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Status Assessment 2020 - Lesser black-backed gull

The status of the Lesser black-backed gull Larus fuscus fuscus breeding population is still vulnerable, but there is supposedly no trend in the population size in OSPAR region I since the last assessment (**Figure 1**). The direct causes of the population development are still not fully understood. Identified threats are climate change, environmental pollution and other anthropogenic stressors, predation, competition, and food limitation.

OSPAR QSR2023

(/en/ospar-assessments/quality-status-reports/qsr-2023/)

Assessment of status		Non-Breeding Distribution	Non-Breeding Population size	Breeding Distribution	Breeding Population size	Condition i.e. breeding productivity	Previous OSPAR status assessment	Evidence of Status
Region	I	NA	NA	←→[2]	←→[1]	↓[235]	•	Poor ↓[1]
	II							NA
	III							NA
	IV							NA
	V							NA

Assessment of key pressures		Pollution	Food limitations	Climate change	Predation	Threat or impact
Region	I	←→[3]	?	←→[1]	↑[5]	←→[3]
	II					NA
	III					NA
	IV					NA
	V					NA

⊞ Table Legend

⊞ Method of Assessment

Confidence

High confidence in the status assessment because of the quantitative data used, across the entire fuscus distribution. Confidence in OSPAR region I is slightly lower due to small sample size (two monitored colonies).

Lower confidence in threat assessment because the understanding of singular as well as interactive effects of climate change, environmental pollution, competition with intermedius and the Herring gull, predation, fishing, and other threats remains poor.

Background Information

Year added to OSPAR list: 2003 (OSPAR 2003)

The original evaluation of the Lesser black-backed gull *Larus fuscus fuscus* against the Texel-Faial criteria referred to decline, rarity and sensitivity, with information also provided on threat.

Global/regional importance: The entire breeding population of the *fuscus* subspecies was at the last assessment (2009) estimated to be 18 –19 000 pairs, whereof approximately 2500 pairs bred along the Norwegian and Russian coastlines within OSPAR Region I Arctic waters. The rest of the population breeds around the Northern Baltic Sea in Sweden, Finland, Russia and Estonia. The *fuscus* subspecies leave the OSPAR area after breeding and spend the winter in the Middle East, eastern Mediterranean and northeast Africa, and occasionally northwest Africa.

Decline: The *fuscus* subspecies was considered to be strongly declining already in 2002, with a then crucial decline estimated to 90% since 1970 (ICES 2002). There were also reports of disappearance from the Murman coast of Russia.

Sensitivity: The *fuscus* subspecies was originally listed as sensitive due to the small breeding population being restricted to a few breeding sites. It was considered especially sensitive to oil pollution, predation and disturbances.

Anthropogenic pressures and biological factors: The likely principal threats to the fuscus subspecies were changes in the abundance of prey species, pollution such as PCBs, and competition with and predation by the Herring Gull *Larus argentatus.*

Last status assessment: 2009. OSPAR (2009) concluded that the subspecies continued to qualify under the OSPAR criteria due to its strong population decline, current small population size, and the limited number of breeding localities, uncontrolled threats, and inadequate conservation measures. This concern has been corroborated by the current assessment.

Geographical Range and Distribution

The Lesser black-backed gull has a complicated taxonomy with five subspecies. The subspecies *fuscus* breeds in the White Sea and at a few breeding sites in northern Norway, along the Baltic coasts of Sweden, Finland, and Estonia, including inland lakes in Finland and Russian Karelia.

The geographical breeding range is declining outside the OSPAR area; within the OSPAR area this is presently not known.

Outside the breeding area the subspecies is challenging to monitor as it is a long-distance migrant wintering primarily in the lakes in and around the East African Rift (Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia), but also the southeastern part of the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea.

