

Caspian Gull

Larus cachinnans

Category A

Rare visitor, mostly in winter.

19 records

Breeds on sandy dunes, islands, steppe lakes and along rivers, mainly in Russia (where there are c.30,000 pairs), but has spread recently into Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland and southern Germany.

The main winter areas are the Black and Caspian seas and the Gulf States although, following breeding, many move west and north-west to reach northern and western Europe, including Britain (Olsen & Larsson 2005).

In Kent it is a scarce but increasingly frequent visitor, especially in the Dungeness area (KOS 2020).



Caspian Gull at Folkestone Harbour (Ian Roberts)

It was formerly treated as a form of Herring Gull but several authors, including Olsen & Larsson, elevated the Caspian Gull to full species status, and this treatment was adopted by the British Ornithologist's Union in 2007 (Sangster *et al.* 2007).

It was first recorded locally in 2006 when Ian Roberts found a first-winter bird in Folkestone Harbour on the 19th February and this was quickly followed by an adult on Folkestone Sunny Sands on the 24th November and a first-winter in Folkestone Harbour from the 11th to 13th December of the same year.

There were no further sightings however until 2011, when a first-winter was seen on the beach at Hythe. It was seen to have a yellow colour-ring and, although the ring could unfortunately not be read, it was presumed to have originated from Poland.

As figure 1 demonstrates, it has now occurred in 11 of the last 12 years and will probably prove to be a regular visitor in time.

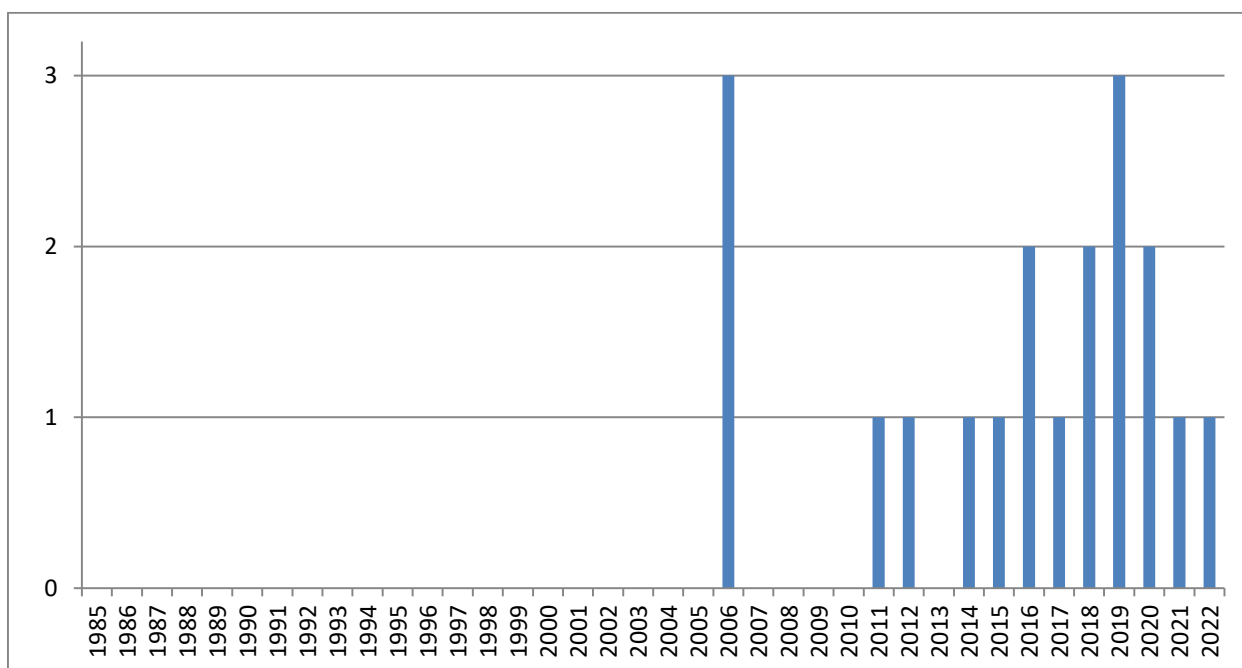


Figure 1: Caspian Gull records at Folkestone and Hythe

Apart from singles in August and September, all records to date have been in the winter period, as shown in figure 2, with most having been found between late November and early January.

