to winter in UK coastal waters, with the Irish Sea and North Sea supporting the majority of birds⁸.

Foraging

Little gulls catch food on or just below the water surface. They fly low over the water and then surface-dip or briefly plunge-dive into the water, also pecking prey from the surface⁹.

They feed on small fish, aquatic invertebrates, insects and zooplankton⁹.

Limited information is available about the specific habitat preferences of little gulls, particularly offshore. On migration, they are seen to use a range of freshwater and saline wetlands, including reservoirs, lakes, saline lagoons, estuaries and shallow inshore waters.

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=3250
- ⁶ Waterbirds in the UK 2009/10: The Wetland Bird Survey (Holt *et al*, 2011)
- ⁷ Birds in England (Brown and Grice, 2005)
- ⁸ The Atlas of Wintering Birds in Britain and Ireland (Lack *et al*, 1986)
- ⁹ BirdLife International seabird wikispace – seabird.wikispaces.com/Little+Gull

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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