

Mute Swan

Cygnus olor

Category A, C2

Breeding resident, perhaps also a winter visitor and occasional passage migrant.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Widespread across middle latitudes of Europe and Asia east to north-east China. It was introduced into many countries of west and central Europe, often from the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, with a major spread during the twentieth century, with a marked population increase over much of its range. It has also been introduced into North America, South Africa, Australasia and Japan. In Europe more northern and eastern populations are migratory but only reach the Low Countries, northern France and south-east England in severe winters.



Mute Swan at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)

In Britain it has long been domesticated and used for food, especially in the Middle Ages, but probably also with some wild stocks. The British population is mainly sedentary, with even little local movement.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

In Kent it is a widespread resident, breeding on most suitable waters, and possibly an occasional migrant.

The Mute Swan was not included in Knight and Tolputt's "List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood" (1871). Ticehurst (1909) stated that it was "kept in a domesticated or semi-domesticated state on private waters and in public parks throughout the county", whilst "in winter, especially in severe ones, it occurs on the tidal waters and mud-flats round the whole of the coastline", however he considered that "probably not one in a hundred is a genuine wild migrant, most ... have undoubtedly wandered ... from private waters", so it is possible that it was known to Knight and Tolputt but omitted as not considered to be of wild origin. The first documented local record therefore involved a nest found by Roger Norman at Nickolls Quarry on the 24th March 1950 (Norman 2007).

Breeding atlas distribution

Figure 1 shows the breeding distribution by tetrad based on the results of the 2007-13 BTO/KOS atlas fieldwork.



Figure 1: Breeding distribution of Mute Swan at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was confirmed in three tetrads, with probable breeding in two more and possible breeding in four others. The table below shows how this compares to previous atlases (Taylor *et al.* 1981; Henderson & Hodge 1998). The confirmed and probable breeding categories have been combined to account for differing definitions of these in the first atlas.

Breeding atlases	1967 - 1973		1988 - 1994		2007 - 2013	
Possible	0	(0%)	4	(13%)	4	(13%)
Probable/Confirmed	6	(19%)	3	(10%)	5	(16%)
Total	6	(19%)	7	(23%)	9	(29%)
Change			+1	(+17%)	+2	(+29%)

The table below shows the changes in tetrad occupancy across the three atlas periods.

Trends	First to second atlas (1967-73 to 1988-94)	Second to third atlas (1988-94 to 2007-13)	First to third atlas (1967-73 to 2007-13)
Local	+17%	+29%	+50%
Kent	+45%	+7%	+55%

Locally it can be found along the Royal Military Canal between the Aldergate Bridge and Seabrook and on the dykes and ditches of the Romney Marsh. It appears to be absent from the higher ground to the north of the canal, even where there are small bodies of water.

There appears to have been a gradual increase in the local breeding distribution which mirrors the trend at a county and national level. Balmer *et al.* (2013) stated that the population had recovered following the adoption of suitable alternatives and subsequent banning of lead for fishing weights in 1987. The authors also considered it likely that populations will have benefited from generally milder winters, which are associated with higher survival and subsequent greater productivity.

Several pairs have bred annually in recent years. There are typically well-known two pairs along the canal, one near Palmarsh (TR13 M) and another near Seabrook (TR13 X), with a few others on the marsh, where nesting sites have included the Willop Sewer near the Willop Basin (TR13 A), the dyke opposite The Little Piece on Donkey Street (TR13 B), the dyke by Stonereach Bridge near Botolph's Bridge (TR13 G), Nickolls Quarry (TR13 G) and the lake near Rose Cottage on Burmarsh Road (TR13 G).

Overall distribution

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of Mute Swan, with sightings in 21 tetrads (68%).

