

Mediterranean Gull

Ichthyaetus melanocephalus

Category A

Increasing winter visitor and passage migrant, scarce in summer.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds discontinuously across central and southern Europe. Its historic breeding range centred on the Black Sea but it underwent a marked expansion into north-west Europe during the second half of the twentieth century when it colonised Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. The bulk of the population winters in the Mediterranean but since the 1950s has occurred with increasing frequency on coasts of western and north-west Europe.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

In Kent it is a much-increased species, breeding in variable numbers usually in association with Black-headed Gulls; in autumn and winter is concentrated in the south of the county.



Mediterranean Gull at Seabrook (Brian Harper)

The Mediterranean Gull was first recorded in Kent at Rochester in March 1957 and has occurred annually in the county in steadily increasing numbers since 1961 (Taylor *et al.* 1981). The first attempt to breed in Kent was in 1977, but it was not until 1984 that nesting became annual, first at Dungeness (where it ceased about 1988), and later in the Medway Estuary, with over 250 pairs present in some years (Clements *et al.* 2015).

The Folkestone area (and Copt Point in particular) has long been famous for the numbers of Mediterranean Gulls that it attracts. Counts here for many years were the highest in the county, and indeed the country as a whole, until the breeding population increased significantly at Langstone Harbour in Hampshire, where over 1,700 pairs have recently bred (Holling *et al.* 2019).



Mediterranean Gull at Folkestone (Marek Szczepanek)



Mediterranean Gull at Copt Point (Rob Lee)

The first local record was seen at Hythe on the 1st September 1967, with further singles at Folkestone on the 19th September 1971 and 6th August 1975, with three in Folkestone Harbour on the 4th January 1976. It has been recorded annually locally since 1978. There was a gradual and steady increase in numbers locally between 1978 and the late 1990s, which then accelerated to 2005, as shown by the annual maximum counts shown in figure 1. Numbers then remained reasonably constant before showing a marked increase in the last few years.

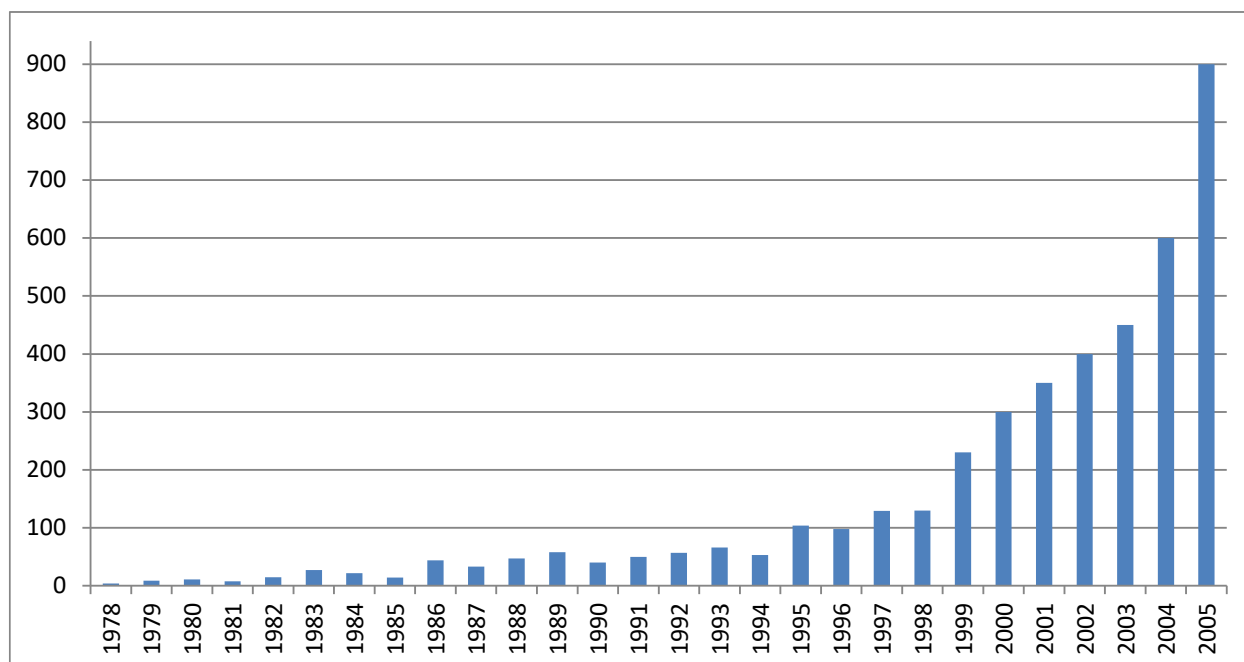


Figure 1: Annual maximum counts of Mediterranean Gulls at Folkestone and Hythe between 1978 and 2005

