

# Common scoter: 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 common scoter, *Melanitta nigra*, is a regularly occurring migratory bird in Europe. It is between 44 and 54 cm long with a wingspan of 79-90 cm<sup>1</sup>.

The typical lifespan of this species is unknown, but the oldest recorded individual was over 13 years old<sup>2</sup>.

## Conservation status

- UK red-listed bird of conservation concern (for the breeding population)<sup>3</sup>.

## Distribution and population

Common scoters breed on a range of low-Arctic and boreal freshwater wetlands across

northernmost Europe and Russia, including north and west Scotland.



Female common scoter © [www.northeastwildlife.co.uk](http://www.northeastwildlife.co.uk)

They are strongly marine outside of the breeding season, wintering in coastal waters in the Atlantic, North Sea and Baltic Sea.

In the UK common scoters are widespread along the UK coastline, particularly in shallow waters with sandy substrate<sup>4</sup>. They can form large, dense flocks numbering thousands of birds in favoured areas such as Carmarthen Bay, Liverpool Bay, the Moray Firth and the north Norfolk coast.

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The closely-related black scoter, *Melanitta americana*, occupies a similar niche in North America and far eastern Russia – until recently common and black scoter were thought to be one species.

### UK population

The wintering population is estimated to be 100,000 individuals in the UK<sup>5</sup>. There is no recent estimate for the number of birds wintering in England. The UK breeding population, which is entirely located within Scotland, was 52 pairs in 2007<sup>6</sup>.

### Migration/movements

The majority of wintering common scoters in the UK arrive from October onwards, with numbers usually peaking between December and early February<sup>4</sup>. A significant easterly passage along the English channel in April is likely to be common scoters returning to northerly breeding grounds from wintering grounds further south. In addition, flocks of non-breeding birds can be present over the summer during their moult, when they use the same waters as they do in winter.

### Foraging

Common scoter is a diving duck that forages over sandy substrates in shallow waters during daytime. They use their webbed feet to propel themselves through the water, diving to a maximum of 20 m, with a mean recorded dive depth of 9.3 m<sup>7</sup>. Feeding flocks have been seen to drift for long distances along the shore with the tide, wind or current before flying back to their original location<sup>4</sup>.

During the winter, common scoters mainly feed on mussels, cockles and other bivalve molluscs, with other molluscs, crustaceans and small fish forming a smaller part of their diet<sup>7</sup>.

This species has a strong preference for sandy substrates and shallow waters, so estuary mouths and large bays with sandbanks and shallows are preferred by large flocks, although smaller flocks can occupy a variety of inshore habitats.

### References

- <sup>1</sup> The Birds of the Western Palearctic (Snow and Perrins, 1998)
- <sup>2</sup> Birds in the European Union: a status assessment (BirdLife International, 2004)
- <sup>3</sup> 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)
- <sup>4</sup> The Atlas of Wintering Birds in Britain and Ireland (Lack *et al*, 1986)
- <sup>5</sup> Overwintering Population Estimates of British Waterbirds (Musgrove *et al*, British Birds, Vol 104, 364-397)
- <sup>6</sup> Rare Breeding Birds in the UK 2010 (Holling *et al*, British Birds, Vol 105, 352-416)
- <sup>7</sup> BirdLife International seabird wikispace – [seabird.wikispaces.com/Black+Scoter](http://seabird.wikispaces.com/Black+Scoter)

### Further information

Natural England Technical Information Notes are available to download from the Natural England website: [www.naturalengland.org.uk](http://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](mailto:enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk).

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