A pair of Spiny Seahorses. Picture copyright Neil Garrick-Maidment. 2020

Seahorses of Poole Harbour

By Neil Garrick-Maidment FBNA

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Introduction

Of the 45 to 65 species of seahorse in the world, two species are resident in the UK and recognised as native species, the Spiny (*Hippocampus guttulatus*) and the Short Snouted (*Hippocampus hippocampus*).

Both are very different in their ecological niche requirements and behaviour; this difference allows them to live in close proximity to each other and yet not compete for the same resources and to a lesser degree habitat.

After studying both species for a number of years and proving they were indeed native to the UK, we submitted both for inclusion under the Wildlife and Countryside Act in 2002, using data and information gathered from the British Seahorse Survey BSS (now World Seahorse Survey WSS).

Acceptance as a British species and legal protection was granted on the 6th of April 2008, giving them full protection under schedule 5, section 9; one of the highest protections they can receive here in England.

The protection and long-term study of seahorses here in the United Kingdom, mainly by The Seahorse Trust, has led to a number of areas being protected as Marine Protected Areas (MPA's) in favour of the seahorses, especially Studland Bay in Dorset, which was granted Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ) status in 2019, after 11 years of campaigning by the trust.

Studland Bay is one of the most important sites for the breeding of Spiny Seahorses in the UK, if not Europe but it is not the only site that has them in residence and breeding at certain times of the year.

Poole Bay, Southampton Waters, the Isle of Wight, Torbay and especially Poole Harbour, amongst many others around the country are also known for its population of seahorses of both species, however the major difference is they are present all year around in Poole Harbour but migrate to deeper, safer water in Studland Bay, and the other areas during the winter. This is a way of avoiding the severe winter storms in exposed areas, especially from the east and north east.

Poole Harbour is a busy port, however one with a wide variety of habitats in it and varying depths of water. It also has areas that are not accessible, easily, to humans, giving safe haven to so many species, especially seahorses. There is also an abundance of food items for seahorses which is directly related to the variety of habitats, shallow water, creating warmer waters at various times of the year and a complex and diverse species mix in the harbour.

This report is set out as an initial look at seahorses in Poole Harbour and is not meant as a full and complete picture of the species and their requirements. Long term study in the harbour is required to allow us to understand these complex species and their interaction with their environment.

British Seahorse Survey

Seahorses have been surrounded by myth and legend for centuries and as a result of this, they have attained an almost mystical presence, wherever they are thought to exist. These areas are usually thought to be the hotter tropical regions of the planet, and so it comes as a surprise to many, that the British Isles are indeed home to two species of Seahorse and they have a wide and varied distribution throughout the entire United Kingdom and Ireland.

The British Seahorse Survey was set up in 1994 because of an original sighting by underwater videographer Sue Daly in Jersey, and it has been running for28 years now. Having progressed from a paper exercise, to an active surveying project working with the diving and fishing industries, and with the help of the general public. It is the longest running continuous survey of its kind in the world with well over 2000 sightings in the UK to date. This continuity has been invaluable in understanding the nature and ecology of the Seahorses found around the British Isles and beyond.

The survey is now part of the World Seahorse Survey administered by The Seahorse Trust, with well over 3,500 sightings recorded on its database. Sightings and access to the database (password protected access only) is through the trusts website online portal, kindly funded by the Sealife group of aquariums.

All Seahorse species are listed under CITES, and protected by the BERN Convention, OSPAR and now here in the UK, for the two native species, the Wildlife and Countryside Act (2008, as amended) which was a direct result of the application by and the work of the British Seahorse Survey administered by The Seahorse Trust.

Since the start of the survey, we are now beginning to understand a great deal more about these elusive creatures and their behaviour. It is now understood what happens to them in the winter, where they are breeding, and how we can have 2 species, and what their own unique traits are that help them to blend in, and live, so perfectly in harmony with their environment.

The survey is a good balance of science and community based voluntary help. We receive information from a wide range of sources from divers, fishermen or even walkers on the beach. Everyone can and does make a valuable contribution, in fact without these people giving up their time and getting in touch with us we would not know so much about British Seahorses.

