

Arctic Skua

Stercorarius parasiticus

Category A

Passage migrant.

Breeds in Scotland, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Fenno-Scandia and Russia, eastwards across northernmost Siberia and North America, along the extreme north Pacific coasts and islands, in Greenland and on islands in the Arctic Ocean. It is pelagic away from the breeding area, with most wintering off Argentina and southern Africa (Snow & Perrins, 1998).

In Kent it is a common passage migrant that is rare inland and in winter (KOS, 2020).



Arctic Skua at Folkestone Pier (Brian Harper)

The species 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 mile radius from Folkestone town hall. Whilst this range extends further inland than the current Folkestone and Hythe area, it is likely that it would have been seen at the coast and so most probably within the modern boundary.

The first documented record occurred on the 1st September 1957, when Roger Norman watched one fly west past Hythe Ranges, whilst Dave Musson saw two flying west past Folkestone on the 20th April 1960 and the Kent Bird Report for 1961 mentioned "one spring record from Folkestone".

There were no further sightings until 1982, when one was seen off Hythe on the 29th September, which was very likely to have been a result of a lack of coverage, as a total of 13 were seen flying east past Hythe Ranges on the 9th August 1984 and there have been annual records since 1987.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of all records of Arctic Skua by tetrad, with records in 12 tetrads (39%).

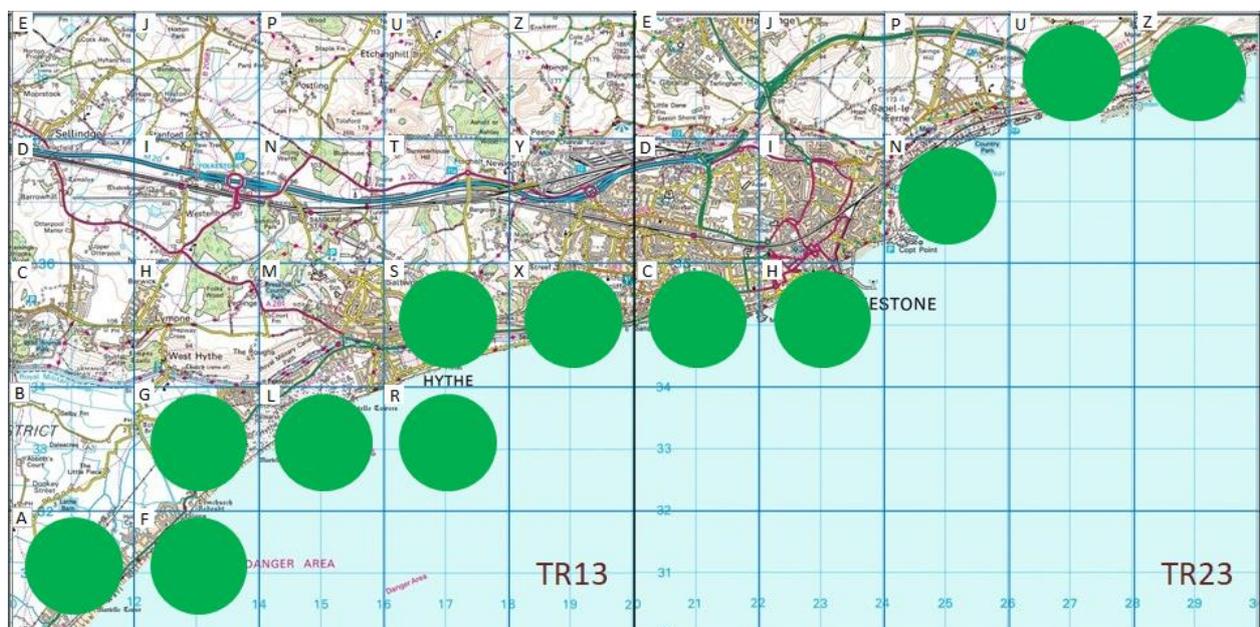


Figure 1: Distribution of all Arctic Skua records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The earliest ever arrival involved one flying east past Seabrook on the 14th March 2016, which was almost a fortnight earlier than the next: singles flying east past Abbotscliffe on the 26th March 1993 and past Mill Point on the 26th March 2016. The only other records in March have been two flying east past Samphire Hoe on the 30th March 2008 and one flying east past Hythe on the 30th March 2018.

