

# Cattle Egret

*Bubulcus ibis*

Category A

Very rare vagrant.

10 records,  
21 birds

*World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):*

A common and widespread breeding species in southern Spain and Portugal, with small, expanding populations in France and Italy. It is also found in north-west Africa, Egypt, south-west Arabia, across southern Asia and locally in Africa, Australia and the Americas. French breeders migrate south but southern populations are mostly resident, although dispersive, moving according to feeding opportunities.

*Kent status (KOS 2022):*

In Kent it is a rare but increasingly regular vagrant.



Cattle Egret at Round Down (Paul Holt)

The Cattle Egret is one of the most adaptable and opportunistic of species, and its world range has expanded considerably in recent years. Its ability to take advantage of human activity is a key factor and, while livestock farming is clearly important, man-made grasslands, golf courses and crop fields are readily adopted as feeding areas. Originally native to Spain, Portugal and tropical Africa, the species began to spread into South Africa in the early twentieth century and crossed the Atlantic to colonise South America in the 1930s before moving north into the USA a decade later.

In Europe, this range expansion was also dramatic. The first breeding record in France was in the Camargue in 1968, and by 1974 some 98 pairs were breeding there. In subsequent years it continued to move northwards, although it remained an extremely rare bird in Britain: six in 1981 were described as “an extraordinary influx” in that year’s BBRC Report. Between 1982 and 1991, a total of just 21 were seen, including 14 in 1986, but there were also several blank years. Numbers increased somewhat from 1992, with annual records and an average of seven per annum. A record total of 29 in 2006 was a clear pointer to what was to come, and an unprecedented arrival of over 100 in 2007, followed by nearly 200 in 2008, when it was removed from the list of species that the British Birds Rarities Committee removed it from the list of species which it assessed (Hudson *et al.* 2009; BBRC 2021).

The 2008 influx also led to the first confirmed breeding record in Britain, when two pairs nested in Somerset. It was speculated then that the Cattle Egret was “here to stay” but a gap of nine years then elapsed without confirmed breeding. It has since nested successfully since 2017, with a total of up to 19 pairs across nine sites in Britain in 2019 (Eaton *et al.* 2021).



Cattle Egret at Lower Wall (Brian Harper)



Cattle Egret at Lower Wall (Brian Harper)

It was not recorded in Kent until 1992 and there had been 12 records to the end of 2005, with the first local record in 2006 being the 13<sup>th</sup> county record. It continued to steadily increase and by the time of the second occurrence in the area in 2016 there had been 58 previous records. It bred successfully in the county for the first time in 2019, when two pairs were considered to have nested at Northward Hill, with breeding also suspected at another site in the north of the county. There had been over 160 Kent records by the end of 2019 (with the total now given simply as “many”) and whilst spring (and particularly April and May) was the peak time of occurrence, winter records and long-staying individuals have become more frequent (KOS 2021, 2022).

The first local record was seen briefly by Derek Smith at Samphire Hoe on the 24<sup>th</sup> April 2006, an account of which is provided below. This was followed by a popular individual found by Mike Buckland at Round Down, above the entrance tunnel to Samphire Hoe on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2016, then two were seen by David Featherbe as they flew east past Copt Point on the 27<sup>th</sup> April 2020.

A remarkable series of records in late 2022/early 2023 began when Martin Whybrow found an exceptional flock of 11 in a field with sheep between Donkey Street and Lower Wall by on the 10<sup>th</sup> November 2022. There was no sign of the flock in that area the following day but one was seen flying west over St. Hilda’s Road in Hythe in the afternoon, whilst one was seen feeding amongst European Bison at the Port Lympne Reserve a fortnight later (on the 25<sup>th</sup> November) and one was reported flying over Earlsfield Road in Hythe on the 7<sup>th</sup> December.

In 2023 one flew north over Botolph’s Bridge before landing in a flooded field with three Little Egrets at West Hythe on the 2<sup>nd</sup> January, one flew south-west there on the 6<sup>th</sup> January and one was seen again with European Bison at the Port Lympne Reserve on the 13<sup>th</sup> and (presumably the same bird) on the 21<sup>st</sup> January. As with Great White Egrets, it is already becoming difficult to ascertain how many individuals these records relate to and there is likely to be some duplication within the total.