Here in the UK, adding the Seahorses to the Wildlife and Countryside Act has been a positive move forward, but this protection needs to be fully implemented and at the time of writing this report this is not being done to the degree that is needed to ensure the future of the species here in the UK.

British Seahorse species

Spiny Seahorse (*Hippocampus guttulatus)*

Common names: Spiny Seahorse, (occasionally but wrongly known in the UK, as the Long Snouted Seahorse)

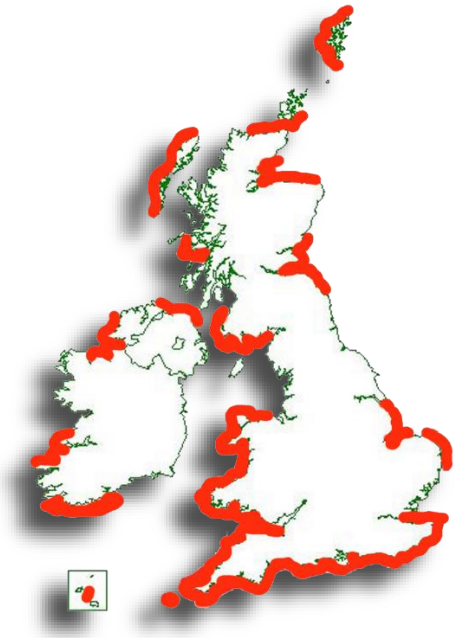
Distribution: Southern Norfolk, Essex, South Eastern England, along the south coast up around parts of Wales, up the West coast of Scotland to the Shetland Isles and around the all the coasts of Ireland.

There have also been sightings in the Firth of Forth and there is a suggestion they are found all down the east coast of England in suitable habitat.

Habitat Out of both British Seahorses, the Spiny should really be called the Seagrass Seahorse due to its dependency on seagrass meadows in the warmer months of its yearly life cycle. Although not exclusive to seagrass, it can be found in other weedy areas.

Description: A big, bony looking seahorse, approximately 17 to 18cm from the top of the coronet to the end of the tail. The largest specimen ever found was found off Poole Harbour in Dorset by a local fisherman and measured 34 cm from the top of the coronet to the end of the tail.

Often, although not exclusively covered in long spines on the top of the head and down the back which reduce with age and are absent in some individuals.



Picture by Neil Garrick-Maidment

Short Snouted Seahorse (*Hippocampus hippocampus*)

Common names: Short Snouted Seahorse

Distribution: Essex, Kent and along the south coast of England. All around the Channel Islands, around parts of Wales, Ireland and Scotland with reports during 2006 in the North Sea, off Dogger Bank.

There have also been a number of records up the River Thames, and other estuaries.

Habitat The Short Snouted Seahorse is highly versatile in its habitat preferences, and occupies a wide range of habitats from sand and silt, to rocky areas, with or without algae. They are the seahorse species here in the UK, most likely to occupy marinas and have a limited tolerance for freshwater which allows them to enter it for short periods of time.

Description: A stocky, barrel chested, solid looking Seahorse 15 to 17 cm from the top of the coronet to the end of the tail. Unlike the Spiny Seahorse around the United Kingdom, the Short Snouted Seahorse seldom has spines on its head and back, although in other parts of Europe they do have them.

Picture by John Newman

It is worth noting both species are found in European waters and even off Scandinavia.

Database

In 1994 we set up the British Seahorse Survey and database to gather as much information as we could possibly get on seahorses in the past and up to date sightings, with the earliest confirmed record on the database from 1821 and contemporary records coming in almost weekly.

At the time, the seahorse sightings here in the UK were considered to be accidental discoveries of animals blown off course or that had rafted here. They were never considered to be a native species, however work by The Seahorse Trust has not only proven they are native and breeding here, but as a direct result of the database and surveys they are now legally recognised as an indigenous species.

Thanks to a grant from the Sealife group of aquariums, the database is also online through the World Seahorse Survey portal on our website at https://www.theseahorsetrust.org/conservation/world-seahorse-survey-2/

The database is held online but is also in paper and electronic form and backed up on a second hard drive to ensure nothing is lost, should a computer malfunction or the paper copies are lost.

