

Red-throated diver: 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 red-throated diver, *Gavia stellata*, is listed under Annex I of the Birds Directive. Also known as the red-throated loon (in the US), it is between 53 and 69 cm long with a wingspan of 106-116 cm¹. A typical lifespan is 8 years. The oldest recorded individual was over 24 years old².

Conservation status

- SPEC3 (unfavourable conservation status in Europe)³;
- listed on Annex I of the Birds Directive; and
- UK amber-listed bird of conservation concern⁴.



Red-throated diver winter plumage © www.northeastwildlife.co.uk

Distribution and population

Red-throated divers breed on a range of wetlands, usually freshwater, across Arctic and sub-Arctic Europe, Asia and North America, including in Scotland. They winter in coastal waters across the northern Atlantic and Pacific oceans⁵.

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In the UK, red-throated divers winter along many coastlines with shallow inshore waters. In England there are higher concentrations in the Irish and southern North Seas and the easternmost English Channel. They are rarely found inland during the winter.

Red-throated divers breed on freshwater lochs of various sizes in north and west Scotland, including the Hebrides, Orkney and Shetland, but they do not breed in England.

UK population

The UK wintering population of red-throated divers is estimated to be 17,000 individuals⁶. There are no recent estimates for the English wintering population. The Scottish breeding population is 1,255 breeding pairs (2006)⁷.

Migration/movements

Wintering red-throated divers start to arrive in UK coastal waters from September. Numbers in English waters decline from late February onwards as birds head back north⁸. Birds that have presumably wintered further south in Europe can be seen migrating east through the English channel in the spring. Red-throated divers generally arrive at their breeding grounds from May onwards.

Foraging

Red-throated divers are streamlined with their feet set far back on their bodies, enabling pursuit diving from sea surface using their feet for propulsion. They occasionally use their wings underwater as well. Prey is seized in the bill rather than speared⁹.

They mainly forage for fish that live near the surface or in the main water column, although in the winter they will sometimes take bottom-dwelling fish. Their diet can also include crustaceans, molluscs and marine worms.

In winter, red-throated divers are found in sheltered inshore waters and sandy bays including shallow sandbanks further offshore, and at tidal rips and fronts⁹. They show a preference for foraging where water depth is less than 30 m⁸.

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=3865
- ⁶ Overwintering Population Estimates of British Waterbirds (Musgrove *et al*, British Birds, Vol 104, 364-397)
- ⁷ Rare breeding birds in the UK in 2010 (Holling *et al*, British Birds, Vol 105, 352-416)
- ⁸ Birds in England (Brown and Grice, 2005)
- ⁹ BirdLife International seabird wikispace – seabird.wikispaces.com/Red-throated+Diver

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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