

Location



Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK) is an island nation off the north-western coast of mainland Europe, which comprises England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland shares a land border with the Republic of Ireland, otherwise, the United Kingdom is surrounded by the North Sea to the east, the English Channel to the south and the Irish Sea and the Atlantic ocean to the west. Its coastline totals 12,429 km.

The UK has a temperate climate. Northern Ireland, Wales and western parts of England and Scotland, being closest to the Atlantic Ocean, are generally the mildest, wettest, and windiest regions of the UK, and temperature ranges there are seldom extreme.

England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland retain their own legal systems and have their own devolved governments, each with varying powers. The UK is divided into more than 100 counties (local government subdivisions), of which 55 are coastal. The UK left the European Union in 2020. Although not part of the UK, two crown dependencies (the Isle of Man and the Channel islands) are also represented by the UK at international level, although they are self-governing and manage their own domestic affairs. The same applies to 14 UK Overseas Territories.

Regional Seas and Biogeography

Atlantic Ocean
North Sea
Irish Sea
English channel

Large Marine Ecosystems: Celtic-Biscay Shelf and North Sea.

Habitats

Coastal conditions along the large coastline vary from sandy beaches to rocky cliffs, to tidal mudflats and several large estuaries.

→ Saltmarshes – are found in many coastal areas around the UK, particularly on the southwest coast of England in Morecambe Bay, around the west and south coasts of Wales, in Devon and Cornwall, Dorset/Hampshire on the central south coast, also on England's east coast to the south of the mouth of the Thames river, coast of Suffolk and around the Wash (Norfolk) and around the Humber estuary on England's northeast coast.

→ Seagrasses are found on the northwest tip of Wales, in Cardigan Bay and Porth Nefyn, also in the north bank of the River Severn, on the southwestern reaches of the Menai strait and on the northwest part of Anglesey island, as well as around the mouth of the river Fal in the far southwestern part of Cornwall. On the northwest coast of England, they are found in Morecambe Bay and on the eastern side of Walney Island. Some small areas exist on the southwest coast of Scotland. On the North Sea coast, saltmarshes are known around the Lindisfarne Nature Reserve near the Scottish border, on the inland side of Chesil beach and around the coast of Poole Bay (both in Dorset), and in the estuary of the Beaulieu river in Hampshire and on the northeast coast of the Isle of Wight.

Biodiversity Hotspots

→ National Parks/Nature Reserves/Marine Protected Areas

A number of Marine Protected Areas are designated in Scotland for black guillemots (*Cepphus grille*), including East Caithness cliffs, Fetlar to Haroldswick on Shetland, Papa Westray on Orkney, Sea of the Hebrides and Clyde sea sill. One site in the mid English channel (Dolphin Head Highly Protected Marine Area) is designated for guillemots and also Lesser black-backed gull (*Larus fuscus*), Northern gannet (*Morus bassanus*), grey seal

(*Halichoerus grypus*) and Harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*).

→ RAMSAR Sites

See under IBAs below.

→ IBAs

There are 118 Marine IBAs around the coasts of the UK, many on islands and in estuaries, with a few examples listed below:

In Scotland – **St. Kilda** islands in the outer Hebrides are of very high importance for breeding seabirds, as is **Foula IBA**, an island to the southwest of the main Shetland islands with very large populations of cliff and moorland nesting seabirds. **Caithness cliffs**, on the NE coast of mainland Scotland supports breeding seabirds and waterbirds. The **Firth of Forth IBA**, a 100km long stretch of the river Forth and its mouth which includes large areas of intertidal flats, saltmarsh and sand-dune systems is important for wintering and passage wildfowl and waders, and for breeding terns.

In Northern Ireland – **Stranford Lough and islands IBA** (also a RAMSAR site and Nature Reserve) is a shallow sea lough with a variety of marine and intertidal habitats. It is Northern Ireland's most important coastal site for wintering wildfowl (more than 70,000 individuals) and also important for breeding terns.

In Wales – **Skholm and Skomer islands** are lined with high cliffs, providing important breeding habitat for seabird and waterbird colonies.

In England – **Lindisfarne** (also a RAMSAR site and Nature Reserve) on the northeast coast near the Scottish border is a stretch of coastline plus Holy Island and its extensive intertidal flats, also with rocky shores, saltmarsh and sand-dune. Terns breed here and the area attracts large numbers of wintering wildfowl (exceeding 20,000 individuals), including the majority of the Spitzbergen breeding population of an internationally important population of wintering Brent geese (*Branta bernicla*).