Information gathered for the data include, location, species, depth, sea temperature, size, sex and species of the seahorses, moon phase, behaviour, habitat found in and personal details of the recorder in case a sighting needs following up and extra information is needed.
By gathering such a wide range of information, it allows us to be more accurate with species, sex and behaviour but alongside this we can also extract information to allow us to understand about migration, behaviour and habitat preference etc.

Alongside the database we have also gathered historic and archaeological information about seahorses here in the UK, such as Pictish carvings and gold jewellery from the Sutton Hoo burial finds. By analysing these unique insights into the past, we know seahorses have been here at least 2,000 years and more likely many thousands of years before that.

Poole Harbour

Poole Harbour is unique in its large size and narrow entrance. It is relatively shallow but there are deeper channels throughout and on the west and south side of the harbour mud flats and very sheltered shallow areas.

The harbour is extremely shallow (average depth 48 cm [19 in]), with one main dredged channel through the harbour, from the mouth to Holes Bay. Poole Harbour has an area of approximately 36 km^2 (14 sq mi).

The harbour also has a number of islands in it, creating rocky and algae covered habitats, which can be good for Short Snouted Seahorses.
There are a number of seagrass beds within the harbour, with a large bed near to the Sandbanks area. Seagrass is a good habitat for Spiny seahorses but because of the mixed habitats in Poole Harbour, they are found as much in seagrass as they are in other habitats.

Poole Harbour is a safe haven for boats and that is why there is a large boating community there, especially on the north side of the harbour where the main quaysides and boating companies are.

Brownsea Island sits almost in the entrance way of the Harbour and this acts as a protection against strong easterly winds and waves going further into the harbour. This protection has meant that Poole Harbour has been used since neolithic times and the Romans used it as an important trading post when they were conquering Britain and launched their west and northward takeover of Britain from here, especially as it connected to a major road network as well.

The very reasons it is a safe haven for boats also make it a safe haven for marine life, both of which benefit from the protection of the narrow entranceway to the harbour and the sand dunes and long beach of Studland Bay, that protect the harbour from strong storms from the east, west and south.
These features and the shallow topography of the harbour create all year around habitats especially for seahorses, that when living in exposed coastlines migrate to deeper water in the winter, to avoid the storms, that would otherwise kill them and/or wash them up on the beach, to be eaten or die.

Seahorse Sightings within Poole Harbour are important to the overall knowledge of seahorses as a species in the wild, and we have, over the years acquired quite a number of sightings from a variety of sources of both dead and alive animals. These sightings have come from fishermen, walkers and divers and they have allowed us to build a picture of seahorses and their distribution within the harbour.

We have found both species of British seahorse, the Spiny (*Hippocampus guttulatus*) and the Short Snouted (*Hippocampus hippocampus*), with the Spiny appearing to be found more often. This could be misleading though; the cryptic nature of both species makes it likely they are found in even numbers throughout a wide variety of habitats; from seagrass through to sand and silt. Seahorses are often thought to just dwell just in seagrass but this is not correct for the Short Snouted Seahorses which are found in a wide variety of habitats.

Poole Harbour has a diverse range of habitats and is a very rich, complex environment for a wide variety of species and it is this amazing diversity that allows it to have both species of seahorse. Only by having a diverse range of food items and habitat can the different needs of both species be catered for within the harbour.

We have a rough idea of the distribution of the seahorses in the harbour based on the current reports and sightings, but we have to assume that this is much wider than is being shown at the moment due to lack of human access. Most sightings come from fishermen and walkers around the edge of the harbour, particularly on the northern and north eastern side and this highlights areas where these types of activity take place.
We also have sightings on the south side of the harbour but these are less in number than that north.
However, there are areas within the harbour where human activities do not take place and these areas are lacking in information, sightings and data and will need to be explored over time.
The lack of seahorse sightings in these areas does not mean there are not seahorses there, just a lack of observations.