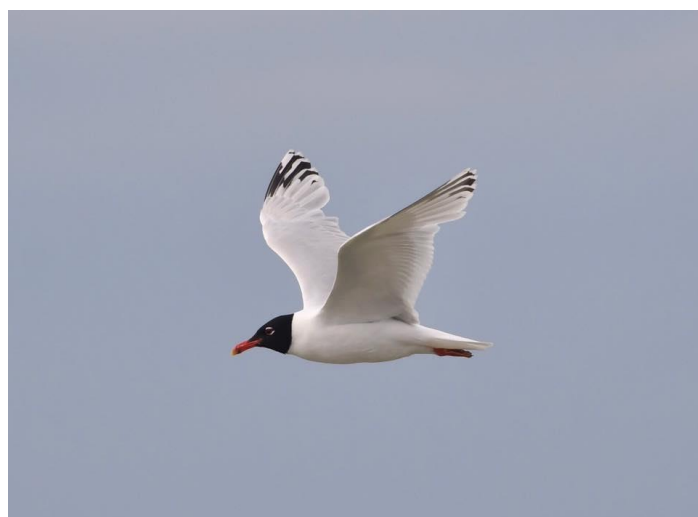
The full list of record counts at Copt Point between 1978 and 2005, which in most cases would have also been county and national records, is as follows:

4 on the 10th February 1978
 5 on the 30th September 1979
 9 on the 1st December 1979
 11 on the 26th March 1980
 13 in October 1982
 15 on the 13th November 1982
 21 on the 4th September 1983
 27 on the 16th October 1983
 32 in October 1986
 39 on the 24th December 1986
 44 on the 27th December 1986
 47 on the 19th December 1988
 58 on the 18th March 1989
 66 in October 1993
 85 on the 13th February 1995

90 on the 2nd March 1995
 104 on the 9th March 1995
 118 on the 1st August 1997
 129 on the 17th August 1997
 130 in October 1998
 150 in March 1999
 215 on the 6th August 1999
 230 in September 1999
 300 in November 2000
 350 in August 2001
 400 in August 2002
 450 in August 2003
 600 in September 2004
 900 in September 2005



Mediterranean Gull at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)



Mediterranean Gull at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)

Numbers then remained reasonably constant before 920 were counted at Copt Point on the 11th August 2015, with c.1,000 seen in fields along Crete Road East on the 16th August 2016. A minimum of 1,045 were seen on the sea offshore from Abbotscliffe on the 29th August 2019, with many of those no doubt included in a count of 1,950 at Copt Point later the same day. In December of that year an estimated 3,000 were present at Copt Point on the 2nd December 2019.

In 2020, Renaud Flamant estimated that over 4,000 individuals had been present at Copt Point in the period of 29th August to 2nd September, based on the proportions of colour-ringed birds within the flocks over these five days.

Overall distribution

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of Mediterranean Gull by tetrad, with records in 30 tetrads (97%).

