

## Bee-eater

*Merops apiaster*

Category A

Very rare vagrant.

15 records,  
41 birds

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

Breeds mostly in Mediterranean and Central Europe, eastwards through central Asia to Kazakhstan. Winters throughout sub-Saharan Africa and locally in India and the Arabian Peninsula. Its stronghold is the Iberian Peninsula with up to 40,000 pairs, although there are at least 10,000 pairs in each of Russia, Ukraine, Romania and Turkey, with up to 5,000 pairs in France, where it has been increasing and extending its range to the north.



Bee-eater at the Sands Estate, Dymchurch (Paul Apps)

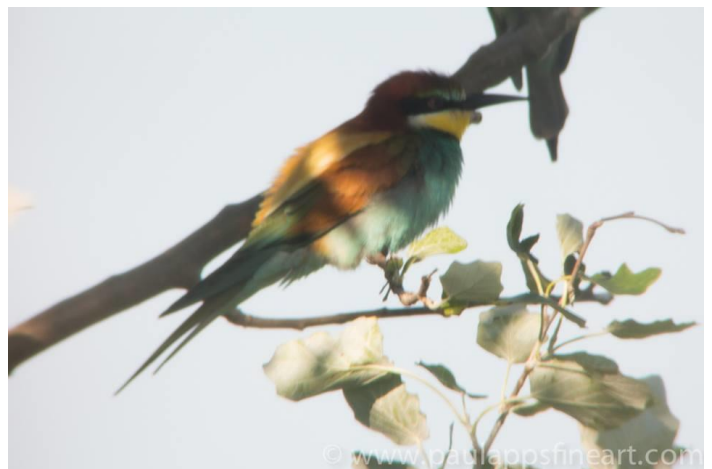
*Kent status (KOS 2022):*

It is a scarce but fairly regular migrant to the county, mainly in spring.

Ticehurst (1909) described it as one of “the rarest of stragglers to the county”, listing only three records, whilst Taylor *et al.* (1981) added a further eight. None of these were local. Nationally it was a rare migrant until the end of the 1970s (with an average of five records per annum) before 1981 saw an influx of 23 and annual totals thereafter were in double-figures in all years except 1982, with a mean of 22 per annum. It was removed from the list of species which the British Birds Rarities Committee assessed at the end of 1990, when nearly 480 sightings had been logged (Rogers *et al.* 1991).

White & Kehoe (2022) considered it to be a scarce but increasing migrant to Britain, with a mean of 71 per annum over the most recent decade, noting that “seven of the ten highest annual totals ... have occurred during the last 20 years”. Annual variability is described as high, with occasional influx years. Holling *et al.* (2019) described it as an occasional breeder in Britain citing instances in the last decade in 2014 (Isle of Wight), 2015 (Cumbria) and 2017 (Nottinghamshire), with a further instance in Norfolk in 2022 (RSPB 2022).

It is almost annual in its occurrence in Kent, with records in all but four years since 1990, and with over 150 records logged by the end of 2020. It appears to be increasing in frequency, with about 45% of those records having been amassed in the last decade. It is predominately a spring rarity in the county, with May and June contributing around 75% of sightings (KOS no date).



Bee-eater at the Sands Estate, Dymchurch (Paul Apps)

The first local record was seen at by Dale Gibson, Jamie Gibson and Ian Roberts at Abbotscliffe on the 16<sup>th</sup> May 1999, with the next at Capel Battery on the 25<sup>th</sup> May 2001. On the 16<sup>th</sup> May a flock of five were found at Dungeness and were later seen flying east at Sampire Hoe, before following the coast round to Sandwich Bay, whilst a single flew east at Abbotscliffe two days later.

After two singles in 2008 and two in 2010, a flock of ten were seen by Geoff Cooke at Saltwood on the 14<sup>th</sup> May 2013, before they flew off to the east (this equalled the second largest flock to be recorded in the county at the time).

There have been a further seven records, which included a flock of six at the Sands Estate in Dymchurch on the 26<sup>th</sup> May 2017 and a flock of nine seen arriving in off the sea at Folkestone Warren on the 9<sup>th</sup> June 2021.

The records by year are shown in figure 1 and shows an increasing frequency of appearance, in line with the county trend.