The **Humber estuary** (also a RAMSAR site) includes the estuary and its mouth, with an elongated shingle-spit with sand dunes, extensive mudflats, saline lagoons and reedbeds. The site is important for breeding raptors and waders, and wintering or passage wildfowl and waders.

The Wash (also a RAMSAR site and Nature Reserve) is one of the most important areas of estuarine mudflats, sandbanks and saltmarsh in the UK. It is a large site which provides important breeding area for wildfowl and several species of gulls and terns. It also supports large concentrations of passage and wintering waders and wildfowl.

Poole Harbour (also a RAMSAR site and Nature Reserve) is one of the largest natural harbours in the world, with the five islands, mudflats, saltmarsh, and reedbeds. The area is important for wintering wildfowl and waders and internationally for breeding gulls and terns.

→ IMMAs

The Orkney Isles and Pentland Firth IMMA – the Orkney islands provide one of the most important pupping for grey seals (*Halichoerus grypus*) in the UK and the area is also one of the most important for marine mammals in the UK. It is very frequently used by killer whales (*Orcinus orca*) and sees high densities of harbour porpoises (*Phocoena phocoena*), also seasonally common minke whales (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*), Atlantic white-sided dolphins (*Leucopleurus acutus*), and groups of Risso's dolphins (*Grampus griseus*).

Shetland and Fair Isle IMMA – the archipelago support a diverse range of marine mammals. Cetacean species such as killer whales, Risso's dolphins and harbour porpoises are found here. Some pods of killer whales are considered semi-resident, Risso's dolphins have shown site fidelity to particular areas and harbour porpoises are present year-round and form large aggregations of up to 200 individuals in the autumn and winter. Other cetaceans occur seasonally including common minke whales, which aggregate in the late summer/autumn, and humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*), which use Shetland to rest and feed during migration. This area is also an important pupping and haul-out area for seals, particularly harbour seals (*Phoca vitulina*). The continental shelf and nearshore deep-water areas are important for large baleen whales, deep diving species and occasional large pods of pelagic dolphins, such as Atlantic white-sided dolphin.

Minches and the Sea of the Hebrides IMMA – waters are some of the richest in marine mammal diversity anywhere in the UK. The continental shelf seas support harbour seals, grey seals, harbour porpoises, common bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*), common dolphins (*Delphinus delphis*), white-beaked dolphins (*Lagenorhynchus albirostris*), Risso's dolphins, killer whales, and minke whales. The habitat is important for breeding for grey seals, harbour seals, harbour porpoises and Risso's dolphins.

Central Irish Sea IMMA – known for a semi-residential population of coastal common bottlenose dolphin, as well as Harbour porpoise, (seen more inshore), common dolphins, and common minke whales. Several cetacean species use the area for feeding and breeding and grey seal occur here.

Western English Channel IMMA – known for coastal populations of bottlenose dolphins as well as grey and harbour seals.

Moray Firth to Humber Estuary IMMA – hosts a resident population of bottlenose dolphins which are regularly encountered in the nearshore waters where they feed and breed. The Southern Trench in the Moray Firth is a key foraging area for common minke whales during the summer and autumn. Harbour porpoise are present year round and both grey and harbour seals haul out and breed here.

The Wash IMMA – includes the haulout, breeding and foraging area (on sandbanks shallower than 30m) of the majority of the English subpopulation of Atlantic harbour seals (*Phoca vitulina vitulina*).

Southern North Sea and Eastern Channel Seasonal Aggregation Area IMMA – holds an important aggregation of harbour porpoises in spring.

At risk Wildlife

In this section, some individual wildlife species are mentioned followed by a letter in parentheses. These are species included in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species within the top three categories of risk - Vulnerable to extinction (VU), Endangered (EN) or Critically Endangered (CR). A more complete list of IUCN listed species is found in Appendix 1.

→ At risk birds

The UK sits on the East Atlantic Flyway which is a major migration route for waterbirds from the Arctic to southern Africa. The UK's rich estuaries and wetlands, provide an important stopover point. There are 56 seabird species known to occur in UK waters of which 23 are breeding – including species of petrel, kittiwake, puffin, fulmar, shearwater, gannet, shag, cormorant, razorbill and several gull, tern skua and guillemot species.

→ At risk reptiles

Of the world's seven marine turtle species, six have been recorded in UK waters, but only the leatherback (VU) is frequently seen. Leatherbacks migrate into UK waters to feed, the other species are less frequently encountered, they usually occur as stray juveniles carried by currents from warmer seas.

