

A potential new marine Special Protection Area for birds in The Greater Wash

This Technical Information Note (TIN) has been prepared to help inform you about the public consultation on a potential Special Protection Area (pSPA) along the Greater Wash coast. Other notes about the process for classifying marine SPAs and about the species to be protected within them are available. For details see Further Information below.

Background

The Greater Wash area, stretching from Bridlington Bay in the north to approximately Great Yarmouth in the south, is being recommended by Natural England and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) as a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the European Union's Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds ('Birds Directive').

The UK Government has ongoing obligations under the Birds Directive requiring it to protect the breeding, moulting and wintering areas and staging posts along migration routes of species to which the Directive applies. In seeking to fulfil this obligation, Natural England and JNCC have:

- Reviewed information from the JNCC based on survey work carried out in the waters around a number of seabird colonies.
- Reviewed current data on populations of red-throated diver, little gull, common scoter and tern species adjacent to and within existing SPAs in the Greater Wash area.

As part of wider work to identify potential marine Special Protection Areas in UK waters, Natural England and JNCC are now consulting on the proposals on behalf of the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).

These proposals are to create a new Greater Wash SPA:

- encompassing areas of importance for non-breeding red-throated diver *Gavia stellata*, common scoter *Melanitta nigra* and little gull *Hydrocoloeus minute*.
- Incorporating the foraging areas for tern species breeding within existing SPAs.

Special Protection Areas

The Birds Directive was adopted in 1979 to tackle declines in wild bird populations across Europe. Each EU member state must identify SPAs to protect:

- Rare or vulnerable bird species (as listed in Annex I of the Directive). And
- Other regularly occurring migratory bird species.

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Birds falling into these categories in the Greater Wash area include:

- Non-breeding Annex I species; red-throated diver and little gull;
- Non-breeding regularly occurring migratory species; common scoter; and
- Breeding Annex I tern species; Sandwich, common and little terns that use relatively restricted areas around their breeding colonies for foraging.

Adjacent to the proposed Greater Wash SPA are a number of existing coastal SPAs; the Humber Estuary, Gibraltar Point, The Wash, North Norfolk Coast, Great Yarmouth North Denes and Breydon Water which all support breeding tern species.

SPAs on land in the UK are now well established, but to provide seabirds with the protection they need, further work is required to establish SPAs at sea. The UK Government is committed to identifying a network of SPAs in the marine environment.

The Greater Wash: a special area for birds

The Greater Wash was one of 45 inshore (within 12 nautical miles of the coast) 'areas of search' selected where numbers of waterbirds are potentially present in high numbers outside of the breeding season. The coastline and offshore waters of the possible Greater Wash SPA regularly support a number of non-breeding species including:

- red-throated diver;
- little gull; and
- common scoter.

Distribution data for little gull, red-throated diver and common scoter were collected over a five year period (2002/03 to 2007/08, between the months of October and March). Surveys were carried out from an aircraft that sampled a

systematic pattern of line-transects. Two observers were used to record bird data from either side of the aircraft. From these data, the JNCC has identified the population size and distributions of red-throated diver and common scoter. However, whilst a little gull population size for the area has been established, the distribution of little gull could not be confidently identified because insufficient survey coverage was achieved for this purpose.

The number of little gull in the Greater Wash is the largest of any inshore area in the UK, whilst 8.9% of the UK wintering red-throated diver population can be found in the Greater Wash, making it the second most important site in the UK for red-throated diver.

Dense flocks of common scoter are consistently found along the North Norfolk coast and to the north of Gibraltar Point, making the Greater Wash area the fourth most important UK site for non-breeding common scoter.

Foraging seabirds

The waters adjacent to seabird colonies are used by seabirds for a wide range of activities. All breeding seabirds go out from and return to a central place (their nest) on every foraging trip. This constraint means that some species have a limited foraging range, and may be reliant on foraging areas close to the colony. The Greater Wash encompasses important foraging areas for little, common and Sandwich tern. Foraging ranges for some tern species can be up to 60 km offshore from the colony and currently fall outside of existing SPAs.