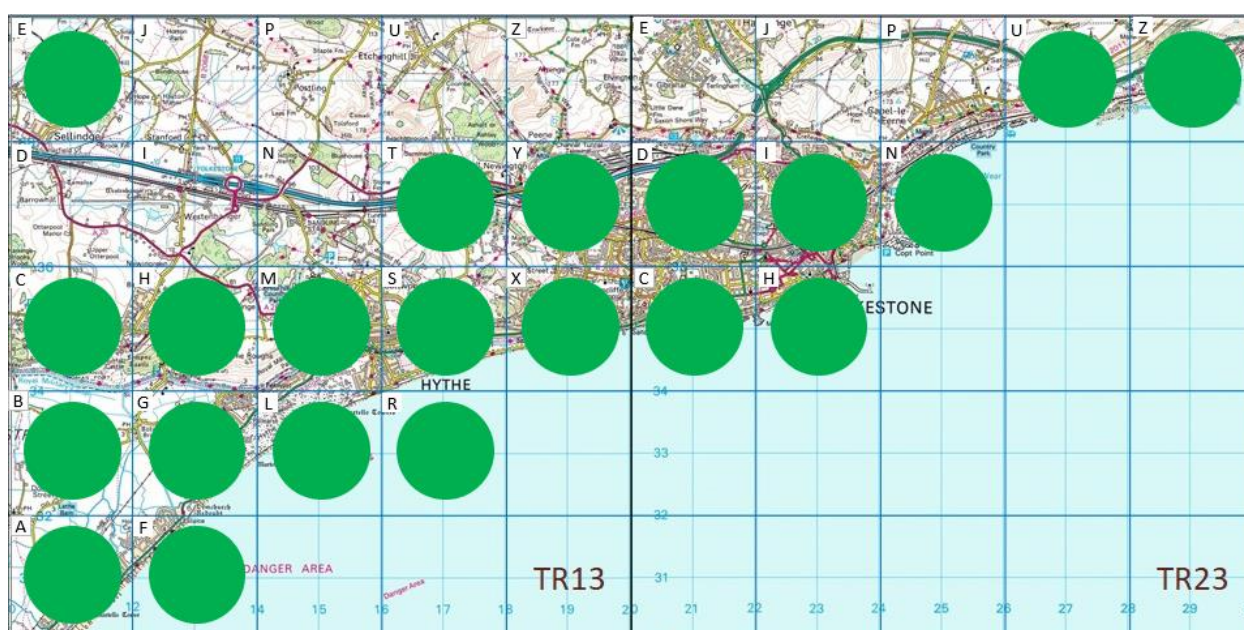


Figure 2: Distribution of all Mute Swan records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Mute Swans are considered to be largely sedentary and exhibit very similar breeding and winter distributions in Britain. There are local movements however within Romney Marsh and the numbers wintering within TR13 vary considerably which is likely to be related to the availability of grazing locally and elsewhere on the marsh.



Mute Swan eggs at Palmarsh (Kenny Brignall)



Mute Swan cygnets at West Hythe (Brian Harper)

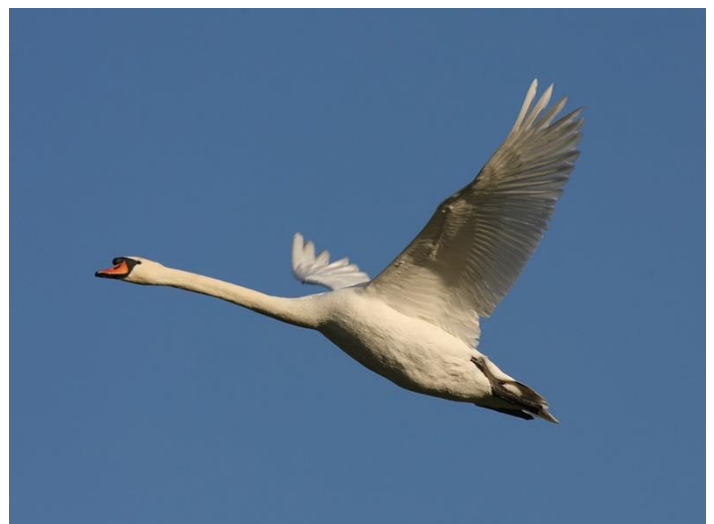
There was only one record prior to 1990 that involved a count higher than 50 birds, and this involved 80 seen by Roger Norman on the canal in Hythe between Scanlon's Bridge and the Red Lion Bridge on the 17th January 1960. This is an unusual record for other reasons too, as it did not appear to be associated with cold weather and concentrations into double figures are rare on the canal. The next highest counts on the canal occurred during freezing conditions in January 1997, with 17 at Seabrook on the 5th and 18 near the Stade Street Bridge on the 26th.