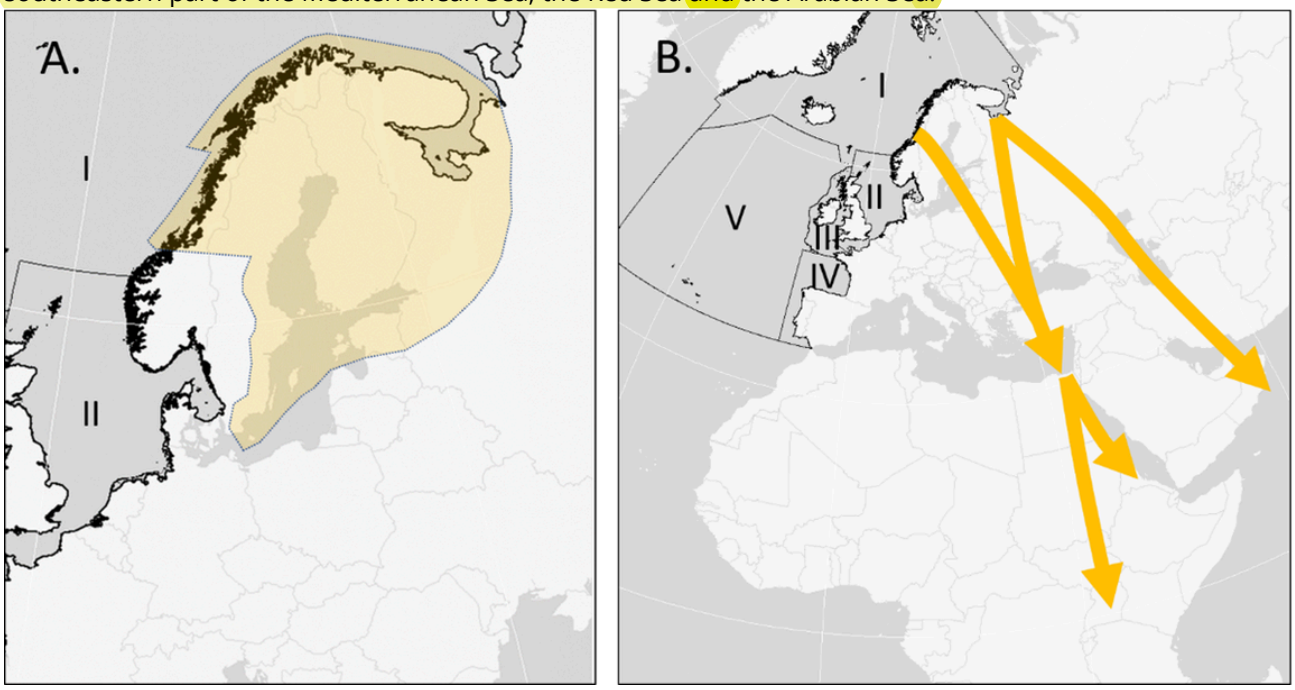

Figure 1. A. Breeding distribution and B. main migratory flyways (lines) and wintering areas (end arrows) of the Lesser black-backed gull Larus fuscus fuscus. OSPAR regions I-V are denoted by Roman numerals.

Method of assessment: 2b,3b – Source: monitoring programs in Russia and Norway, but also national surveys and monitoring programs in Finland, Sweden, Estonia, as well as data for Denmark.

Population/Abundance

Trends in the number of breeding pairs (**Figure 2**) demonstrate a stable trend in the Lesser black-backed gull *Larus fuscus fuscus* in OSPAR region I since the last assessment. The seeming population drop in the Baltic Sea 1996-2000 and subsequent recovery 2000-2004 is driven by uncertainty in the Swedish surveys between 1996-2004. The trend is in reality most likely flatter during the first half of the study period (1990-2005). Whereas the trends are robust, the actual estimates are more uncertain (**Figure 2** and **Table 1**). The number of breeding pairs in the Baltic Sea is considerably higher than in OSPAR region I.

