

Great White Pelican

Pelecanus onocrotalus Category D

Very rare vagrant or escapee. 3 records,
3 birds

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

In Europe breeding is confined to the Danube Delta in Romania and Ukraine, which holds around half of the entire Palearctic population. Small numbers breed in Greece and Turkey, in the Volga Delta and throughout central Asia. Northern breeders are migratory, with European population wintering south to eastern Africa. Asian populations winter in the Indus Delta, Pakistan and locally in north-west India. Other largely sedentary populations breed locally in eastern and southern Africa.

Kent status (KOS 2022):

Very rare vagrant or escapee.

British (BBRC) records to end 2020: 0

Kent (KOS) records to end 2020: 0

In Britain all records are currently held in category D as “species that would otherwise appear in Category A except that there is reasonable doubt that they have ever occurred in a natural state”.

The first report of a Great White Pelican in Britain dates from 1663, when one was shot in Norfolk, but this was “supposed to be one of the King’s birds which had flown away from St. James’ Park”. A further 14 reports (including three in Kent) from prior to the formation of the British Birds Rarities Committee (BBRC) in 1958 were also deemed to be unacceptable for admission to the national list, usually on the grounds of being known or suspected escapees (Naylor 2021).

Since 1958, there have been 18 reports in Britain that have been considered by the BBRC. 14 of these occurred between 1971 and 1977 and involved adults (where the age was provided), with three seen together in Norfolk and Surrey in 1971 and two seen together in Surrey and at Dungeness in 1972, with subsequent sightings involving single birds. Several of these were thought to have wandered widely over a prolonged period of time and may have accounted for numerous records.

In Kent two that were at Dungeness from the 11th to 12th November 1972 were presumed to have been the same seen in Surrey on the 10th November, whilst one seen at Fordwich between the 8th and 11th July 1975 was presumed to have previously been noted in Essex on the 6th July and was later seen in Humberside and Warwickshire in July, and possibly in Dorset in September. A further sighting near Appledore on the 18th September 1977 was the last of this sequence of records.

There were no further sightings until singles were seen in Glamorgan in September 1989 and Herefordshire/Radnorshire in October 2001, although a number of records may have been presumed (or known) to be escapes and not passed to the committee for review, including two local sightings: one that had been seen at Rye in East Sussex on the 29th January 1996 was seen flying north-west over Folkestone the next day. It was then relocated at Nickolls Quarry, where it was still present the following morning before it flew off (Norman 2007) and was later seen heading east over Cheriton. What was presumably to be the same bird was then seen at Felixstowe in Suffolk in early February. A second bird was reported at Hythe on the 10th October 1998.

A bird initially seen in the Netherlands in May 2006, and which later crossed the North Sea to Britain, generated some interest in this country following its acceptance as a wild bird by the Dutch rarities committee (CDNA). Having first been seen in the Netherlands in May, it was later seen in Germany in early July, before returning to the Netherlands from late July into August. It arrived in Britain on the 16th August, when it was tracked along the coast from north Norfolk to Lincolnshire. It then wandered widely, ranging as far north as Moray and as far west as Anglesey, before finally being taken into care in Northumberland in October. It was however only considered to be admissible to category D of the British List (Hudson *et al.* 2008).

A second bird was also noted in Britain in 2006, being initially noted at Bough Beech reservoir in Kent between the 30th July and 4th September, before moving via Essex and Yorkshire north to Angus (where it was last seen on the 15th September), whilst a third was reported flying over Park Farm in Folkestone on the 9th November.

The records by year are shown in figure 1.

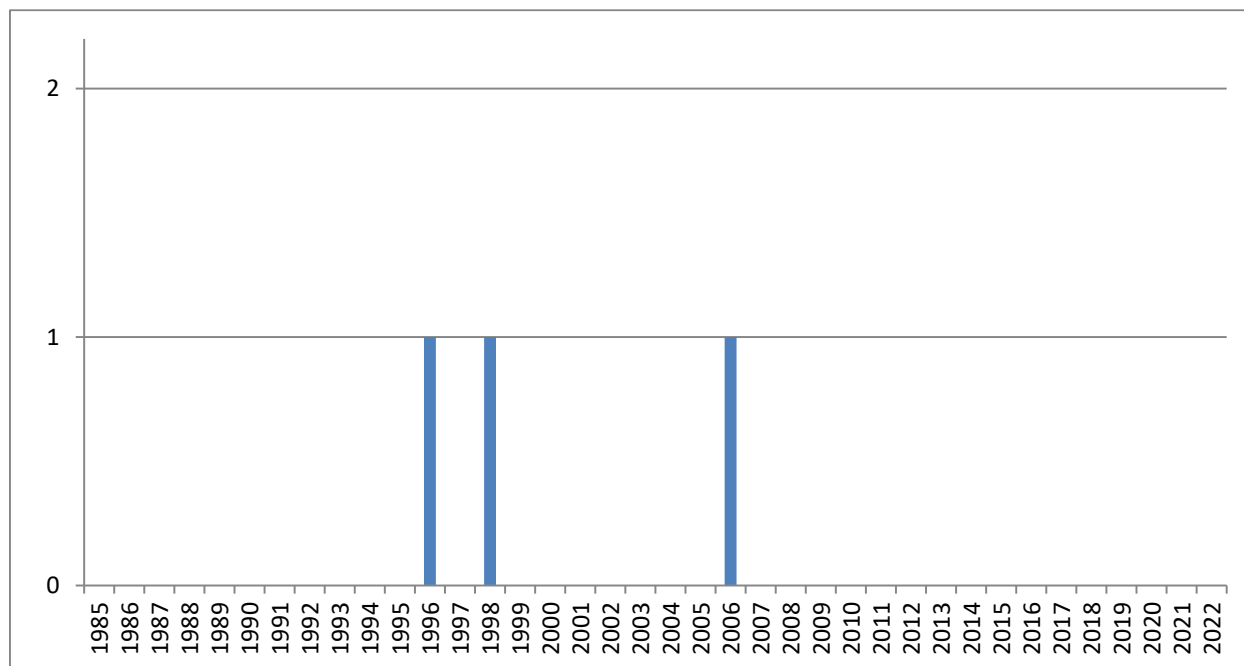


Figure 1: Great White Pelican records at Folkestone and Hythe

The records by week are given in figure 2.

