

A review of the ornithological interest of SSSIs in England

This review is a systematic assessment of the coverage of important aggregations of breeding and non-breeding birds by England's network of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The proportions of the English breeding and non-breeding bird populations which occur within SSSIs has been estimated for 111 regularly occurring species which are (or could be) designated interest features under the SSSI selection guidelines. Each species is described individually, with separate estimates of coverage for breeding and non-breeding populations where relevant.

What was done

The main ornithological features of special scientific interest relevant to this report are nationally important aggregations of breeding or non-breeding birds, smaller isolated colonies of particular species (eg Grey Herons) and assemblages of breeding birds.

Data from a wide range of sources have been reviewed to identify and list important aggregations for each species. Key data sources include the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS), the Seabird Colony Register and the recent national Seabird 2000 census, Rare Breeding Bird Panel reports and single species national surveys (e.g. Nightjar 2004 and Woodlark 2006). Data are generally for the period 1999-2004 unless more recent information is available.

A list of important locations for birds generated by the review of these data sources has been matched against the location of existing SSSIs to indicate the level of coverage. A database of ornithological interest features for all SSSIs was then used to check the status of important bird aggregations occurring within SSSIs. This is important as location within an SSSI only confers full protection on a species when it is formally identified as a feature of scientific interest on the SSSI citation.

Following these analyses, the degree of coverage of species is presented in individual

species accounts and, where data are sufficient, in tables listing important aggregations against relevant SSSIs. These tables indicate those SSSIs where species are a scientific interest feature and have been used to identify coverage by those SSSIs which offer full protection as well as the overall level of coverage provided by all SSSIs.

Results and conclusions

This is the first review of the coverage of important bird populations by SSSIs in England. It shows that coverage is generally very high, commonly greater than 90% of the English population, for many of the most aggregated species, including wintering and passage wildfowl and waders and breeding seabirds. However, coverage is much lower for some groups, in particular near-shore marine species such as wintering divers, grebes and sea ducks, and the more abundant and dispersed breeding species associated with farmland. Although coverage is high for many non-breeding water birds, a number of these are highly dependent on habitats outside designated sites for foraging or roosting.

Natural England's viewpoint

Protected areas are a cornerstone of efforts to conserve England's avifauna and this assessment is important for three reasons. Firstly, by providing information on the proportions of the

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populations of rare, threatened or otherwise important species which are protected by designated sites, it can inform conservation strategies such as species and habitat action plans under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. Secondly, it sets individual sites into context, thus highlighting their importance and reinforcing the case for their protection and sustainable management. Finally, it identifies gaps in coverage which may point to a need for further designations, or alternative conservation strategies such as the effective deployment of wider countryside measures (e.g. agri-environment schemes). Such an assessment is especially timely given the potential threats to biodiversity from man-induced climate change and the important role of designated sites in conserving England's avifauna the coming decades.

Selected references

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Further information

For the full details of the research covered by this information note see Natural England Research Report NERR015 *A review of the ornithological interest of SSSIs in England*.

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