In order to provide a good evidence base upon which to identify the sea areas that might be best afforded protection for tern species, JNCC collected data on the distribution of terns foraging by tracking Sandwich tern and common tern from colonies, and by conducting field observations of little tern, at a number of SPAs; Humber Estuary (little tern), Gibraltar Point (little

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tern), North Norfolk Coast (little tern, Sandwich tern, common tern), Great Yarmouth & North Denes (little tern).

On the basis of this survey work, and the development of statistical models that predicted the probability of tern presence based on local environmental conditions, the JNCC identified potential feeding areas around existing tern colony SPAs, including the colonies listed above for Sandwich, common and little tern. The same statistical model developed for common tern was applied to Breydon Water SPA where no survey data was available. The foraging areas are predicted by the JNCC analysis as having the highest relative foraging densities around each colony.

A marine SPA

Natural England and JNCC are recommending a new marine SPA, named the "Greater Wash SPA". It is proposed that this new marine SPA will cover an area from Bridlington Bay in the north to approximately Great Yarmouth in the south.

The Greater Wash SPA will have its landward boundary at Mean High Water or where it abuts an existing SPA.

The seaward boundary is a composite of the distribution of red-throated diver and the foraging area of Sandwich tern, approximately 30km or 16 nm from shore at its furthest extent. It will encompass the foraging areas of little tern at Humber Estuary, Gibraltar Point, The Wash, North Norfolk Coast and Great Yarmouth & North Denes SPA colonies, and common tern at North Norfolk Coast and Breydon Water SPA colonies. The boundary also includes areas with high densities of common scoter, and so we are proposing to include common scoter as a feature to be protected within the SPA. Whilst an exact boundary around the most important foraging areas for little gull could not be

determined from the available data, a sufficient number occur within the boundary of the pSPA for this species to be included as a qualifying feature.

What happens next?

Natural England is responsible for recommending SPAs in English waters out to 12 nautical miles to Defra for classification. JNCC is responsible for recommending SPAs in offshore water's within the UK's Exclusive Economic Zone.

Together Natural England and JNCC have developed initial site recommendations, and held informal discussions with stakeholders. These informal discussions were intended to ensure that as many stakeholders as possible are aware of our proposal and to give them an opportunity to provide information to inform our recommendations. We have considered all comments received and have incorporated these into our recommendations to Defra (approved by our Executive Board and the JNCC).

Ministerial approval has been granted for the formal consultation process, which will run for a period of thirteen weeks. This period will provide an opportunity for stakeholders to formally submit views on the proposals. After the consultation we will consider the responses and submit our formal advice to Defra. It is the Government's intention to make a decision regarding the classification of the site in 2017.

Further information

Natural England Technical Information Notes are available to download from the Natural England website: [Establishing marine Special Protected Areas](#). In particular see:

- [TIN120: Establishing marine Special Protection Areas](#)

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- **TIN135: *Sandwich tern: species information for marine Special Protection Area consultations***
- **TIN138: *Common tern: species information for marine Special Protection Area consultations***
- **TIN139: *Little tern: species information for marine Special Protection Area consultations***
- **TIN143: *Common scoter: species information for marine Special Protection Area consultations***
- **TIN141: *Red-throated diver: species information for marine Special Protection Area consultations***
- **TIN133: *Little gull: species information for marine Special Protection Area consultations***

If you want to know more

If you would like to know more about the proposals or ask any questions, please get in touch with:

Greater Wash SPA Classification Team, Natural England, Dragonfly House, 2 Gilders Way, Norwich, NR3 1UB Telephone: 02080 264885 or email: SNS_N2K@naturalengland.org.uk

To find out more about the work of Natural England, please visit:

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Appendix 1: Area under consideration for a possible new marine Special Protection Area in The Greater Wash