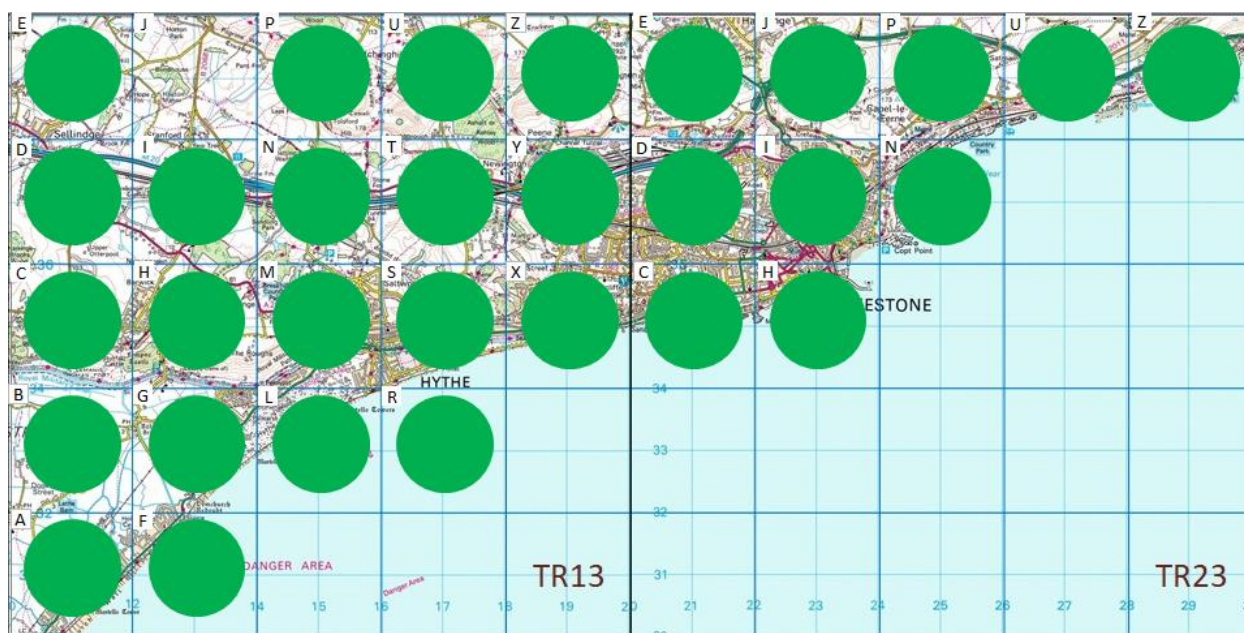


Figure 2: Distribution of all Mediterranean Gull records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Raymond Henson (2004) studied colour-ringed Mediterranean Gulls at Copt Point between 1998 and 2002 and found that the birds utilised the site in one of three ways. 36% of the study sample were present in the summer/autumn period (early July to mid-December), 27% were present in the autumn/winter period (mid-September to late March) and 37% were present throughout both periods (early July to late March). Virtually no birds were present during the breeding season (April to June).



Mediterranean Gull at Copt Point (Brian Harper)



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Further to this, Henson noted that the sample of adult and second-year birds arrived between the early July and early August, with a peak around mid-July, with lesser arrivals between mid-September and early December. The main arrival of first-year birds was between the 21st July and mid-August, but significant arrivals could continue until the end of November. Adult and second-year birds would depart in November and December, and again from mid-February, whilst first-year birds would depart from mid-September and peak between mid-October and mid-November, with a second peak in late March.

A small up-channel spring passage can be evident in some years, mainly in April. A total of nine flew east past Copt Point on the 29th April 1995 and the first double-figure movement involved 26 flying east past Samphire Hoe on the 23rd April 2008, whilst 21 flew east past Princes Parade/Mill Point on the 22nd April 2016. There were particularly pronounced passages in 2019, when a total of at least 187 were logged heading east between the 16th and 26th April, with a peak of 63 passing Hythe on the 19th April, and 2020, when a total of at least 91 were logged heading east, including a peak of 33 passing Hythe on the 23rd April.

Very small numbers may be seen in May, with a couple of double-figure counts in the first few days of the month presumably relating to late spring migrants, whilst only single figures have been noted in June with the notable exceptions of 30 (three flying east and 27 west) past Mill Point on the 4th June 2015 and 18 at Sandgate on the 19th June 2017.

Large numbers may be noted from mid-July, with the earliest three-figure count relating to 350 at Copt Point on the 16th July 2020 and the earliest four-figure count relating to c.1,000 there on the 21st July 2022. Peak numbers generally occur between August and December, with notable counts given above.

A down-channel autumn passage had been suspected in some years but is difficult to distinguish from the post-roost dispersal of wintering birds, whereas spring passage is much more obvious as most wintering birds have departed.



Mediterranean Gull at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)



Mediterranean Gull at Copt Point (Brian Harper)

Colour-ringed birds from England, Ireland, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, Norway, Switzerland, Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Spain, Italy and the Ukraine have been noted.

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](#). I am indebted to Andrew Henderson and Tim Hodge for providing access to the Kent Ornithological Society archives.



Mediterranean Gull at Folkestone (Brian Harper)