Method of assessment: 3a – Source: national surveys and monitoring programs in Finland, Sweden, Estonia, Russia and Norway

Table 1. Predicted number of breeding pairs and relative abundance (a proportion of the baseline in 1990 set at 1,0) of Lesser black-backed gull Larus fuscus fuscus

	2008		**2020**	
OSPAR Region	**No. pairs**	**Relative abundance**	**No. pairs**	**Relative abundance**
I	2 400	2,6	2 400	2,6
Baltic Sea	9 000	0,55	7 500	0,47

	2008		2020	
OSPAR Region	**No. pairs**	**Relative abundance**	**No. pairs**	**Relative abundance**
Total	11 400	0,66	9 900	0,58

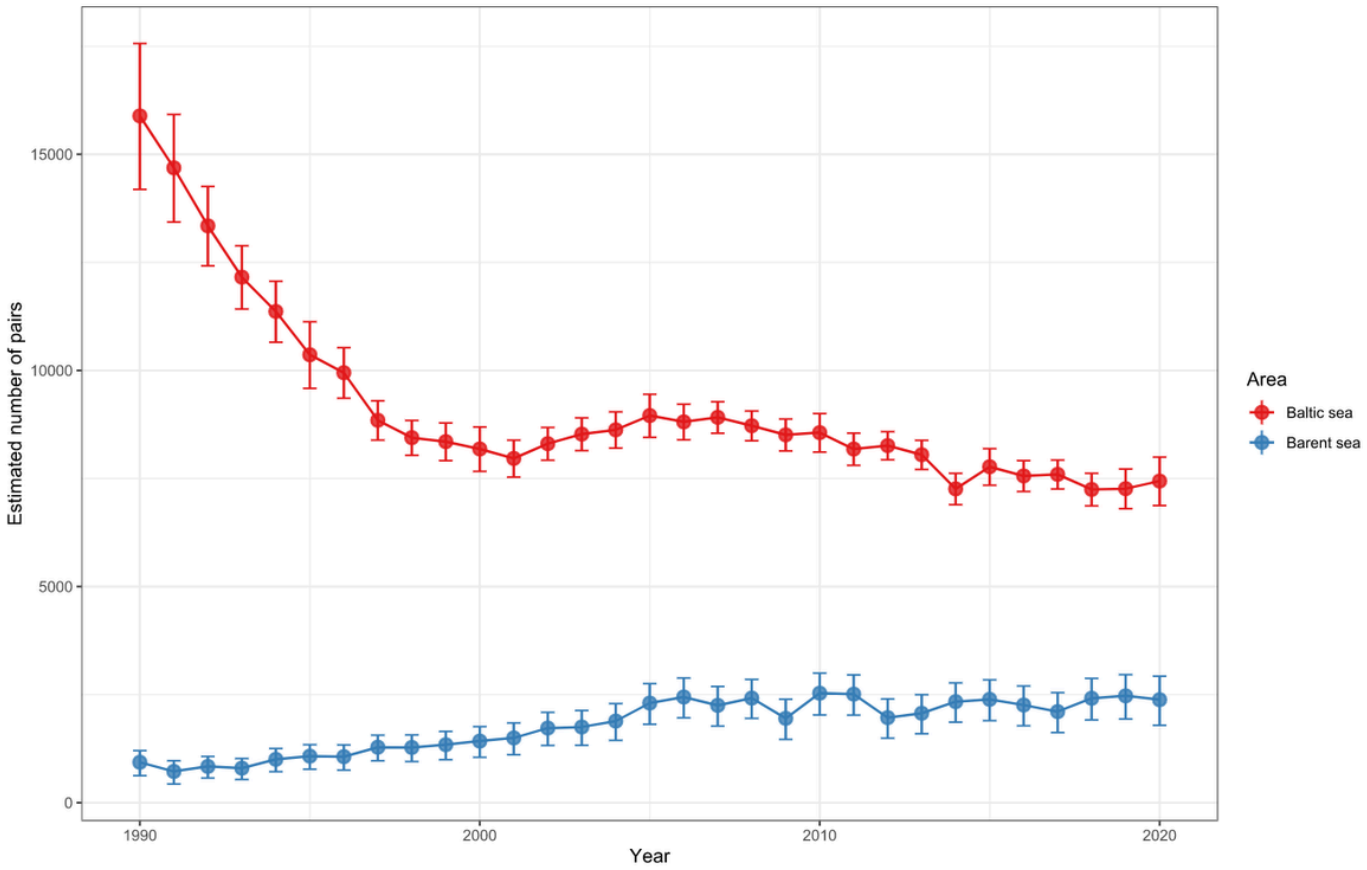

Figure 2. Trends in the number of breeding pairs of the Lesser black-backed gull Larus fuscus fuscus during the period 1990-2020.