Given the increasing trend of occurrences and the beginning of an apparent colonisation in the county, it would seem very likely that this species will in time follow the Little Egret and Great White Egret in becoming a regular sight in the local area.

The records by year are shown in figure 1.

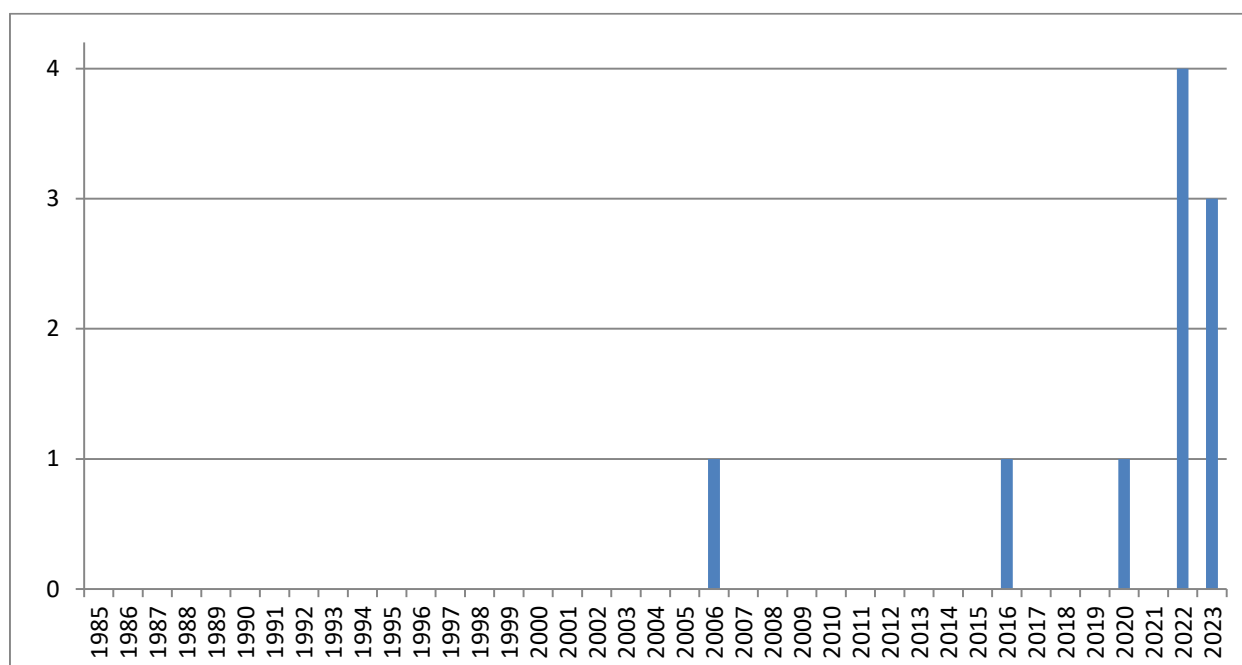


Figure 1: Cattle Egret records at Folkestone and Hythe

The records by week are given in figure 2. The first and third area records were found in April and all others between November and January.

