

Herring Gull

Larus argentatus

Category A

Breeding resident, winter visitor and passage migrant.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds across much of northern Europe eastwards in a narrowing band across Siberia to the Bering Sea coast. It is mainly migratory in northern Norway, the Gulf of Bothnia, Finland, the Baltic States and Russia, but elsewhere it is either resident or dispersive to varying degrees. In all populations immatures remain widely distributed in summer. It underwent a marked and widespread increase during the twentieth century, mainly due to protection and its increased exploitation of waste food provided by man.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

In Kent it is a numerous breeding species that is now found far more on buildings than in natural sites, and also a passage migrant and winter visitor.

The Herring Gull was included in Knight and Tolputt's "List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood" (1871). This list covered an area of six miles radius from Folkestone town hall, therefore extending further inland than the current Folkestone and Hythe area, so this does not provide conclusive evidence of its occurrence here. However, Ticehurst (1909) considered it to be "next to the Black-headed Gull ... the most numerous of this family round the coast of Kent at all seasons", so there can be little doubt that it was to be found locally.

Ticehurst was only aware of breeding taking place at Dungeness and on the chalk cliffs to the east of Dover, with the earliest reference to "a few pairs" nesting there dating from 1842, but he remarked on a "very considerable" increase to 400 pairs by 1887. Harrison (1953) specified that the colony originated in the St. Margaret's Bay area and that in 1947 the "chief breeding area is between St. Margaret's Bay and Dover, most of the nests being on the cliff face", where 700 pairs were present, and continued that "there are fewer suitable nesting ledges between Dover and Folkestone", presumably as the cliff is less steep, but provided no details regarding numbers.



Herring Gull at Hotel Imperial golf course (Brian Harper)



Herring Gull at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)



Herring Gull at Battery Point (Brian Harper)

The only references in Kent Bird Reports to cliff-nesting birds in the Folkestone & Hythe area were that c.40 breeding pairs were found in the vicinity of Abbotscliffe in 1957 by J. V. Perrott and that 31 pairs were noted between Folkestone and Dover in 1986. Cliff-nesting between Folkestone and Dover appears to have ceased during the 1990s though two pairs bred on the ground at Samphire Hoe in 1997, before it opened to the public in July of that year.

Harrison recounted how the spread to buildings for nest sites was first noted at Dover in 1936 and this colony grew rapidly, increasing to 200 pairs by 1946. He also included the first record of roof-nesting in the Folkestone area when he and his son saw “on the 25th March 1952, a pair of Herring Gulls ... displaying and calling on the roof-top of a shop in the Sandgate Road, Folkestone. This behaviour may possibly portend, at some future date, the establishment of a breeding colony there, such as exists in Dover”.

Further reports soon followed in 1954, when Geoffrey Manser saw 11 (three sitting) at Folkestone, and 1956, when A. Clough noted that one pair reared four young in a roof-top nest at Folkestone and another nest was found on a roof-top at nearby Cheriton. However, there is little information in relation to local nesting Herring Gulls in subsequent Kent Bird Reports apart from reference to dedicated censuses.



Herring Gull at Folkestone (Brian Harper)



Herring Gull at Hythe (Brian Harper)

The first census of gulls nesting on buildings in Britain and Ireland was organised in 1969 by the Seabird Group (Cramp *et al.* 1974) and found a single nest at Folkestone. A second survey, coordinated by Monaghan & Coulson (1977), followed just seven years later in 1976, but by this time the population had expanded to 20 pairs.

It was a decade later that Shepway District Council commissioned the University of Durham to assess “the scale of the problems presented by” Herring Gulls nesting in Folkestone and to make recommendations on methods of control, which led to Worsfold (1996) reporting that “two counts in May and June [1986] revealed a total of 386 nesting pairs”. This was however slightly lower figure than that belatedly included in the 1991 Kent Bird Report: “1986 Counts of breeding pairs included ... 410 on buildings in Folkestone and Cheriton”. The 1991 report also mentions seven pairs on buildings in Hythe.

The University of Durham, with the endorsement of the British Trust for Ornithology, also coordinated a national survey in 1994 (Raven & Coulson, 1997) which reported 550 Herring Gull nests at Folkestone and 46 at Hythe, with a mixed Herring x Lesser Black-backed Gull pairing also at Folkestone.

A gap of 25 years ensued until the next survey, when the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) coordinated a census of gulls nesting in non-natural sites in Britain during the 2019 breeding season. A total of 877 apparently occupied Herring Gulls nests were recorded across the area, with an additional 138 apparently occupied territories, giving an overall total of between 877 and 1,015 breeding pairs. For details of survey methods etc. refer to Roberts (2021).

The numbers by 10km hectad are shown in the table below:

Hectad	AON	AOT	Nesting population
TR13	372	434	372 – 434 pairs
TR23	505	581	505 – 581 pairs
Total	877	1,015	877 – 1,015 pairs

The numbers of nests and territories by 2km tetrad are summarised in the tables below. The detailed results by 1km monads with maps of the nest locations can be found [here](#).