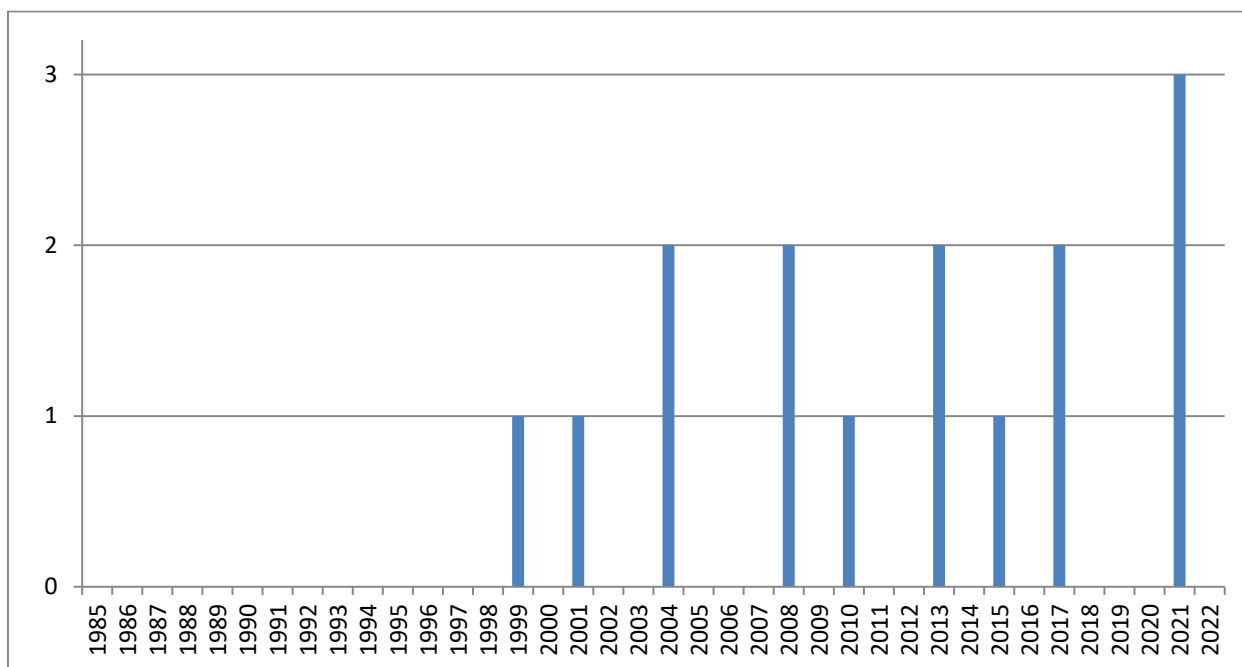


Figure 1: Bee-eater records at Folkestone and Hythe

All records to date have occurred in spring, between 14<sup>th</sup> May (week 20) and 26<sup>th</sup> June (week 26), with a distinct peak in week 20 (between the 14<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> May), as demonstrated by figure 2.