Condition

Overall, breeding success in the Lesser black-backed gull *Larus fuscus fuscus* is exceptionally low, in OSPAR region I as well as in the Baltic, although it varies strongly between colonies and among years. Breeding success is in general too low to maintain a stable population size, although data from the last 20 years indicate that the population in OSPAR region I might on average just reach the minimum 0,45 chicks per breeding pair per year required to maintain a stable population size (Hario & Nuutinen 2011), given adequate adult survival rates.

Method of assessment: 2b – Source: current literature, expert judgements, and indirect data.

Threats and Impacts

Threats appear to be continuing or increasing in OSPAR region I. Climate change and environmental pollution remain serious threats. The threat from predators in the breeding colonies appear to increase. The Lesser black-backed gull *Larus fuscus fuscus* is potentially still suffering from changes in prey abundance and composition. There is also competition from the larger subspecies *intermedius* and the Herring gull *Larus*

argentatus. Other local threats are culling around fur farms and misidentification during hunting (among immatures, *fuscus* are mistaken for Herring gulls). The general population decline across the entire distribution suggests that the decline might be the result of several anthropogenic stressors and increased predation pressure.

Measures that address key pressures from human activities or conserve the species/habitat

Russia and Norway have introduced national legislation, as well as the HELCOM countries Denmark, Estonia, Finland and Sweden. The subspecies is on the national Red list in all the above-mentioned countries except Norway which is not recognizing subspecies. Russia and Norway, in addition to the mentioned HELCOM countries, have taken measures to protect at least some of the key areas. Similarly, there are some MPAs, although none provide the highest level of protection. Russia and Norway have monitoring programmes in place, and Norway have undertaken some awareness raising activities. In addition, Norway has an ongoing bycatch monitoring project and have implemented actions from the Nordic Action Plan for Seabirds.

The Lesser black-backed gull *Larus fuscus fuscus* is a long-distance migrant and there are currently a few monitoring and conservation efforts on the wintering grounds, although yet none along the migratory trajectory.

Conclusion (including management considerations)

The present status assessment confirms the vulnerable status by a small population size, but demonstrates no trend in the population size of the Lesser black-backed gull *Larus fuscus fuscus* in OSPAR region I since the last assessment. In the Baltic, there is a decided decline in numbers. The majority of the population is however located in the Baltic Sea. Outside the OSPAR area, the breeding range is likely in the process of shifting slightly northwards.

Threats are continuing or increasing in OSPAR region I. Climate change and environmental pollution remain serious threats, while the threat from increased predation on eggs and offspring seem to increase. Studies from the Baltic indicate that chick mortality due to organochlorine pollution has abated somewhat. Apart from the stable population development in OSPAR region I, the population decline of the Lesser black-backed gull *Larus fuscus fuscus* across almost its entire range is consistent with the general seabird declines. This suggests that the decline cannot be attributed to single causes but might be a result of a combination of several anthropogenic stressors, pathogens, predation, competition and food limitation.

The Lesser black-backed gull *Larus fuscus fuscus*, is therefore still justified for inclusion in the OSPAR List of Declining Species.

There are still no specific conservation measures targeted at protecting the *fuscus* subspecies and the threats remain uncontrolled.

Knowledge Gaps

The assessment was based on counts of nests or individuals during the breeding season at two monitored breeding colonies within OSPAR region I. Our understanding of the population development would benefit from inclusion of breeding success, and juvenile and adult survival into the present monitoring programs, and from monitoring also at the wintering grounds outside the OSPAR area.

The assessment of threats suffers from a lack of understanding of the joint impact of the stressors potentially responsible for the continuation of the population decline.

Method used

Main source of information:

3. Assessment derived from a mix of OSPAR data assessment and assessments from third parties

Assessment is based upon:

a) complete survey or a statistically robust estimate: this status assessment was greatly improved compared to the background document (OSPAR 2009), by the inclusion of survey data from the national monitoring programs in Finland, Sweden, Estonia, Russia and Norway, as well as data for Denmark.

⊞ References

Sheet reference:

BDC2020/Lesser_black-backed_gull, Larus fuscus fuscus