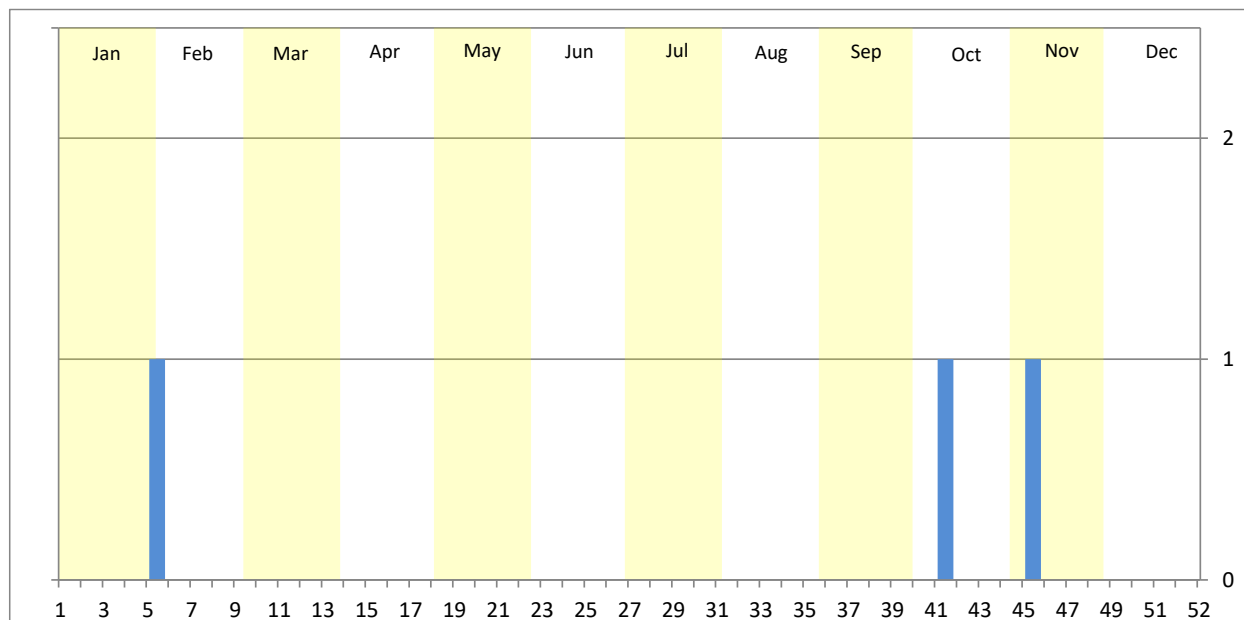


Figure 2: Great White Pelican records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

In 2008 Jiguet *et al.* published a paper that provided support for vagrancy within Europe. They stated that annual out-of-range numbers could be predicted by breeding colony size and breeding success in Greece, with a further effect of Sahel rainfall during the previous year. In northern and western Europe the occurrence of wild birds were to be expected in April to May (the dispersion of adult-type non-breeders in spring), and to a lesser extent in August to September (failed breeders in summer). Records from a number of countries, including France, matched this pattern.

This led Hudson *et al.* to state that “in future it would be useful to receive documented claims of this species in Britain to enable consideration of origins by BOURC, especially given the recent support for vagrancy within Europe”, however there have been no reports since, although a Dalmatian Pelican present in Cornwall in Devon from the 7th May to 20th November 2016 was accepted as a genuine vagrant and the first British record since pre-historical times. It had first been seen in Poland in early April 2016, where it was considered to be a wild bird, before being noted at various sites in Germany later in April and in eastern France on the 3rd May (McInerney 2019). The wide-ranging and prolonged occurrence in western Europe was not dissimilar to the British 2006 occurrences of Great White Pelican.

Figure 3 shows the location of records by tetrad.



Figure 3: Distribution of all Great White Pelican records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The full list of records is as follows:

1996 Cheriton, Folkestone and Nickolls Quarry, 30th to 31st January, (D. A. Gibson, R. K. Norman)

1998 Hythe, one, 10th October (per Kent Bird Report)

2006 Folkestone, one flew over, 9th November (J. A. Gibson)

References

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- Jiguet, F., Doxa, A., & Robert, A. 2008. The origin of out-of-range pelicans in Europe: wild bird dispersal or zoo escapes? *Ibis* 150: 606-618.
- Kent Ornithological Society (KOS) 1953-2022. *Kent Bird Reports*. Kent Ornithological Society.
- McInerney, C. 2019. The Dalmatian Pelican in Britain. *British Birds* 112: 403-406.
- Naylor, K. A. 2021. Historical Rare Birds. www.historicalrarebirds.info/cat-np/great-white-pelican
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Acknowledgements

The tetrad map images were produced from the Ordnance Survey [Get-a-map service](#) and are reproduced with kind permission of [Ordnance Survey](#).

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