

UK SPA SCIENTIFIC WORKING GROUP

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Selection of sites for non-breeding waterbirds: guidance on the use of minimum thresholds

Background

The second review of the UK SPA network (Stroud *et al.* 2001) re-affirmed guidance on the use of minimum thresholds for the selection of SPAs for non-breeding waterbirds which had been operative since the early 1980s (see Appendix).

The objective of applying a minimum threshold of 50 is to act as a filter to avoid the identification as qualifying species at sites holding very small numbers of birds, where such selection would make no significant contribution to the conservation needs of those species.

The Scientific Working Group further reviewed this issue in 2002¹. The conclusion was that “The Group agreed to uphold the ‘minimum 50’ rule, but recognised that there may be a few exceptions where sites supporting low numbers of non-breeding birds would add to the conservation of a given species, especially in contributing to range maintenance. Such cases will be reviewed and agreed when necessary.”²

As recognised by the second network review and previously by the Scientific Working Group, in some cases the application of a minimum threshold of 50 may constrain the selection of SPAs which either a) would be inappropriate to provide for the conservation needs of the species concerned; and/or b) would inhibit fulfilment of UK obligations under Article 4 of the Birds Directive by precluding the selection of ‘the most suitable territories’ of a species as SPA(s).

The table below provides the current list of those species for which a minimum threshold of 50 does not currently apply. Thus for these species UK SPAs are selected on the basis of 1% of national populations (using current thresholds as shown).

It is recommended that this guidance is periodically reviewed by the Scientific Working Group in the light of waterbird population changes.

Any future changes to the list of species affected by this guidance will be agreed by the Scientific Working Group and recorded in the minutes of the relevant meeting.

¹ http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/pdf/sites_waterbirds.pdf

² <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/pdf/minutes080502.pdf>

Species	Status	Justification for non-applicability of rule	National (GB) population ³	1% threshold (GB)
Slavonian Grebe	Annex I	Application of rule would constrain selection of an appropriate SPA suite	1,100	10
Bittern	Annex I	Globally threatened and declining (in 2001); application of rule would constrain selection of an appropriate SPA suite	600	6
Spoonbill	Annex I	Application of rule would constrain selection of an appropriate SPA suite	20	1
Smew	Annex I	Application of rule would constrain selection of an appropriate SPA suite	180	2
Crane	Annex I	Application of rule would constrain selection of an appropriate SPA suite	52	1

References

- Musgrove, A.J., Aebischer, N.J., Eaton, M.A., Hearn, R.D., Newson, S.E., Noble, D.G., Parsons, M., Risely, K. & Stroud, D.A. 2013. Population estimates of birds in Great Britain and the United Kingdom. *British Birds* 106: 64-100.
- Salmon, D.G. 1981. *Wildfowl and wader counts 1980-81*. Slimbridge, The Wildfowl Trust. 51 pp.
- Stroud, D.A., Chambers, D., Cook, S., Buxton, N., Fraser, B., Clement, P., Lewis, P., McLean, I., Baker, H. & Whitehead, S. (eds.) 2001. [*The UK SPA network: its scope and content*](#). JNCC, Peterborough. Three volumes. (90 pp; 438 pp; 392 pp)

Appendix

“4.1.2 Minimum numbers for wintering waterbirds

“The size of the national population of some wintering waterbirds is very small. This typically is the case for those species whose main range in the non-breeding season occurs either to the south (e.g. for Ruff and Greenshank) or east (e.g. Bean Goose and Smew) of the UK. For these species, 1% of national populations give small values, often amounting to just a few individuals. In an international context these very small numbers are not of major significance for sustaining viable biogeographical populations of these species.

“With this in mind, it has been the statutory agencies’ long-standing practice to require at least 50 individuals to be regularly present on a site before that area is considered for site selection (Salmon 1981). This has been the practice with regard to the selection of SSSIs and has also been adopted for this review of SPAs.

“Note that the guideline has only been applied in the context of wintering waterbirds. It would not be appropriate for breeding birds where the rarest breeding populations of many species are characterised by just a few pairs. Nor would it be appropriate where the global population size is small (for example, a globally threatened species of waterbird such as Bittern). In such a case, it would be entirely appropriate to select a site based on small absolute numbers (as indeed, is urged by the Ramsar Convention’s site selection guidance – Res. C.VII.11).”

³ As used in the third SPA network review and based on Musgrove *et al.* 2013.