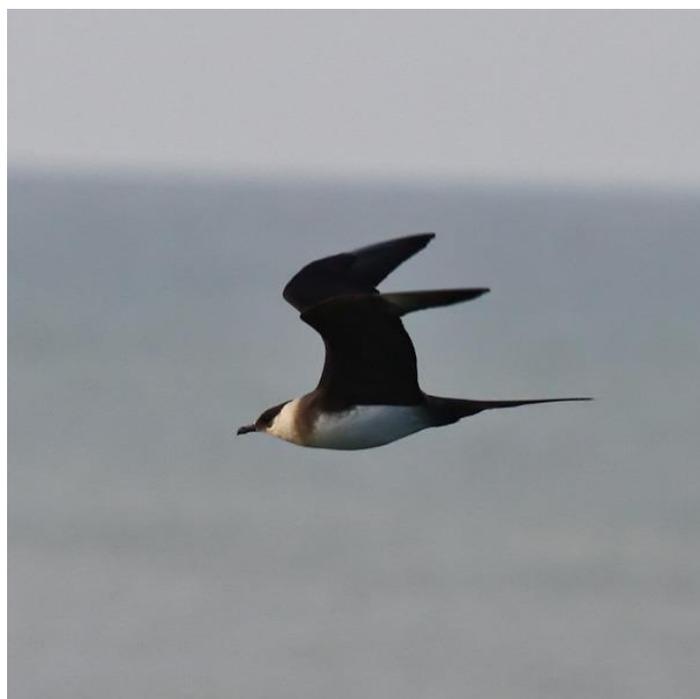
Arrival is more typically in April, with a mean date over the most recent decade of 15th April. On average around 17 birds per annum are noted on spring passage but annual variability is fairly high, with a minimum of three in 2010 but peaks of 44 in 2008 and 34 in 2018. Counts in excess of five have occurred as follows:

10 east past Copt Point on the 23rd April 1998
7 east past Copt Point on the 28th April 2002
7 east past Copt Point on the 21st April 2003
8 east past Copt Point on the 10th May 2004
7 east past Samphire Hoe on the 2nd May 2006
22 east past Samphire Hoe on the 30th April 2008
6 east past Mill Point on the 6th May 2016
9 east past Mill Point on the 30th April 2017
6 east past Samphire Hoe on the 6th May 2018
6 east past Samphire Hoe on the 11th May 2018

Small numbers can be seen until the end of May and there have been two records in June: singles flying east past Copt Point on the 9th June 2012 and 13th June 1998. The earliest returning migrants were noted at Copt Point on the 8th July 2004, 12th July 1998 (two), 13th July 1998 and 17th July 2003, whilst birds are more usually seen from the last week of July or in August. Annual



Arctic Skua at Folkestone Pier (Brian Harper)



Arctic Skua at Folkestone Pier (Brian Harper)

On average around 20 birds per annum are noted on autumn passage but annual variability is fairly high, with a minimum of six in 2009 but peaks of 64 in 2006 and 44 in 2014. Double-figure counts have involved:

10 west past Copt Point on the 30th August 1997
14 west past Copt Point on the 20th September 1999
16 east past Mill Point on the 24th October 2005
19 west past Copt Point on the 2nd October 2006
10 west past Copt Point on the 6th October 2006
10 (6 east, 4 west) past Samphire Hoe on the 24th August 2008
17 (6 west, 11 east) past Samphire Hoe on the 9th October 2011
13 west past Copt Point on the 27th August 2012
30 west past Hythe Beach on the 8th October 2014
21 west past Hythe Seafront on the 23rd September 2018
12 west past Mill Point on the 1st October 2021

The mean departure date over the most recent decade has been the 17th October but stragglers have lingered into November in eight years. Only two have occurred later than mid-November, singles off Copt Point on the 16th November 2000 and 21st November 2002, but there has been a sighting in December, one flying west past Seabrook on the 2nd December 2020.

References

Kent Bird Reports. Kent Ornithological Society

Knight, V. and Tolputt, F., 1871. List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood, *Folkestone Natural History Society Annual Report*, 1871

Snow, D. & Perrins, C.M., 1998. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Oxford University Press.

Acknowledgements

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



Arctic Skua at Folkestone Pier (Brian Harper)