Notable sightings

Seahorses are observed all year around in Poole Harbour, as opposed to exposed coastlines like Studland Bay and other open areas. This helps to back up the evidence, based on the data gathered that seahorses migrate in exposed areas and because it uses a lot of energy don't migrate in protected areas; Torbay is another example of having seahorses in parts of it all year around, although even in this relatively sheltered area seahorses move out of the shallows and down into deeper water.

Only time and a continuation of sightings being reported into the British Seahorse Survey will give a complete overview season by season of what is happening with the seahorses within the harbour confines.

There are two notable sightings sent into us at the British Seahorse Survey (administered by The Seahorse Trust) and these give an insight into what can happen to the seahorses and importantly about one of the many species that can predate on them, seagulls.

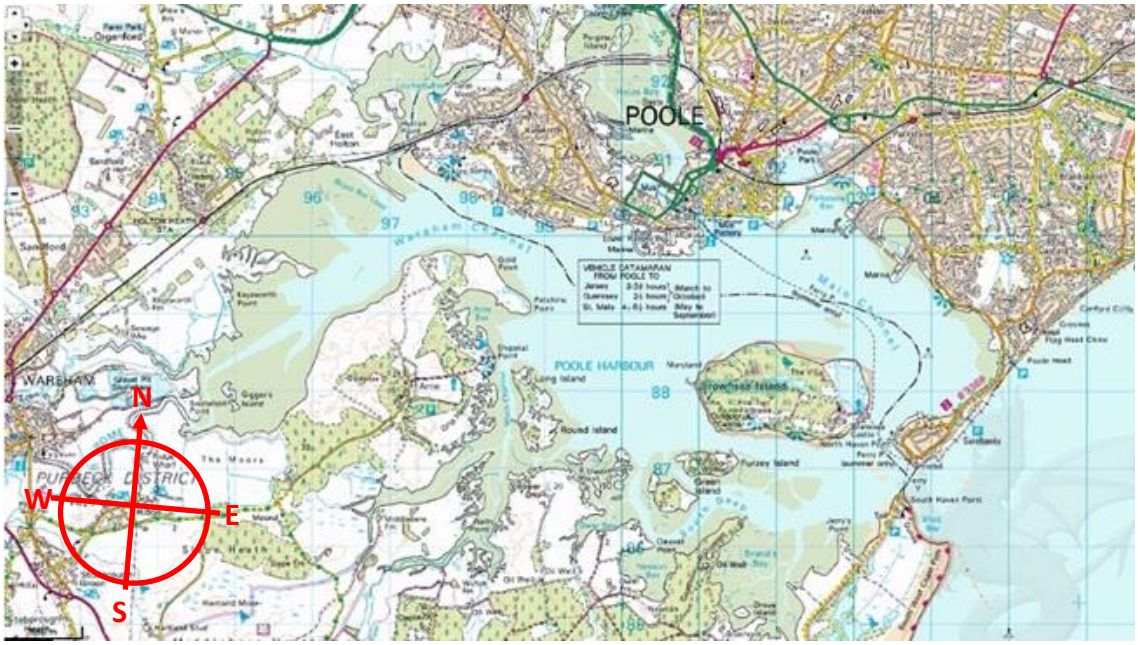
Over the years we have had a number of observations of people watching seagulls drop seahorses from the sky to 'crack' them open to eat them. This is a common way for seagulls to open mussels and other types of shellfish so they can access the flesh inside

and it appears they also do this to seahorses, maybe mistaking their hard bodies for shellfish.
The people making this observation say that they watch the seagulls grab the seahorses from the water (usually very shallow) and they then fly up into the sky and drop them onto a hard surface or rock to try and crack them open like mussels. We have recovered many of these seahorses and they have never been broken open but sadly they are usually dead because of the impact of the fall.

The second but related observation is seahorses that have been dropped inland quite often within the town by seagulls. A few times now we have had calls from someone who has found a seahorse in their garden or back yard and on a couple of occasions (once in Poole and once in another seaside town), schools reporting them after they have been dropped in the playground, again because they were probably trying to crack them open.