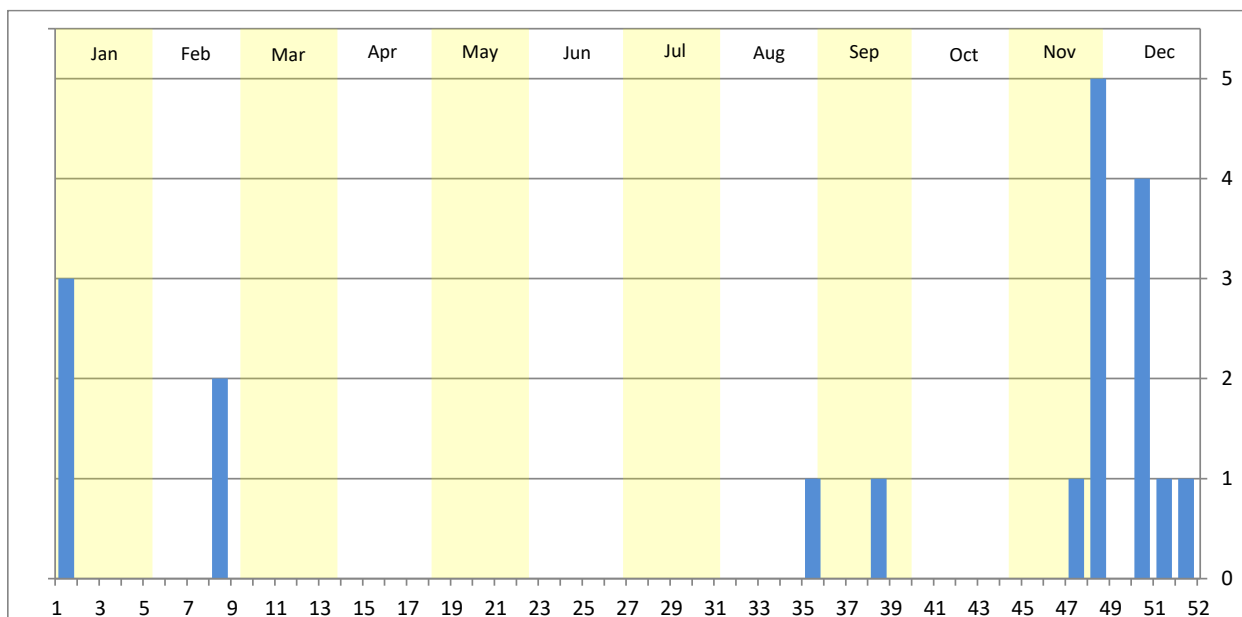


Figure 2: Caspian Gull records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Figure 3 shows the distribution of records to date. Nine have been found in the Folkestone Harbour area, with the others at Nickolls Quarry (3), Hythe (2), Sandgate (2), Hythe Ranges, Haguelands and the Willop Basin.



Figure 3: Distribution of all Caspian Gull records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

With the first juvenile recorded in 2020, all ages have now been recorded locally:

Age	Records	Percentage
Juvenile	1	5%
First-winter	8	42%
Second-winter	1	5%
Third-winter	1	5%
Adult	8	42%



First-winter Caspian Gull at Folkestone Harbour
(Ian Roberts)



First-winter Caspian Gull at Folkestone Harbour
(Ian Roberts)



First-winter Caspian Gull at Sandgate
(Chris Powell)



First-winter Caspian Gull at Sandgate
(Chris Powell)



First-winter Caspian Gull at Hythe
(Ian Roberts)



Second-winter Caspian Gull with adult Yellow-legged Gull
at Sandgate (Ian Roberts)



Third-winter Caspian Gull at Hythe Imperial golf course
(Ian Roberts)



Adult Caspian Gull at Folkestone Harbour
(Ian Roberts)

The full list of records is as follows:

