

Spanish landmark legislation increases 20-fold marine protected areas

Brussels, 17 July, 2014

Spain's Agricultural Ministry officially established today 39 new marine protected areas under the European Natura 2000 network, marking a very important day in marine conservation. The new sites are 'Special Protection Areas for Birds' (SPAs)[1], designated under the European Birds Directive. The SPAs will offer protection to seabirds whilst they are at sea, complementing the existing network of sites on land. Spain, with its Atlantic and Mediterranean coastlines and islands, is extremely important for European seabirds. This includes Europe's most threatened seabird- the Balearic shearwater[2], and other endemic species to the Mediterranean, such as the Yelkouan shearwater and Audouin's gull. Today's announcement is the culmination of many years of hard work by BirdLife's Spanish partner SEO/BirdLife[3], who has played a major role in this process: each of the 39 sites closely mirror the Marine Important Bird Areas[4] identified by the organisation, following nearly a decade of scientific research. Previously, Spain's network of protected sites for seabirds was made up mostly of small sites at colonies and along coasts and islands. These sites mostly protect seabirds whilst on land, but do not protect them in the environment where they spend the majority of their time: out at sea. These new sites, many of which are large in size, and include areas offshore, will add an additional 50,000km² to Spain's protected area network for birds, a whopping 20-fold increase.

«Today's announcement is extremely important – stated Asunción Ruiz, Director of SEO/BirdLife - now seabirds can be protected when they venture away from the Spanish coast. Carefully managed, these sites could make a real difference to the recovery of our threatened seabirds».

The ground work carried out by SEO/BirdLife to identify these sites, involved many years of scientific research tracking seabirds and understanding their behaviour at sea. The information on Marine Important Bird Area is collated on BirdLife's Marine E-Atlas[5]. Across Europe, these sites act as a 'shadow list' of sites which should be protected under EU law.

«It is extremely promising that Spain has moved to designate offshore sites and it is imperative for seabird conservation that other countries in Europe follow their example - added Marguerite Tarzia, European Marine Conservation Officer at BirdLife - the addition of these sites means that Spain has gone from lagging behind other EU countries, to being one of the regional leaders in seabird protection at sea. It is important that the next steps include strong and effective management of sites, to ensure that the positive gains made today are followed through for real conservation outcomes».

The European Commission recognises BirdLife's marine Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas as a shadow list for designating Marine Special Protected Areas (Natura 2000 sites). Several EU Member States have still not designated their marine SPAs despite having a marine IBA list. Spain's designation is a step forward to complete the EU marine natura 2000 network.

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BirdLife Europe is a Partnership of nature conservation organisations in 49 countries, including all EU Member States, and a leader in bird conservation. Through its unique local to global approach BirdLife Europe delivers high impact and long term conservation for the benefit of nature and people.

Notes to Editor

[1] The Natura 2000 network includes Special Protection Areas for Birds, and Special Areas of Conservation, under the European Birds Directive and the Habitats Directive. http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/index_en.htm

[2] The Balearic Shearwater is listed as 'Critically Endangered' by IUCN and BirdLife, <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/speciesfactsheet.php?id=30026>

[3] SEO/BirdLife is BirdLife's partner in Spain. <http://www.seo.org>

[4] BirdLife's marine Important Bird Area (mIBAs) programme uses scientific data and criteria to determine the most important sites for seabirds.

[5] BirdLife's Marine E-Atlas is an inventory of all the marine Important Bird Areas (mIBAs) identified by BirdLife's partners. This includes both coastal and offshore sites. <http://maps.birdlife.org/marineIBAs/default.html>

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