Without a doubt seagulls have very good eyesight when it comes to finding prey but to find a highly camouflaged species like a seahorse takes this skill to another level. However it must be more frequent than we think because we do have several records on the database of seagulls that were being handled by bird ringers regurgitating seahorses into the boats where they were being ringed; not just one or two animals but on one occasion up to 50 of them.

Map of Poole Harbour



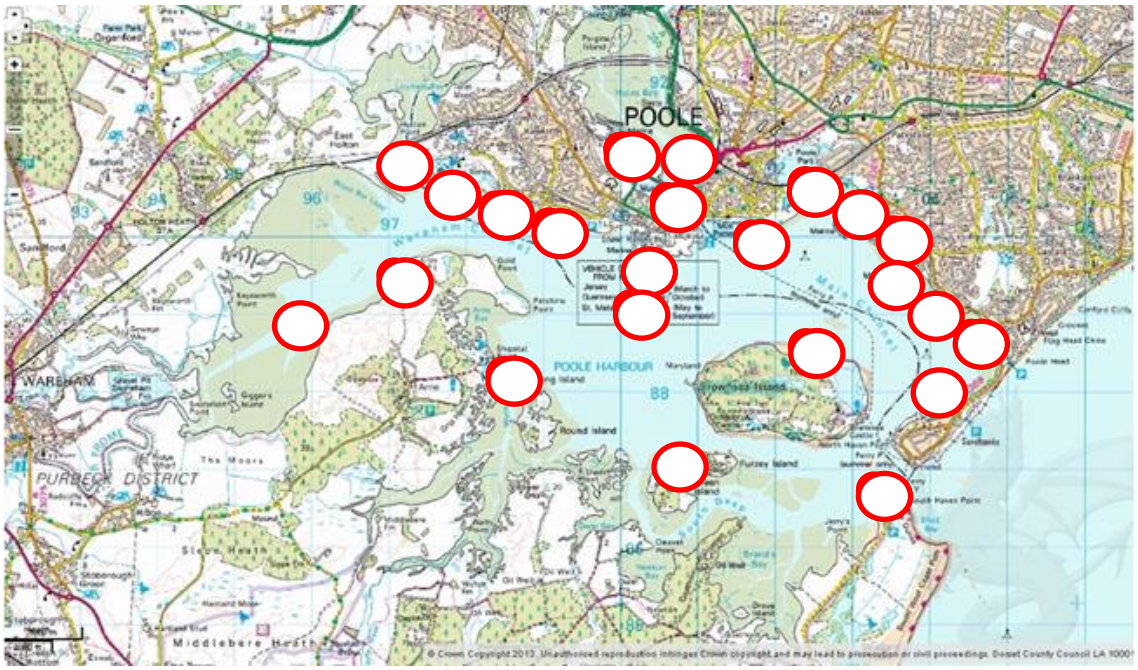
Map 1: Poole Harbour, copyright Google Maps

Distribution

Seahorses are found throughout the harbour, all year around, however most of our sightings come from areas more frequented by humans and so this can give a false impression of what is happening within the harbour.
Some areas are sheltered from human activity because they cannot, or do not go into these areas, mainly because of access or it is a mudflat or private property.

Map 2 shows where most of the sightings have occurred but because of the relatively shallow nature of the harbour they would have a much wider distribution throughout than the data shows.

Please note exact location not given for bio security reasons but dots are within 700 metres of actual sighting.



Map 2: Red dots show approximate rough location of seahorses, many showing multiple sightings in close proximity. copyright Google Maps

Breeding seahorses in Poole Harbour

Although we have had one or two pregnant seahorses found within the Poole Harbour area, there is not the sort of numbers of pregnant animals expected or compared with the nearby site of Studland Bay, which is internationally recognised for its breeding colony of Spiny Seahorses.

There is not enough evidence to ascertain why this is, but most likely due to lack of long-term studies within the harbour; more long-term research is needed to look into this

Courtship displays have been recorded within Poole Harbour as recently as 2021 and observations of pregnant male as well.

However, the breeding that does occur could be locally distributed due to the correct habitat and food items for the adults in certain parts of the harbour.

