

Brent Goose

Branta bernicla

Category A

Winter visitor and passage migrant, rare in summer.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

It has a circumpolar breeding distribution, with the nominate Dark-bellied Brent *B. b. bernicla* breeding in arctic Russia, and wintering in south-east England, France and the Netherlands, the Pale-bellied Brent *B. b. hrota* breeding in Canada, Greenland, Spitzbergen and Franz Josef Island, and wintering in the USA, Ireland, north-east England and Denmark and the Black Brant *B. b. nigricans* breeding in Siberia, Alaska and western Canada, and wintering along the Pacific coasts south to the Yellow Sea and Baja California.



Brent Goose at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)

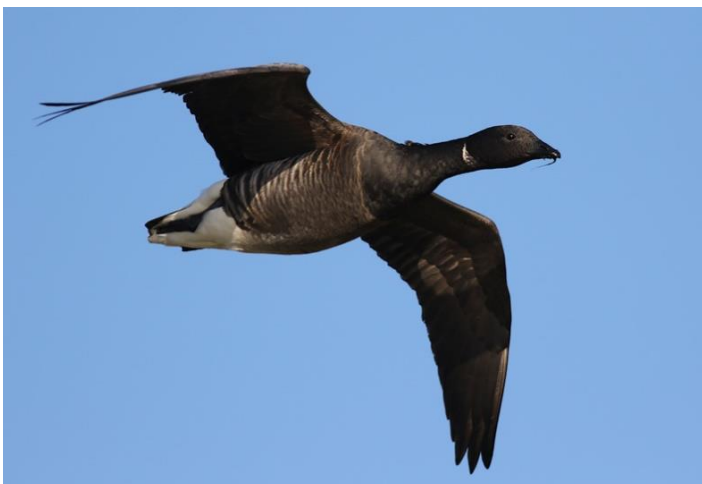
Kent status (KOS 2021):

In Kent it is a common passage migrant and winter visitor to coastal areas, with stragglers occasionally summering. The most important Kent concentrations are in the Medway and Swale estuaries.

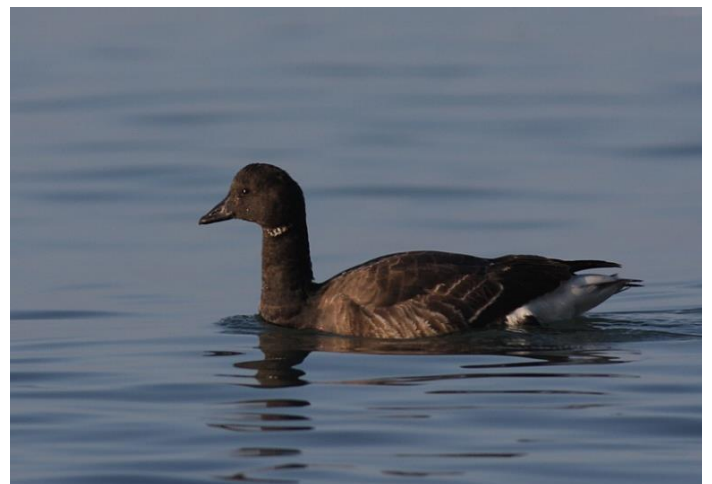
The Brent Goose was included in Knight and Tolputt's "List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood" (1871). This list covered an area of six miles radius from Folkestone town hall, therefore extending further inland than the current Folkestone and Hythe area, so this does not provide conclusive evidence of its occurrence here, however it is almost exclusively coastal in distribution so that can be little doubt that it was to be found locally. Furthermore, Ticehurst (1909) wrote that it was "the only goose that can be considered as an annual visitor to the Kent coasts" and that "in an ordinary winter ... a few of these birds are always to be found, but in the really hard winters that occasionally fall to our lot they arrive in immense flocks, which take up their quarters in the neighbourhood of the estuaries of the Thames, Medway and Swale, and in the sea around the south of the county, where they particularly affect the Sandwich flats at the mouth of the Stour and the east and west bays of Dungeness, off Hythe and Dymchurch and Rye Harbour respectively".

He wrote of immense flocks visiting the county in the eighteenth century and thought that "we are never likely to experience such invasions" again, although recounted "very large numbers all round the Kent coast" in the hard winters of 1890/91 and 1895/96.