Since 1990 there have been counts of over 50 in nine winters and all of these have been in the Botolph's Bridge/Nickolls Quarry area. When birds are frequenting fields in the Botolph's Bridge area they normally roost overnight at Nickolls Quarry. On the first two occasions these occurred during periods of hard weather, when in February 1991 there was a peak of 73 at Nickolls Quarry on the 10th and in January 1997 there were 58 there on the 1st. However, since the 1999/2000 winter large counts have become a more regular feature even in mild years. In 1999/2000 there was a peak of 70 at Botolph's Bridge on the 21st December 1999 and the following winter saw a peak of 54 at Nickolls Quarry on the 18th January 2001.

The 2001/02 winter produced exceptional numbers, and these are still the largest counts to date. The flock rapidly increased during November 2001, with at least 85 at Nickolls Quarry on the 11th, 116 at Botolph's Bridge on the 17th and 140 at Botolph's Bridge on the 23rd, before peaking in December, when at least 150 were in the Botolph's Bridge/Nickolls Quarry area on the 26th. In early January 139 were still present on the 2nd before numbers slowly dwindled.



Mute Swan at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)



Mute Swan at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)

There were also counts exceeding 50 in the winters of 2004/05 (peak of 85 at Botolph's Bridge on the 24th December 2004), 2006/07 (peak of 62 at Botolph's Bridge on the 9th December) and 2008/09 (when the peak of 110 at Nickolls Quarry on the 10th January was the only three figure count to have been recorded other than the 2001/02 influx).

Since 2008/09 there appears to have been a decrease in winter numbers locally and this has also been noted at a countywide level (being remarked upon in the 2011 Kent Bird Report), in contrast to the increase noted in the Bird Atlas. The only winter in the next decade to produce a count exceeding 50 was 2016/17, when there was a peak of 59 on the 29th December 2016, though there were 50 at Donkey Street on the 27th October 2018.

Overall, there have been records from 19 tetrads (61% of all tetrads). There have been very few inland records away from the marsh, but small numbers of non-breeding birds can occur at coastal sites at any time of year. At Samphire Hoe, which is some distance from any breeding sites, there were 24 records (involving 71 birds) in the 14 years between 2005 and 2019, an average of 1.7 per year.

Coastal records typically involve single figure counts however ten flew east (and later west) past Mill Point on the 23rd April 1991, ten flew west past Copt Point on the 18th April 2002, 11 flew west past Samphire Hoe on the 18th April 2010, 12 flew east past Capel-le-Ferne and Samphire Hoe on the 2nd May 2004 and 14 flew east past Samphire Hoe on the 14th May 2009.

These movements are probably fairly localised, although a flock of eight that were seen flying east past Mill Point and later Samphire Hoe on the 22nd April 2018, a first-winter bird that flew east past Mill Point with a flock of four Brent Geese on the 29th October 2017 and was later seen flying north past Sandwich Bay, and two that flew east past Seabrook and later Samphire Hoe on the 24th March 2021 suggest that some birds may wander further afield.

Harrison (1953) suggested the possibility of immigrants from the continent occurring in winter and Taylor *et al.* cited a cold weather migrant ringed at Maidstone in February 1963 and recovered in Mecklenberg, Germany in October 1966. The latest Kent Bird Report (KOS 2021) noted ten other foreign ringing recoveries, nine of which involve France.

There have been two local ringing recoveries that are somewhat contrasting, one demonstrating site fidelity and the other illustrating the potential for longer distance movement. A bird that was ringed at Dymchurch on the 25th August 1961 was found dead at West Hythe on the 31st January 1973, nearly 12 years later but just four miles away. Another ringed at Hythe on the 26th December 1961 was found dead at Dorking in Surrey, 60 miles to the west on the 23rd February 1963, having succumbed to the extreme winter weather.



Mute Swans at Nickolls Quarry (Ian Roberts)



Mute Swans at Samphire Hoe (Ian Roberts)

Click [here](#) to watch a local video recording of a herd at an icy Nickolls Quarry on the 18th January 2017 (Ian Roberts).

References

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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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