



The UK SPA network: Its Scope and Content

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Source: The Auk, 120(1) : 245-246

Published By: American Ornithological Society

URL: [https://doi.org/10.1642/0004-8038\(2003\)120\[0245:TUSNIS\]2.0.CO;2](https://doi.org/10.1642/0004-8038(2003)120[0245:TUSNIS]2.0.CO;2)

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The Auk 120(1):245–246, 2003

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D. A. Stroud, D. Chambers, S. Cook, N. Buxton, B. Fraser, P. Clement, P. Lewis, I. McLean, H. Baker, and S. Whitehead, Eds. 2001. Joint Nature Conservation Committee. Peterborough, United Kingdom. Volume 1: Rationale for the Selection of Sites, xiii + 90 pp. ISBN 1-86107-529-4. Volume 2: Species Accounts, vii + 438 pp. ISBN 1-86107-530-8. Volume 3: Site Accounts, vi + 391 pp. ISBN 1-86107-531-6. Paper.—This three volume set was published to meet the obligations of the United Kingdom to identify a network of Special Protection Areas (SPAs) as specified by the European Union's directive on the conservation of wild birds issued in 1979. That directive provides for the establishment of an international network of protected areas for a defined set of rare or vulnerable bird species and for regularly occurring migratory species, with special emphasis on wetlands. The current volumes represent a major revision of the previous effort in 1992 and identify a network of 243 SPAs in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. This network was selected for the protection of 103 species of birds. Volume 1 of the set describes the process, procedures, and guidelines used in selecting the SPAs. Volume 2 includes an account for each species describing its status and extent of occurrence in the SPA network. Volume 3 contains a description of each of the 243 sites, including a locator map and list of qualifying species.

The species included in this process are derived from Annex I of the European Union birds directive, which designates a list of endangered, vulnerable, or rare species, supplemented by regularly occurring migratory species. The criteria for inclusion of a site in the SPA network are modeled very closely after the Ramsar Convention criteria for selecting wetlands of importance: 1% or more of the Great Britain or whole Ireland population of a species in Annex I; or 1% of the rather nebulously defined biogeographical population of a migratory species; or an area used by 20,000 or more waterfowl or seabirds. Other areas can be included by applying a range of apparently qualitative criteria such as population size and density, geographic range, breeding success, species-rich areas, naturalness, and severe weather refuges. The network of sites was assembled in a series of inter-agency review workshops.

Application of those species and site-selection criteria—especially given the emphasis on conforming to Ramsar criteria—generates a species list and site network that heavily emphasizes wetland-associated species, with many sites being on or near the coast. In fact, of the 103 species provided for in the SPA network, there are only 6 passerines. The authors deserve a great deal of credit, however, for pointing out that for many species it is either not possible to identify concentration sites or that site-based conservation action is not the best protection tool. This is one of the few publications to directly make the point that these broadly dispersed migrants, many of which are passerines, must have their conservation addressed by policy measures across the entire geographic and political landscape. Some very good suggestions on ongoing efforts to protect such species in the United Kingdom are listed.

I was impressed by the thoroughness of this publication in documenting not only the resulting site network, but the complete steps used to select sites and the data for each species. This really should be a model for how to publish the documentation for any such site selection procedure. However, as a non-United Kingdom based reader of this work, I was struck by the overall similarities of this project with the well-known and widely used criteria and publications used by BirdLife International to identify their network of Important Bird Areas. In fact, BirdLife published a list of Important Bird Areas in Europe very recently (Heath and Evans 2000) based on similar but slightly different criteria. Therefore, there now exist two similar but slightly different sets of reserve network specifications for bird conservation in the United Kingdom (and presumably the whole of the European Union in the future). Although those are both commendable efforts, I fail to see how multiple lists of important sites containing basically the same areas will do much to advance the cause of bird conservation. Some form of collaboration and synthesis

to agree on species lists and site selection procedures is urgently needed, to reduce duplication of effort if nothing else.

These volumes will have considerable value for conservationists in the United Kingdom and Ireland, though readers will have to do their own cross-matching between the SPA and Important Bird Area networks. However, the additional information in the species accounts will be of value to conservationists and researchers in other countries who have concerns with the same or related species. These data include listings of legal and conservation status in the European Union, United Kingdom, and whole of Ireland; text discussions of the global and United Kingdom distribution, population structure, and trends; and information on where in the SPA network the species is found. Despite a section on protection measures, there is little material on threats to the species and conservation strategies that can be used to abate those threats. Of real benefit are population estimates that are given for each species

(as appropriate) for Great Britain, whole of Ireland, and the biogeographic population. The latter is potentially very useful, but the area covered depends on the species; it may be global, Europe, east Atlantic, or various combinations of continents or parts of continents. Also informative were the analyses of how well the SPA network did at capturing proportions of the species it targeted. These would be useful analyses to include in other publications of reserve networks and I urge future authors to consult the SPA network publication as an example.—DAVID MEHLMAN, *The Nature Conservancy*, 322 Tyler Road NW, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87107, USA. E-mail: dmehlman@tnc.org

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