Wintering numbers were to decline rapidly in the 1930s when a mycetozoan disease destroyed many of the *Zostera* (eel-grass) beds that were their main food (Taylor *et al.* 1981). After reaching a low point in 1946/47 the population slowly recovered, rising to a peak in the early 1990s and remaining largely stable since (Balmer *et al.* 2013).



Brent Goose at Hythe Redoubt (Brian Harper)



Brent Goose at Copt Point (Brian Harper)

Overall distribution

Figure 1 shows the distribution of all records of Brent Goose by tetrad. There have been records in 18 (58%) of tetrads.

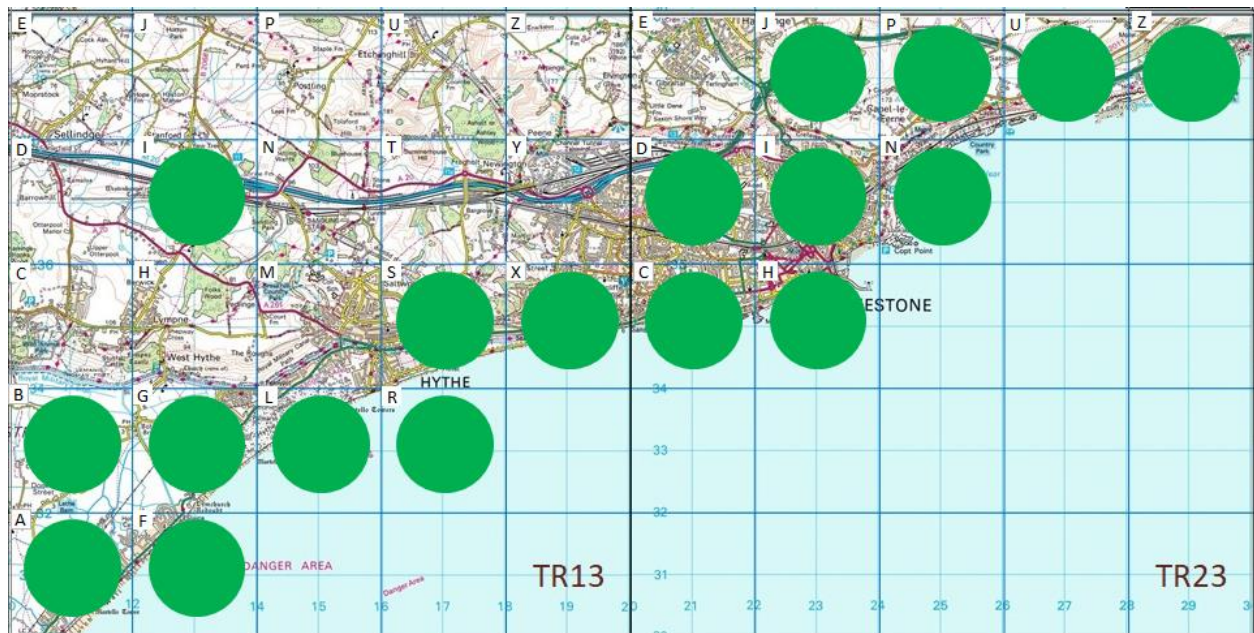


Figure 1: Distribution of all Brent Goose records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The Folkestone and Hythe area no longer supports a regular wintering population but it frequently occurs in small numbers at this time of year and more significant numbers are seen on passage.

The first autumn birds are typically seen in September, with the earliest ever sighting involving 12 reported flying west past Samphire Hoe on the 1st September 2008. The mean arrival date over the last ten years was the 21st September but in some years arrival was not noted before early October. Numbers generally increase during September and three-figure counts are possible in the last third of the month, with 117 (4 west, 113 east) past Copt Point on the 23rd September 2002 and 240 west past Samphire Hoe on the 29th September 2010.

The largest movements usually occur in October, with the peak count of 916 flying west past Samphire Hoe on the 9th October 2011. Other counts of 300 or more have involved 300 east past Samphire Hoe on the 12th October 2009, 315 (110 east, 215 west) past there on the 12th October 2013, 345 east past Mill Point on the 28th October 2018, 375 west past Copt Point on the 30th October 2006, 387 west past Samphire Hoe on the 24th October 2014, 450 south over Hillhurst Farm on the 15th October 2014 and 450 (45 east, 405 west) past Mill Point on the 29th October 2019.