- 2006** Folkestone Harbour, first-winter, 19th February, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
- 2006** Folkestone Sands, adult, 24th November (I. A. Roberts)
- 2006** Folkestone Harbour, first-winter, 11th to 13th December, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
- 2011** Hythe Beach, first-winter, 14th December, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
- 2012** Folkestone Harbour, adult, probably female, 27th November, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
- 2014** Folkestone Harbour, first-winter, 1st December, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
- 2015** Hythe Imperial golf course, third-winter, 30th November, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
- 2016** Sandgate, second-winter, 26th November, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
- 2016** Folkestone Harbour, first-winter, 19th December, photographed, video-recorded (I. A. Roberts)
- 2017** Folkestone Harbour, adult, 2nd December, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
- 2018** Nickolls Quarry, two adults, 15th December, photographed (B. Harper)
- 2018** Nickolls Quarry, adult, 28th December (B. Harper), possibly one of above
- 2019** Nickolls Quarry, two adults, 1st to 2nd January, with one on 3rd January (B. Harper, I. A. Roberts), possibly same as 2018
- 2019** Hythe Ranges, adult, 3rd January, photographed (B. Harper), possibly one of above
- 2019** Folkestone Harbour, adult, 7th January (I. A. Roberts)
- 2020** Folkestone Beach, juvenile, 30th August (T. Donegan)
- 2020** Willop Basin, first-winter, 11th December (B. Harper, I. A. Roberts)
- 2021** Haguelands, first-winter, 19th February, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
- 2022** Sandgate, first-winter, 21st September, photographed (C. Powell)



Adult Caspian Gull at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)

An account of the first area record is given below.

Caspian Gull at Folkestone Harbour
19th February 2006

By Ian Roberts

Circumstances of the find:

At c.09:50 on 19th February I arrived at Folkestone Harbour, having already checked through the gulls at Sandgate and Mill Point. The tide was quite low and there were a good number of gulls roosting in the harbour. Due to overcast skies there was no glare from the sun, and viewing conditions were ideal.

I set up a scope and scanned through the flock. A very pale-headed bird became obvious fairly quickly, and I focused my attention on it. It was a long-billed, long-necked, slender bird, with a protruding breast and flat belly angled behind the legs. The legs were long, thin, and pale pink. The head and underparts were white except for streaking on the hind-neck, breast sides, and a little on the flanks.

The dark lesser coverts formed a distinct contrast with the white underparts, the median and especially the greater coverts were plain brown with pale tips (apart from some new feathers), and the mantle had bars and diamond-shaped spots. The tertials formed a dark block with pale tips (although worn) and the primaries looked long. So structurally and plumage-wise it appeared very good for Caspian Gull, and over the next 30 minutes or so I took detailed notes and some record shots.

Description of the bird:

Structure: The forehead was long and sloping, accentuating the long bill. The gull looked long-necked, slender, and long-winged, with a protruding breast and flat belly angled behind the legs.

Bill: The bill was long and thin, with the basal half parallel-sided, leading to a gently drooping tip: the upper mandible was gently decurved, and the lower mandible appeared to curve upwards slightly before curving down to the tip. There appeared to be some paleness on the upper and lower mandibles before a dark terminal band, although the cutting edges of both mandibles were dark throughout. There was a hint of a pale tip to the bill. The bill was a very distinctive feature, and quite unlike any that I have seen on a Herring.

Legs: Long, thin and pale pink, with more exposed tibia than Herring.

Head and underparts: The head was white with a little dark before the eye, and the white eyelids were noticeable. The underparts were plain and white, apart from some streaking on the hind-neck, breast-sides and a little on the flanks. There was a little mottling behind the legs, but the under-tail coverts looked pale.

Upperparts: The mantle was grey with bars and diamond-shaped spots. The lesser coverts were dark and formed a distinct contrast with the white underparts. There were some new feathers in the outer median and greater coverts, with the older feathers plain and brown, with paler tips especially on greater coverts. The tertials formed a dark block with pale tips (although worn) and the primaries were dark. The upper-part pattern matched closely the illustration in Olsen & Larsson (2005, plate 42, p. 310, bird no.3).



Caspian Gull at Folkestone Harbour



Caspian Gull (left) at Folkestone Harbour

References

Kent Ornithological Society (KOS). 1953-2021. Kent Bird Reports. Kent Ornithological Society.

Olsen, K. M. & Larsson, H. 2005. *Gulls of Europe, Asia and North America*. Christopher Helm.

Sangster, G., Collinson, J. M., Knox, A. G., Parkin, D. T. & Svensson, L. 2007. Taxonomic recommendations for British birds: fourth report. *Ibis* 149: 853-857.

Acknowledgements

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