→ At risk mammals

For cetaceans, the species listed under the IMMA section above are known to occur around the UK. The most commonly species seen are bottlenose dolphins and harbour porpoise. Common dolphins are found in deeper offshore waters, while orcas can be seen year-round in the Northern Isles and in late spring off Scotland's northern mainland coast. Minke whales are seen especially during the summer off Scotland's west coast and in the North Sea.

A few additional species with special conservation status have also been observed in UK waters, including Sei (EN), blue (EN), Fin (VU), found in deeper waters from Scotland down to the western English Channel, possibly breeding around Shetland) and Sperm (VU) whales. Long-finned pilot whale, (*Globicephala melas*) and Cuvier's beaked whale (*Ziphius cavirostris*) have also been recorded.

Two species of seals are found in UK waters, grey and common seals. Both are found in many areas around the UK. Grey seals are found all around the UK, with large numbers in Scottish coastal waters, main concentrations in Western Isles and Orkney, with a breeding colony in Shetland. They are also commonly observed in Cornwall and Devon in the southwest of England, on the Pembrokeshire coast of Wales, and on the east coast in Norfolk, Lincolnshire, the Farne Islands and in Northumberland. Grey seals pup between September and late November and moult during February-March.

Harbour seals are widespread around the west coast of Scotland and throughout the Northern Isles, and in the Firths of Moray, Forth and Tay. They are also regularly seen in Norfolk on England's east coast. Harbour seals are mostly associated with the coast. They pup in June/July and moult in August.

Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) can be present in all coastal areas, often associated with rivers, marshes or wetlands. Most otter pups are born between May and August.

Past experience with oil spill and potential risks

The UK has experienced a number of major oil and HNS incidents: Torrey Canyon (Scilly isles, 1967), Amoco Cadiz (France, 1978), Braer (Shetland, 1993), Sea Empress (Milford Haven, 1996), MSC Napoli (Devon, 2007). The most notable of these are the Torrey Canyon, MSC Napoli and Sea Empress, where large numbers of birds were affected and large-scale rehabilitation efforts were undertaken. For the Sea Empress, around 3000 birds were admitted into facilities and around 1000 in the Napoli incident. One incident involving a pollutant other than oil (Polyisobutylene) occurred in 2013 in the English channel, which resulted in 550 birds being rescued and sent to rehabilitation facilities. Protocols involved using a hydrogenated vegetable oil as a solvent before proceeding

to the washing stage.

International and Regional Treaties and Agreements

→ Oil spill and HNS Response

- d CLC Convention 69
- d CLC Protocol 76
- CLC Protocol 92
- d FUND Protocol 76
- FUND Protocol 92
- FUND Protocol 2003
- d LLMC Convention 76
- LLMC Protocol 96
- OPRC Convention 90
- HNS Convention 96
- HNS PROT 2010
- OPRC_HNS 2000
- BUNKERS CONVENTION 01

→ Marine Biodiversity Protection

- Indian Ocean South East Asia (IOSEA) Marine Turtle MoU
- Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans of the Baltic, North East Atlantic, Irish and North Seas (ASCOBANS)
- Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA)
- Cartagena Convention for the Protection and Development of the Marine Environment in the Wider Caribbean Region
- MoU on the Conservation and Management of Marine Turtles and their Habitats of the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia (CMS IOSEA)
- The Protocol Concerning Co-operation and Development in Combating Oil Spills in the Wider Caribbean Region (the Oil Spills Protocol)
- Bonn Agreement for Cooperation in dealing with pollution of the North Sea by oil and other harmful substances

Oil Spill Response and HNS Spill Response

→ National Contingency Plan?

The UK National Oil Spill Contingency Plan was developed in in the late 1990s, its most recent update was in 2024.

→ Role of Competent National Authorities

The Department for Transport is responsible for pollution arising from marine shipping in and around UK waters, whilst the Department for Energy, Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) for offshore installations such as oil and gas installations. The Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA), an executive agency of the DfT, within its Counter Pollution and Salvage branch, has responsibility for counter pollution response at sea and is custodian of the National Contingency Plan. The local authority, Northern Ireland Environment Agency or landowner if private land are responsible for overseeing shoreline response.

The Scottish Government, Northern Ireland Executive and the Welsh Government would also be closely involved when their areas were affected or at risk, although marine pollution response remains a reserved function of the UK government. The lead authorities for marine pollution would be the Marine Directorate in Scotland, The Welsh Government's Climate Change and Rural Affairs Group, and Northern Ireland's Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. Isle of Man, the Channel Islands and the UK overseas territories are responsible for their own pollution response arrangements but may request assistance from the UK Government.

