

Razorbill

Alca torda

Category A

Winter visitor and passage migrant.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds along the eastern Atlantic seaboard from north-west France, western and northern Britain, and Ireland to Iceland, Spitsbergen and Bear Island, eastwards to European Russia, also in Greenland and the east coast of North America south to Maine. Northern populations are mainly migratory but in southern populations adults stay in seas close to colonies, whilst others (especially first-years) make long displacements of a migratory nature.



Razorbill at Princes Parade (Elliot Ranford)

Kent status (KOS 2021):

A passage migrant and winter visitor to Kent that is less frequent in summer.

The Razorbill was included in Knight and Tolputt's "List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood" (1871). This list covered an area of six miles radius from Folkestone town hall, therefore extending further inland than the current Folkestone and Hythe area, so this does not provide conclusive evidence of its occurrence here, however it would have been very likely to have been recorded at the coast and so within the modern boundary.

Ticehurst (1909) referred to a report that "several Razorbills" had been identified amongst the Guillemots that were breeding below the South Foreland lighthouse, east of Dover, and concluded that they were nesting there. Harrison (1953) considered that this "really seems not improbable... but the pity is that the matter was not taken to its proof". Ticehurst considered it to be "a moderately common autumn and winter visitor to the sea-coast of Kent, though it is never as numerous as the Guillemot", noting that "on the south and east coasts the Razorbill is to be found in small flocks a mile or two off-shore all the winter through".

Most early records relate to oiled birds that have been found dead or stranded, although live birds were noted off Sandgate on the 9th April 1972 and off Copt Point on the 16th April 1978. In December 1968, 4 oiled birds were found at Folkestone whilst in the first week of January 1970 a total of 73 oiled birds were found at Folkestone. One that was found dead at Hythe on the 25th February 1978 had been ringed as a nestling at Shiant Island in the Outer Hebrides on the 28th June of the previous year.



Razorbill at Folkestone Pier (Ian Roberts)



Razorbill at Folkestone Pier (Don Rooney)

The Kent Bird Report for 1983 described "a huge wreck of auks" that "took place along the whole of the east coast of Britain, marked in Kent by appearance of about 2,500 dead or stranded birds, mostly not oiled", driven south by a "spell of strong north-westerly and northerly winds". As part of this a total of 18 Razorbills were found at Folkestone.

It has been recorded annually since regular seawatching commenced in the late 1980s. Taylor *et al.* (1981) considered it practical to discuss both the Guillemot and Razorbill together as “such a high proportion of the larger auks remain unidentified”, and locally a number of movements have been recorded as “Guillemot/Razorbill”. Taylor *et al* stated that “at Dungeness peak day-totals rarely exceed 40” and gave a maximum count there of 71 (in May 1975), with one larger count from north Kent of 315 (in November 1969). A considerable change in status has since occurred as four-figure counts have now occurred locally on several occasions.

Overall distribution

Figure 1 shows the distribution of all records of Razorbill by tetrad, with records in 13 tetrads (42%).



Figure 1: Distribution of all Razorbill records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

It is only noted in small numbers in the summer months, with no double figure counts noted between late May and the end of September.



Razorbill at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)



Razorbill at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)

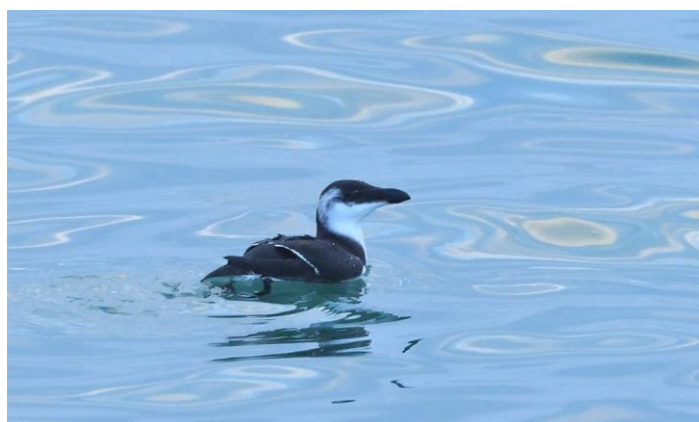
Numbers can increase rapidly during October, with double-figure counts possible from the first week of the month, totals in excess of 50 from mid-month and three-figure movements from late October, although all three figure-counts between October and December have involved unidentified “Guillemot/Razorbill”. The largest counts of confirmed Razorbills during this period have involved 50 on/west off Folkestone Pier on the 10th December 2020, 60 west past the Willop Outfall on the 11th December 2020 and 65 on/east off Copt Point on the 24th December 2000, but totals of 405 (390 west, 15 east) Guillemot/Razorbill flew past Folkestone Beach on the 9th November 2012 and 709 Guillemot/Razorbill west past Samphire Hoe on the 12th December 2020.

Peak numbers tend to occur in January or February, when four-figure counts (of Razorbill or “Guillemot/Razorbill”) have been logged on a number of occasions. With the most of the large movements in January and February, totals have been assigned to either species based on the proportion that could be identified:

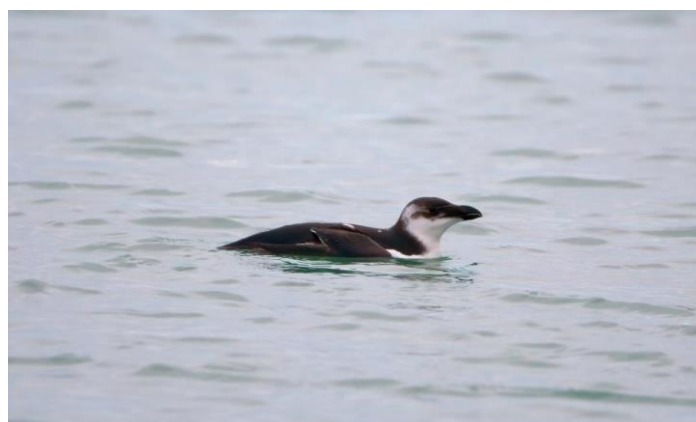
1,200 Razorbills west past Copt Point on the 29th January 2000
1,000 Razorbills east past Copt Point on the 29th January 2003
1,000 Razorbills east past Copt Point on the 30th January 2003
3,000 Razorbills east past Samphire Hoe on the 10th January 2013
4,500 Razorbills on/east past Samphire Hoe on the 11th January 2013
1,275 Razorbills east past Samphire Hoe on the 12th January 2013
3,200 Razorbills east past Samphire Hoe on the 24th January 2013
2,300 Razorbills east past Samphire Hoe on the 3rd February 2013
2,000 Razorbills west past Samphire Hoe on the 27th January 2018
2,545 “mostly Razorbills” west past Samphire Hoe on the 22nd January 2021
5,000 Razorbills west past the Willop Outfall on the 24th January 2021

The largest ever movement on the 24th January 2021 involved 10,000 auks, around 50% of which were thought to be Razorbills.

A small spring passage is observed in April and May, with peak counts of 40 Guillemot/Razorbill east past Samphire Hoe on the 8th April 2021, 43 Guillemot/Razorbill east past Samphire Hoe on the 7th May 2017 and 64 Guillemot/Razorbill east past Copt Point on the 22nd April 2001.



Razorbill at Hythe (Glenn Tutton)



Razorbill at Princes Parade (Elliot Ranford)

References

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Acknowledgements

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Razorbills at Samphire Hoe (Ian Roberts)



Razorbill at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)