Passage often continues into November, when counts of 304 west past Copt Point on the 10th November 2002, 710 west past Samphire Hoe on the 11th November 2013 and 450 west past Hythe on the 22nd November 2015 have been noted. Easterly movements in autumn are thought to involve birds that have overshot the wintering grounds in Essex and are working their way back (Taylor *et al.*).

Small numbers can occur at Nickolls Quarry or in fields on the Romney Marsh in winter but double-figure counts are rare. In February 1992 a flock of up to 43 were frequenting the Nickolls Quarry/Botolph's Bridge area between the 7th and 13th February, whilst ten were seen at Botolph's Bridge on the 8th January 2010.

In recent years there has been an apparent eastwards passage in late December and early January. The reason for this recent phenomenon, first noted in 2012, is as yet unclear. It would appear very early for spring migration to commence and may instead involve late arriving birds (for it seems to be most associated with mild winters) re-orientating or perhaps birds moving between feeding grounds. Counts have included 160 passing Samphire Hoe on the 29th December 2012, at least 224 passing Samphire Hoe on the 4th January 2014, up to 323 passing Hythe/Princes Parade on the 29th December 2016, up to 444 passing Hythe the following day, 170 passing Hythe on the 18th December 2019 and 156 passing Seabrook on the 26th December 2019.

Three-figure counts are unusual after the first week of January until spring passage properly commences from mid to late February, however there was a remarkable easterly movement on the 12th January 2013, when at least 1,765 were logged from various coastal watch-points between Hythe and Samphire Hoe. This event was thought to be associated with cold weather and coincided with large movements of other wildfowl.



Brent Geese at Creteway Down (Brian Harper)



Brent Geese at Folkestone Pier (Brian Harper)

The peak count in February was 720 heading east past Samphire Hoe on the 24th February 2008 and the main spring passage occurs in March and early April, typically being much heavier than the autumn movements. The mean spring total over the last decade is around 3,730 birds. Up-channel movements of 1,000 or more have been recorded on eleven occasions:

21 st March 1985	1,640	9 th March 2013	1,280
28 th March 1993	1,313	13 th March 2015	1,304
8 th March 1996	1,116	4 th April 2015	2,580
9 th March 1996	2,800	18 th March 2016	c.1,000
14 th March 2006	1,880	4 th March 2021	1,132
9 th April 2021	1,370		

Passage can continue in smaller numbers throughout April and into May in some years. The mean departure date over the last ten years was the 7th May and the latest record in May involved a flock of 25 flying east past Copt Point on the 26th May 1997. Stragglers have occasionally over-summered in the county and there are two local records in summer: one off Copt Point on the 24th June 1962 and three flying east past Samphire Hoe on the 13th July 2013.

Inland sightings are rare. A single record from TR13 I is mentioned above (involving a flock of 450 flying south over Hillhurst Farm on the 15th October 2014). There were two records in TR23 D in 1988, a group of seven seen on the “Polo Ground” playing field to the north of Cheriton Road on the 2nd January and a flock heard passing over Cherry Garden Avenue after dark on the evening of the 30th September. In TR23 J a flock of 17 flew over Creteway Down on the 22nd November 2015.

Pale-bellied Brent Goose

Branta bernicla hrota

The Pale-bellied race *B. b. hrota* breeds in Svalbard and winters predominately in Denmark and in Northumberland, whilst small numbers may occur at other English east coast sites, particularly during periods of cold weather. It is an uncommon passage migrant and winter visitor in Kent (KOS 2021). There have been four local records of this form, as follows:

1994 Nickolls Quarry, one, 13th February 1994 (R. K. Norman)

2005 Mill Point, one flew east with Dark-bellied Brent Geese, 21st March 2005 (I. A. Roberts)

2010 Botolph’s Bridge, at least two among a flock of ten Brent Geese, 8th January 2010 (I. A. Roberts)

2014 Willop Basin, one, 9th February 2014, photographed (I. A. Roberts *et al.*)



Brent Geese at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)



Pale-bellied Brent Goose at Willop Basin (Ian Roberts)

References

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Acknowledgements

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