

Little Tern

Sternula albifrons

Category A

Formerly bred, but now a passage migrant in spring, very rare in autumn.

Breeds along coasts and river valleys across much of lower and middle latitude Europe, eastwards across west-central Asia south to India and eastern Arabia, and Manchuria south to Tasmania, but patchily distributed throughout its range. West European populations winter in west Africa, east European and west Asian birds winter in the Red Sea and southern Arabia (Snow & Perrins, 1998).



Little Tern at Battery Point (Brian Harper)

In Kent it is a passage migrant and summer visitor, which continues to attempt to breed but with limited success. In 2019 breeding reports came from three sites in the north of the county, with a total of eight pairs making breeding attempts but success was low, with just four young fledging (KOS, 2021). As the 2018 Kent Bird Report noted, disturbance, bad weather and tidal flooding remain major obstacles for the fortunes of this species in Kent (KOS, 2020).

Ticehurst (1909) wrote that “on the south coast we have a fairly large colony between Hythe and Dymchurch”, no doubt referring to Hythe Ranges. This colony is thought to have moved progressively to the south-west as range disturbance increased, to settle in the area to the east of the Dymchurch Redoubt. In the years from 1950 to 1968 between three and 21 pairs nested. The last confirmed breeding occurred in 1968, but two pairs apparently attempted to nest in 1972, being deterred by a new enclosed range being built on part of the colony that year. An additional pair were present at another site close to the Hythe end of Hythe Ranges (near the site of Fort Sutherland) in 1964 and bred “and may have done so in earlier years” (Roger Norman, pers. comm.).

Arrival dates, where recorded, fell between the 18th and 25th April, with the first display noted on the 21st April (1958) and the earliest egg found on the 10th May of the same year.

At nearby Nickolls Quarry birds seen by Roger Norman during the 1950s and to 1965 were assumed to have originated from the colony at Hythe Ranges. He recounts how: “in 1951 birds gathered in the quarry with ten present on the 28th April and 25 on the 10th May, though with only four on the following day. The only similar gathering in subsequent years was in 1959 when nine pairs indulged in fish flight/presentation display on the 10th May. Two other years deserve specific mention: in 1958 four birds were present on the 20th April, one carrying a fish (display?) two days later. A “pair” was present on the 3rd May and three birds were fishing on the 13th June. It is possible that a pair may have bred away from the ranges colony, but that is a thought in hindsight. In 1960 my only spring visits were confined to the 4th to 19th June, when a pair were displaying on the 6th and 3 birds were present on the 19th. In 1965, six birds were seen resting on a small shingle “islet” on the only visit of the year, the 18th July”.

Roger noted some “significant numbers moving” past Hythe Ranges during that period. On the 29th April 1957 a total of 20 flew east in 15 minutes, whilst on the 20th April 1958 some 117 flew west in 90 minutes. There was also a large autumn passage of between 100 and 150 moving west in 60 minutes on the 9th September 1957. Other counts of note involved 36 on the shore there on the 20th April 1958 and 46 on the 4th May of the same year.

There have been no further indications of breeding and the only summer records since nesting ceased have involved two seen fishing off Hythe Ranges on the 29th May and 18th June 1992, and one seen off Princes Parade on the 17th June 2017.

It now just a passage migrant, mainly encountered in spring, and very rare in autumn when there have been only three records: singles at Nickolls Quarry on the 22nd July 1995 and 10th August 1991, and flying west past Copt Point on the 16th September 1999.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of all records of Little Tern by tetrad, with records in 11 tetrads (35%).



Figure 1: Distribution of all Little Tern records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

It has been noted on spring passage in most years since 1989. The earliest record involved three flying east past Hythe on the 11th April 2016, whilst six flying east past Mill Point on the 16th April 2004, two flying east past Samphire Hoe on the 17th April 2005, one flying east past Mill Point on the 17th April 2020 and one flying east past Copt Point on the 20th April 1993 complete the sightings within the first three weeks of April.



Little Tern at Battery Point (Brian Harper)



Little Tern at Battery Point (Brian Harper)

The earliest double-figure count involved ten flying east past Mill Point on the 22nd April and passage typically peaks in the last week of April or more usually in the first ten days of May. Annual variability is high, with none in two years (2007 and 2009) and a peak of 99 in 1993. The annual average between 1989 and 2011 is just over 25 birds per spring and has remained fairly constant. Counts in excess of ten have been noted on a number of occasions:

- 17 offshore of Mill Point on the 6th May 1989
- 14 east past Mill Point on the 8th May 1989
- 98 east past Copt Point on the 10th May 1993
- 24 east past Copt Point on the 3rd May 1997
- 26 east past Copt Point on the 9th May 1998
- 37 east past Copt Point on the 10th May 1998
- 13 east past Copt Point on the 1st May 1999
- 15 east past Copt Point on the 6th May 2000
- 18 east past Hythe Ranges on the 12th May 2002
- 12 east past Copt Point on the 9th May 2004
- 12 east past Copt Point on the 10th May 2004
- 33 east past Samphire Hoe on the 3rd May 2005
- 11 east past Samphire Hoe on the 2nd May 2008
- 23 east past Mill Point on the 24th Apr 2010
- 26 east past Copt Point on the 3rd May 2011
- 15 east past Folkestone Pier on the 5th May 2013
- 15 east past Samphire Hoe on the 7th May 2013
- 42 east past Hythe Beach on the 8th May 2015
- 15 east past Mill Point on the 4th May 2016
- 18 east past Samphire Hoe on the 11th May 2018
- 11 offshore of Hythe Ranges on the 28th Apr 2021

Very few have been noted after mid-May, but eight flew east past Copt Point on the 19th May 1998, with singles on several dates to the 27th May (1989).



Little Tern at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)



Little Tern at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)

References

Kent Bird Reports. Kent Ornithological Society

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

Ticehurst, N. F. 1909. *A History of the Birds of Kent*. Witherby, London.

Acknowledgements

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



Little Tern at Battery Point (Brian Harper)



Little Tern at Battery Point (Brian Harper)



Little Tern at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)