The SOSREP represents the Secretaries of State for Transport (shipping incident) and DESNZ (offshore installations) by removing/reducing the risk to safety, the environment and property arising from pollution incidents. SOSREP has the ultimate and decisive voice for maritime salvage, offshore containment and intervention but does not include any responsibility for either at-sea or shoreline clean-up activities. In a significant oil pollution incident from offshore oil and gas, the Offshore Petroleum Regulator for Environment and Decommissioning (OPRED) will liaise with DESNZ to determine the need for an Emergency Response Team to

co-ordinate the response as lead government department.

The National Contingency Plan also defines standing Environment Groups (there are 9 around the UK), which provide advice on environmental and public health impacts of the incident and associated response operations. The Environment Group is advisory only, not an operational response cell.

Oiled Wildlife Preparedness and Response

→ **Formal guidelines?**

There is no detailed guidance within the National Contingency Plan on wildlife response. The Plan names several named NGOs as responsible for wildlife welfare action and management: the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals or RSPCA (England and Wales), the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals or SSPCA (Scotland) and the Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals or USPCA (Northern Ireland). This is echoed in the STOp note outlining the role of the Environment Group, which also states that the EG has a role to advise on humane rescue and rehabilitation or human disposal and post mortem analysis of wildlife casualties by recognised animal welfare or conservation organisations.

→ **Response objectives and strategy**

The National Contingency plan refers to a mechanism to take contaminated animals into captivity for cleaning and rehabilitation and to establish advice and monitoring on wildlife impacts.

→ **Euthanasia or rehabilitation?**

Rehabilitation is allowed under the National Contingency Plan, relying on the developed standards used by the lead NGOs named above, as recognised welfare bodies.

→ **Impact assessment**

The Environment Group has a role to provide advice and guidance on monitoring, assessing and documenting the environmental (including wildlife) impact of a maritime pollution incident and the impact of all response measures implemented. Key members of the Environment Group regarding nature conservation are the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (UK-wide), which advises on offshore sensitivity/impacts (outside 12 nautical miles). Their onshore counterparts are the Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies: Nature Scot, Natural England, Natural Resources Wales and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and Committee on Nature Conservation (CNCC).

The Marine Impact Assessment and Monitoring (Premiam) network, coordinated by the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS) has defined guidelines and a mechanism for Various agencies and government departments to apply best practice to post spill monitoring and impact assessment, providing a recommended scientific framework for monitoring programmes. For significant incidents, they describe the setup of a Premiam Monitoring Coordination Cell (PMCC), charged with providing advice on impact assessment and post-spill monitoring to the various response cells defined in the National Contingency Plan. PMCC are also responsible for establishing and managing the funding for the impact and long-term monitoring programmes.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds will likely be involved in monitoring and collection of data for dead birds. The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) also carries out monitoring of bird populations around the UK. It is likely they would get involved in impact assessment activities for birds during an oiled wildlife incident. For cetaceans, CSIP (England/Wales) and SMASS (Scotland) would likely support impact assessment.

→ **Notification and early response**

Notification procedures vary locally around the UK, but for significant incidents it is likely that notification of wildlife impacts will be reported to the Environment Group.

→ **Wildlife responders**

The RSPCA and SSPCA would be the largest response organisations in England and Scotland for birds and seals, respectively, although a number of smaller organisations also exist in the UK and may get involved (some are listed under the permanent facilities section below). The USPCA would likely be involved in responding in Northern Ireland.

For marine mammals, British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR) is a network of coordinators and volunteers who respond to marine mammal strandings around the UK (seals and cetaceans). Seals can be taken to BDMLR temporary holding facilities before transfer to a seal rehabilitation centre (see under permanent facilities below). The BDMLR has 7 temporary holding units, in Cornwall, Kent, Suffolk, Yorkshire, Northumberland in England and Moray and Inverness in Scotland). Local vets are used for euthanasia where needed. Coverage includes Northern Ireland, in partnership with the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group.

The UK Cetacean Strandings Investigation Programme (CSIP), a consortium of organisations managed by JNCC, carries out monitoring of stranded marine mammals and sea turtles around UK shores. Its Scottish equivalent is the Scottish marine Animal Stranding Scheme (SMASS).

➔ **Cooperation between stakeholders**

RSPCA and SSPCA are both members of the EUROWA network. RSPCA is also a member of the GOWRS (Global Oiled Wildlife Response System) network.

On the Shetland islands, the Shetland Oiled Wildlife Network (SOWN), coordinated by the Shetland Oil Terminal Advisory Group (SOTEAG), is a forum for knowledge sharing and information transfer between Shetland's oiled wildlife stakeholders. SOTEAG also holds an extensive long-term database of wildlife sensitivities on Shetland.