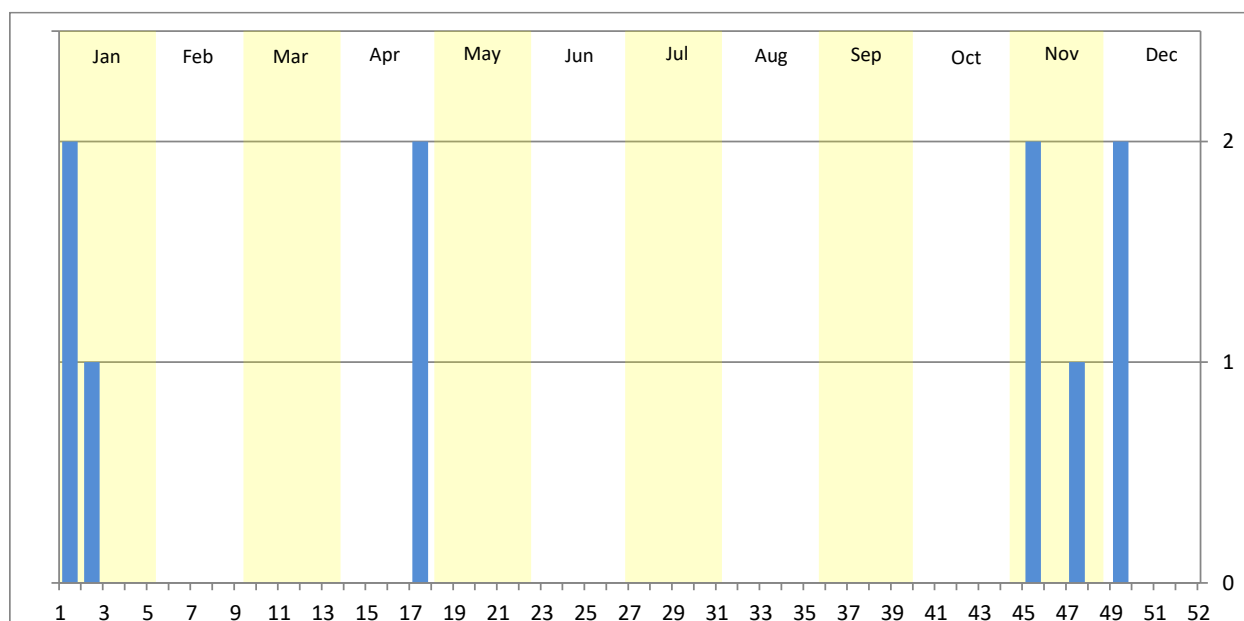


Figure 2: Cattle Egret records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Figure 3 shows the location of records by tetrad.



Figure 3: Distribution of all Cattle Egret records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The full list of records is as follows:

- 2006** Samphire Hoe, one, 24<sup>th</sup> April (D. E. Smith)
- 2016** Round Down, one, 3<sup>rd</sup> December, photographed (M. C. Buckland, P. Holt *et al*)
- 2020** Copt Point, two flew east, 27<sup>th</sup> April (D. Featherbe)
- 2022** Donkey Street/Lower Wall, 11, 10<sup>th</sup> November, photographed (M. Whybrow, I. A. Roberts, B. Harper)
- 2022** Hythe, one flew west, 11<sup>th</sup> November (I. A. Roberts)
- 2022** Port Lympe, one, 25<sup>th</sup> November (B. Harper)
- 2022** Hythe, one flew over, 7<sup>th</sup> December (reported)
- 2023** Botolph's Bridge, one flew north, then landed at West Hythe, 2<sup>nd</sup> January (I. A. Roberts), possibly same as Port Lympe
- 2023** Botolph's Bridge, one flew south-west, 6<sup>th</sup> January (I. A. Roberts), possibly same as above

**2023** Port Lympne, one, 13<sup>th</sup> January (I. A. Roberts, B. Harper), with presumed same 21<sup>st</sup> January (B. Harper), also possibly same as above

An account of the first area record is given below.

### **Cattle Egret at Samphire Hoe**

**24<sup>th</sup> April 2006**

By Derek Smith

#### **Circumstances of the find:**

On the afternoon of the 24<sup>th</sup> April 2006 I decided to take one last walk around the Hoe before going home, on approaching the main pond I saw what I thought was a Little Egret, but getting closer to a distance of about 70/80 metres I realised that there was something different about this bird, i.e. head shape, short neck and a general hunched posture, and a short bill. A description was taken at the time and is given below. After about 5 minutes the bird flew off to the west.

#### **Description of the bird:**

Size and shape: short neck, general hunched posture, and different head shape to Little Egret.

Upperparts: mainly white, with buff cap/crest and buff mantle/scapulars.

Underparts: white.

Bare parts: short, yellow beak and legs greenish-brown.



Cattle Egret at Lower Wall (Brian Harper)



Cattle Egret at Lower Wall (Brian Harper)



Cattle Egret at Round Down (Ian Roberts)



Cattle Egret at Round Down (Paul Holt)



Cattle Egret at Round Down (Paul Holt)

### ***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](#).

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Cattle Egrets at Donkey Street (Ian Roberts)