Importantly, any fry bred in the harbour would become distributed throughout the harbour and may be pushed out of the harbour by the strong currents going out through the channel into Poole Bay and into Studland Bay. They would also distribute further afield by floating in the plankton layer and be moved around by the long shore drift which works predominantly from East to West. There are localised currents that go counter to this and circulatory currents bringing the fry back towards the east as the tides create the right conditions, giving in turn, good recruitment into other areas which in turn would add to the genetic diversity of those areas.
There would also be a small number of fry and seahorses going back into Poole Harbour but it is doubtful if this is a site targeted by migrating seahorses as they tend to go into deeper water not just move along the coast.

Pregnant male Short Snouted Seahorse

By Neil Garrick-Maidment

Conclusion

Both native species of seahorse are found within Poole Harbour and they appear to be widely distributed, although their distribution could possibly be wider than is observed at present if and when access is available to other areas.

The habitat within Poole Harbour is under threat from a variety of effects such as pollution, illegal activities such as bait digging and loss of habitat and long-term guidelines and plans need to be put into place to stop the degradation of this site.

However, there is a lot of protection work being undertaken by the National Trust, RSPB and others and so there is good reason to be optimistic for the future of the natural world in the harbour.

The population of seahorses appears to be relatively low in the harbour and it would be expected that more pregnant animals should be seen than there is at present. There is a lack of data but initial observations seem to show that the site should support many more seahorses and especially many more pregnant animals.

Even though seahorses are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, to date little has been done to implement this protection, even though it has the same level as Otters, Bats and Dormice Etc. This lack of enforcement is having and will have long term effects on the national seahorse population, particularly because the areas where they tend to come into conflict with humans are being developed and destroyed at an alarming rate.

We are hopeful this is changing and moves are afoot to make sure Studland Bay, which became a Marine Conservation Zone in 2019, directly due to action taken by us, is being protected and because Poole Harbour is adjacent to the bay it will have positive effects in Poole Harbour.

Thanks to

So many people help the work of The Seahorse Trust and it is with great thanks we acknowledge all their help, even if we cannot name them all in this short report, below are just a few of the outstandiong people and organisations that are making a difference.

Kim Maidment	Paul Lott
John Newman	Dr Eva Durrant
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Dr Ken Collins	National Oceanography Centre, Southampton University
The National Trust	Boatfolk

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Appendix 1

Wildlife and Countryside Act as amended 1981)

http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/PDF/waca1981_schedule5.pdf
http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-3408

The Wildlife and Countryside Act became part of national law in 1981 (as amended) to protect wildlife and habitats (and includes the intentions of the BERN Convention). It took many years for seahorses to be recognised through this legislation, added on the 6th of April 2008 and they have been listed in Schedule 5 section 9.

The Seahorse Trust got them added on the 6th of April 2008 after 6 years of lobbying and submission of data following on from work of their British Seahorse Survey (BSS) and data submitted to the National Seahorse Database (NSD) run and organised by The Seahorse Trust.

There are five sections, made up of 6 parts of the WCA Act and schedule 5, section 9 that are of importance to our native seahorse species and their place of shelter and it clearly states:-

The WCA schedule 5, section 9 states, it is illegal to:

Section 9	
Part 1	intentional killing, injuring, taking
Part 2	possession or control (live or dead animal, part or derivative)
Part 4 (a)	damage to, destruction of, obstruction of access to any structure or place used by a scheduled animal for shelter or protection
Part 4 (b)	disturbance of animal occupying such a structure or place
Part 5 (a)	selling, offering for sale, possessing or transporting for the purpose of sale (live or dead animal, part or derivative)
Part 5 (b)	advertising for buying or selling such things

The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981

The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 consolidates and amends existing national legislation to implement the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern Convention) and Council Directive 79/409/EEC on the conservation of wild birds (Birds Directive) in Great Britain (NB Council Directive 79/409/EEC has now been replaced by Directive 2009/147/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 November 2009 on the conservation of wild birds (codified version)). Equivalent provisions for Northern Ireland are contained within the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 and the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.