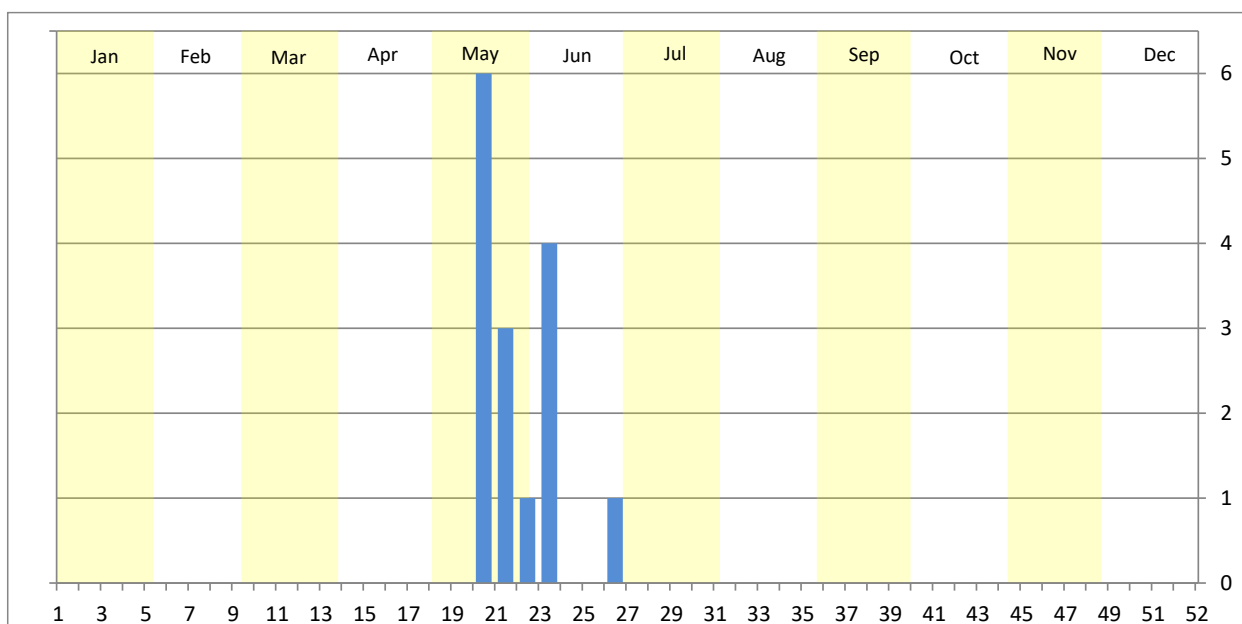


Figure 2: Bee-eater records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Figure 3 shows the location of records by tetrad. Just over half of the records are from the cliffs, between Folkestone Warren and Samphire Hoe, with two others just inland at Church Hougham, and the others scattered between Hythe, Saltwood, Newingreen and Dymchurch.



Figure 3: Distribution of all Bee-eater records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The full list of records is as follows:

- 1999** Abbotscliffe, one flew west, 16<sup>th</sup> May (D. A. Gibson, I. A. Roberts, J. A. Gibson)
- 2001** Capel Battery, one, 25<sup>th</sup> May (I. A. Roberts, D. A. Gibson *et al*)
- 2004** Samphire Hoe, five flew east, 16<sup>th</sup> May (C. S. Johnson). This flock had originally been seen at Dungeness, and were later tracked over St. Margaret's, Bockhill, and Kingsdown, to Sandwich Bay
- 2004** Abbotscliffe, one flew east, 18<sup>th</sup> May (I. A. Roberts)
- 2008** Church Hougham, one, 14<sup>th</sup> May (M. Kennett)
- 2008** Samphire Hoe, one, 3<sup>rd</sup> June (P. Holt)
- 2010** Samphire Hoe, two flew west, 8<sup>th</sup> June (P. Holt, D. E. Smith)
- 2013** Saltwood, ten, then flew east, 14<sup>th</sup> May (G. Cooke)
- 2013** Hythe, one, 24<sup>th</sup> May (S. McMinn), presumed same later flying north-west over Nickolls Quarry (I. A. Roberts)
- 2015** Newingreen, one on wires, 26<sup>th</sup> June (P. Coleman)
- 2017** Hythe, at least one heard calling, 14<sup>th</sup> May (I. A. Roberts)
- 2017** Sands Estate (Dymchurch), six, then flew east, 26<sup>th</sup> May (P. Apps)
- 2021** Samphire Hoe, one heard calling, 31<sup>st</sup> May (P. Holt)
- 2021** Folkestone Warren, nine flew in off the sea, then flew east, 9<sup>th</sup> June (I. A. Roberts), later heard at Langdon Bay
- 2021** Church Hougham, one heard calling, 9<sup>th</sup> June (M. D. Kennett)

An account of the first area record is given below.

## **Bee-eater at Abbotscliffe**

**16<sup>th</sup> May 1999**

By Ian Roberts

### **Weather conditions:**

A dry day with a cool north-easterly wind (force 4-5), 3-7/8 cloud cover and good visibility.

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

At about 09:50 Dale, Jamie and I were at Abbotscliffe, and with the area done we had settled down to watch any visual migration, which up to then had involved just a trickle of Swallows and House Martins. Dale was sheltering from the cool north-easterly breeze just below the cliff-top, I was doing likewise behind my car and Jamie was catching up on some sleep in his, when I heard what sounded like a Bee-eater.