JNCC, BTO and the RSPB collaborate on producing annual breeding bird surveys.

The UK is a signatory to the Bonn Agreement for cooperation on oil pollution in the North Sea, the Anglo-French Joint Maritime Contingency Plan (Mancheplan) which covers counter pollution and search and rescue operations in the English Channel and the Norbrit Agreement with Norway for joint counter pollution operations in a zone extending either side of their continental shelf boundaries. There is also a joint agreement between UK and Ireland in the event of an incident in the Irish Sea.

➔ **Permanent facilities**

In England there are four RSPCA wildlife centres: West Hatch in the county of Somerset, East Winch in Norfolk, Stapeley Grange in Cheshire and Mallydams Wood in East Sussex capable of caring for oiled wildlife, including seals.

In Scotland the SSPCA's National Wildlife rescue Centre in Clackmannanshire, inland northeast of Edinburgh, is the largest facility in Scotland which would admit oiled wildlife, including seals. The New Arc Wildlife Rescue Centre, north of Aberdeen, also has some capacity for dealing with seabirds and limited capacity for stabilising seals (which are normally taken to the SSPCA centre for rehabilitation). Highland Wildlife Rescue in Brora, towards the northern tip of Scotland's mainland coast and Hessilhead Wildlife Rescue Centre, inland southwest of Glasgow, may have some smaller capacity to assist with seabirds and seals. On Shetland, there are no facilities, for birds, the Hillswick Wildlife Sanctuary rehabilitates seals and otters from their small facility.

In Wales, the only centre dealing with birds is the Gower Bird Hospital, west of Swansea.

In Northern Ireland, the USPCA can provide some assistance in dealing with marine birds from their centre in Newry, County Down. The Exploris aquarium's seal sanctuary in Portaferry, County Down rehabilitates orphaned and sick seal pups.

For seals, there are a number of other rehabilitation centres or facilities that could assist with seal rehabilitation, although on a smaller scale than the RSPCA/SSPCA centres. These include the Cornish Seal Sanctuary, South Essex Wildlife Hospital, Skegness Seal Sanctuary, Mablethorpe Seal Sanctuary, t Mountain Zoo, Hunstanton Sea Life Centre, Scarborough Sea Life Centre, Tynemouth Aquarium, Caithness Seal Rehab and Orkney Seal Rescue. There are a number of other centres which could also get involved with bird rehabilitation.

➔ **Current processes**

A new framework oiled wildlife response plan was created in 2025 for the Scottish part of the North Sea, which provides an outline strategy for wildlife response, but still needs operational implementation.

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Appendix 1

→ At risk birds

Common name / Latin name / IUCN Red List Category (CR,EN,VU) / Resident-Migratory (season) / Breeding-Nesting-Pupping (season)

Balearic Shearwater / *Puffinus mauretanicus* / CR / Migratory /
Long-tailed Duck / *Clangula hyemalis* / VU / Migratory (wintering) /
Velvet Scoter / *Melanitta fusca* / VU / Resident/migratory / Breeding
Common Pochard / *Aythya ferina* / VU / Resident/migratory (winter) /
Horned Grebe / *Podiceps auritus* / VU / Migratory (wintering) /
Leach's Storm-petrel / *Hydrobates leucorhous* / VU / Migratory (wintering) / Breeding
Grey Plover / *Pluvialis squatarola* / VU / Migratory (wintering) /
Broad-billed Sandpiper / *Calidris falcinellus* / VU / Migratory /
Curlew Sandpiper / *Calidris ferruginea* / VU / Resident/migratory (winter) /
Black-legged Kittiwake / *Rissa tridactyla* / VU / Resident/migratory (summer) / Breeding
Atlantic Puffin / *Fratercula arctica* / VU / Resident/migratory (summer) / Breeding
Aquatic Warbler / *Acrocephalus paludicola* / VU / Migratory (autumn) /

→ At risk reptiles

Common name / Latin name / IUCN Red List Category (CR,EN,VU) / Resident-Migratory (season) / Breeding-Nesting-Pupping (season)

Leatherback turtle / *Dermochelys coriacea* / VU / /

→ At risk mammals

Common name / Latin name / IUCN Red List Category (CR,EN,VU) / Resident-Migratory (season) / Breeding-Nesting-Pupping (season)

Sei whale / *Balaenoptera borealis* / EN / /
Blue Whale / *Balaenoptera musculus* / EN / /
Fin whale / *Balaenoptera physalus* / VU / /
Sperm whale / *Physeter macrocephalus* / VU / /