The Act received royal assent on 30 October 1981. It is supplemented by the Wildlife and Countryside (Service of Notices) Act 1985, which relates to notices served under the 1981 Act. Various amendments have occurred since the original enactment, some of the most significant being via the

- Wildlife and Countryside (Amendment) Act 1985,
- Wildlife and Countryside (Amendment) Act 1991,
- Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000 (in England and Wales),
- Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2001,
- Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981(England and Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2004,
- Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (Amendment) (Wales) Regulations 2004,
- Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 (in Scotland),

- Equivalent provisions for Northern Ireland are contained within the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 and the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985
- and the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (in England and Wales).

There are also numerous country-specific Orders pertaining to Variation of Schedules of the Act.

In Northern Ireland legislative amendments have taken place through the Wildlife (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002.

The original Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 text is available and an updated version is available on Legislation.gov.uk website.

There is also a statutory five-yearly review of Schedules 5 and 8 (protected wild animals and plants respectively) and period review of Schedule 9 (in relation to non-native species). These reviews are undertaken by the country agencies and coordinated by JNCC. Containing four Parts and 17 Schedules, the Act covers protection of wildlife (birds, and some animals and plants), the countryside, National Parks, and the designation of protected areas, and public rights of way. (Further details on the Schedules>>>)

Wildlife - other animals

The Act makes it an offence (subject to exceptions) to intentionally (or recklessly] - only under the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004) kill, injure or take any wild animal listed on Schedule 5, and prohibits interference with places used for shelter or protection, or intentionally disturbing animals occupying such places. The Act also prohibits certain methods of killing, injuring, or taking wild animals.

Quinquennial Review

Every five years, the statutory nature conservation agencies Natural England, Natural Resources Wales (formally Countryside Council for Wales) and Scottish Natural Heritage, working jointly through the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), are required to review Schedules 5 and 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, and to make recommendations to the Secretary of State and Ministers for the Environment. Schedule 5 lists animals (other than birds) which are specially protected, and Schedule 8 lists plants (vascular plants, bryophytes, lichens and fungi) which are specially protected.

The statutory nature conservation bodies and JNCC prepare recommendations which are sent to the Joint Committee for approval prior to being submitted as JNCC advice to Defra and the Devolved Administrations in Great Britain.

There have been five QQRs and recommendations from the sixth QQR are under review.

5th QQR was submitted by JNCC in 2008. Defra and the Welsh Government responded to these recommendations in 2010.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest and other protected areas

Sections 28 to 33 of Part 2 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act detail the law regarding SSSIs. See Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Sections 34 to 53 deal with other protected areas within Great Britain.

The Act provides for the notification and confirmation of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) – these sites are identified for their flora, fauna, geological or physiographical features – by the country conservation bodies in England (Natural England) and Wales (Natural Resources Wales). (NB In Scotland similar powers are afforded to Scottish Natural Heritage under the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 and in Northern Ireland the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside have powers under the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002) to designate Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs).

A notification must be served on the relevant local planning authority, all land owners and occupiers, and the Secretary of State, specifying the time period within which representations and objections may be made. The country conservation bodies must consider these responses and may withdraw or confirm the notification, with or without amendment. The Act also contains measures for the protection and management of SSSIs.

The Act provides for the making of Limestone Pavement Orders, which prohibit the disturbance and removal of limestone from such designated areas, and the designation of Marine Nature Reserves. The Act prohibits the undertaking of agricultural or forestry operations on land within National Parks which has been either moor or heath for 20 years, without consent from the relevant planning authority. Planning authorities are also required to make available to the public up to date maps of moor and heath land within National Parks, which are important for the conservation of natural beauty.

http://www.ukwildlife.com/index.php/wildlife-countryside-act-1981/schedule-5/section-9-1a/
http://www.ukwildlife.com/index.php/wildlife-countryside-act-1981/schedule-5/

Short Snouted Seahorse *Hippocampus hippocampus* 2008 With respect to England and, since 12/8/2008, Wales

Spiny Seahorse *Hippocampus guttulatus* 2008 With respect to England and, since 12/8/2008, Wales