I did not believe for a moment that it would be and was looking around for a Starling or something else giving an odd call when it called again, closer and clearer and very much like a Bee-eater. At this point Dale appeared from below the cliff-top looking very agitated and shouting something that involved the words "Bee-eater" and I bellowed something of a similar nature into Jamie's ear.

Mercifully all three of us were onto the bird quickly as it emerged from behind the cliff, really quite close (probably about 100 yards range) and with the sea as a backdrop to its stunning colours. We got scopes on it and had superb views as it slowly headed west and steadily gained height over Folkestone Warren, pausing in flight occasionally to hawk insects. We eventually lost it to view high and distant and beyond the Gun Site at Capel-le-Ferne.

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

Size, shape, jizz: unmistakable shape with a long, tapering body, long, broad, triangular wings and long extending tail streamers and very distinctive flight, undulating and gliding, with series of rapid, deep, elastic wing-beats.

Head and upperparts: the upperparts were colourful and fairly complex with yellow, russet-brown, blue and green areas, being difficult to describe accurately when only seen for a few minutes. It appeared that the crown, upper back and inner wings were russet-brown, with the scapulars and perhaps the lower back being a bright yellow. The outer parts of the wings and tail were blue or green, with a darker trailing edge to the wings.

Underparts: the underparts were simpler, with a bright yellow throat neatly separated from the blue underside by a black collar. The underwings were a peachy brown, with a broad dark trailing edge.

Bare parts: the bill and eye looked dark.

Call: a loud, liquid and very distinctive 'prrup'.

### **Comments on the record:**

The record was accepted by the KOS rarities committee and appears in the Kent Bird Report for that year (KOS 2001).

## **References**

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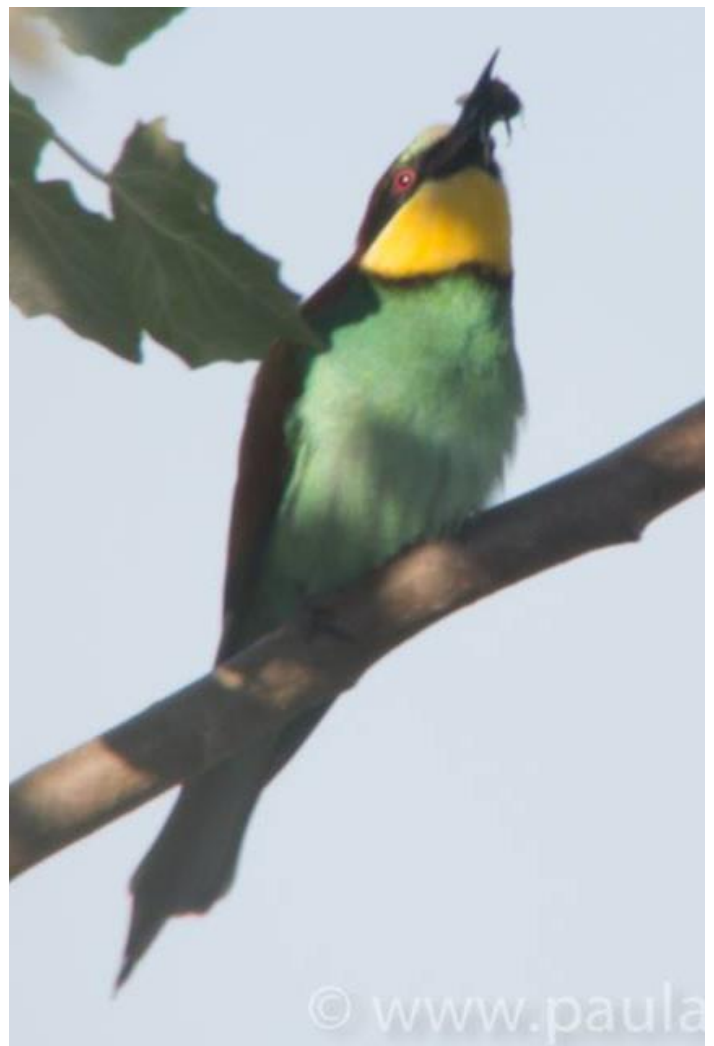
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### **Acknowledgements**

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.



Bee-eater at the Sands Estate, Dymchurch (Paul Apps)