TR13		
Tetrad	AON	AOT
TR13 A	3	12
TR13 B	0	1
TR13 C	4	9
TR13 D	0	0
TR13 E	0	1
TR13 F	8	10
TR13 G	6	19
TR13 H	1	2
TR13 I	11	13
TR13 J	0	0
TR13 L	2	8
TR13 M	106	115
TR13 N	0	0
TR13 P	0	0
TR13 S	51	57
TR13 T	0	0
TR13 U	0	0
TR13 X	19	25
TR13 Y	161	162
TR13 Z	0	0
Total	372	434

TR23		
Tetrad	AON	AOT
TR23 C	52	60
TR23 D	183	187
TR23 E	0	1
TR23 H	51	84
TR23 I	208	230
TR23 J	0	0
TR23 N	3	3
TR23 P	3	11
TR23 U	0	0
TR23 Z	5	5
Total	505	581

Previous surveys have not provided precise definitions of the areas that have been considered to comprise “Folkestone and Cheriton” or “Hythe” so was necessary to make some assumptions in order to analyse trends. It was assumed that the tetrad TR13 X contains the boundary between Folkestone and Hythe, where the western half of the tetrad (the Seabrook area) is generally considered to be part of Hythe and the eastern half (the Sandgate area) is generally considered to be part of Folkestone.

Therefore, Folkestone was considered to comprise the western half of TR13 X (monads TR1934/1935) and all of TR13 Y, TR23 C, TR23 D, TR23 H, TR23 I and TR23 N, whilst Hythe comprises the eastern half of TR13 X (monads TR1834/1835) and all of TR13 G, TR13 L, TR13 M and TR13 S.

It also was assumed that previous surveys have given their totals based on the number of apparently occupied nests (Raven & Coulson confirm that this was the methodology for the 1994 census). The 1986 total is the higher figure that appears in 1991 Kent Bird Report, rather than the lower number quoted by Worsfold.

The table below shows the numbers of Herring Gull nests recorded in the five surveys listed above:

	1969	1976	1986	1994	2019
Folkestone	1	20	410	550	670
Hythe	0	0	7	46	172
Total	1	20	417	596	842

The overall numbers of Herring Gulls have increased by 246 pairs (41%) since the 1994 survey, a growth rate of 1.7% per annum on average, with a larger increase in the Hythe area (126 pairs, 274%) than Folkestone (120 pairs, 22%). There is insufficient data to enable a more detailed analysis of the population trends and the factors which enable and restrict growth in numbers are numerous and complex in nature.

A small number of Herring Gull nests (35) from outlying areas have been excluded from the comparison above. It is not clear in all cases whether these were in areas not covered under previous surveys or new colonisations. The 1994 survey reported that “one pair ... was reported as being distinctly territorial in Dymchurch, but no nest was a found”, whilst the 2019 survey found three nests and a further nine territories within the Sands Estate (TR13 A) and another eight nests and two territories in TR13 C, centred upon the New Beach holiday park, so this would appear to be an area that has been colonised since the earlier survey. One nest and a territory were found at Lympne (TR13 H), which was not mentioned in the 1994 survey, but where two pairs had bred in 2011.

At least four nests and five territories were found at the Lympne Industrial Park (TR13 C) and at least 11 nests and two territories were noted on industrial buildings in the Westenhangar area (TR13 I), with probably more present as neither of these sites could not be fully accessed. Some of these industrial units appear to have been constructed since the last survey so this would appear most likely to be another colonisation, although a small number of nests could have been overlooked previously. At Samphire Hoe five Herring Gull nests were present on the buildings there, which have been constructed since the previous survey (breeding was first reported there in 2013). Finally, there were also three nests and eight territories at Capel-le-Ferne which is a site that had not previously been mentioned.

As Worsfold observed, in the towns gulls showed a preference for old, high, well-built structures with stout chimney stacks, particularly properties built before 1920. Flat roof sections where extensions had been added were also popular. Additionally, the birds built on pitched roofs, the nests often wedged between chimney pots, dormer windows or roof tiles. In some areas more modern and single storey buildings were also used to a lesser extent.



Herring Gull at Seabrook (Brian Harper)



Herring Gull at Seabrook (Brian Harper)

Large commercial or industrial buildings with shallow, pitched roofs, or flat roofs with large vents were used extensively and as Raven & Coulson stated, here the colonies could be much denser. The greatest concentrations locally involved 89 on buildings within the Channel Tunnel Terminal site complex (in TR13 Y) and 106 pairs on buildings at the Park Farm Industrial Estate in Folkestone (TR23 D/TR23 I).

These colonies have been continued to be surveyed since the 2019 census and the population increase has also generally continued, as the table below demonstrates:

Year	Channel Tunnel Terminal site (in TR13 Y)			Park Farm Industrial Estate West (in TR23 D)			Park Farm Industrial Estate East (in TR23 I)		
	AON	Variance	Var%	AON	Variance	Var%	AON	Variance	Var%
2019	89			53			53		
2020	114	+25	+28%	60	+7	+13%	75	+22	+42%
2021	108	-6	-5%	75	+15	+25%	80	+5	+7%
2022	120	+14	+13%	75	0	-	67	-13	-19%

The overall population across the three colonies increased from 195 in 2019 to 249 in 2020 (+28%), and to 263 in 2021 (+6%), then remained stable at 262 in 2022.

Breeding atlas distribution

Figure 1 shows the breeding distribution by tetrad based on the results of the 2007-13 BTO/KOS atlas fieldwork.

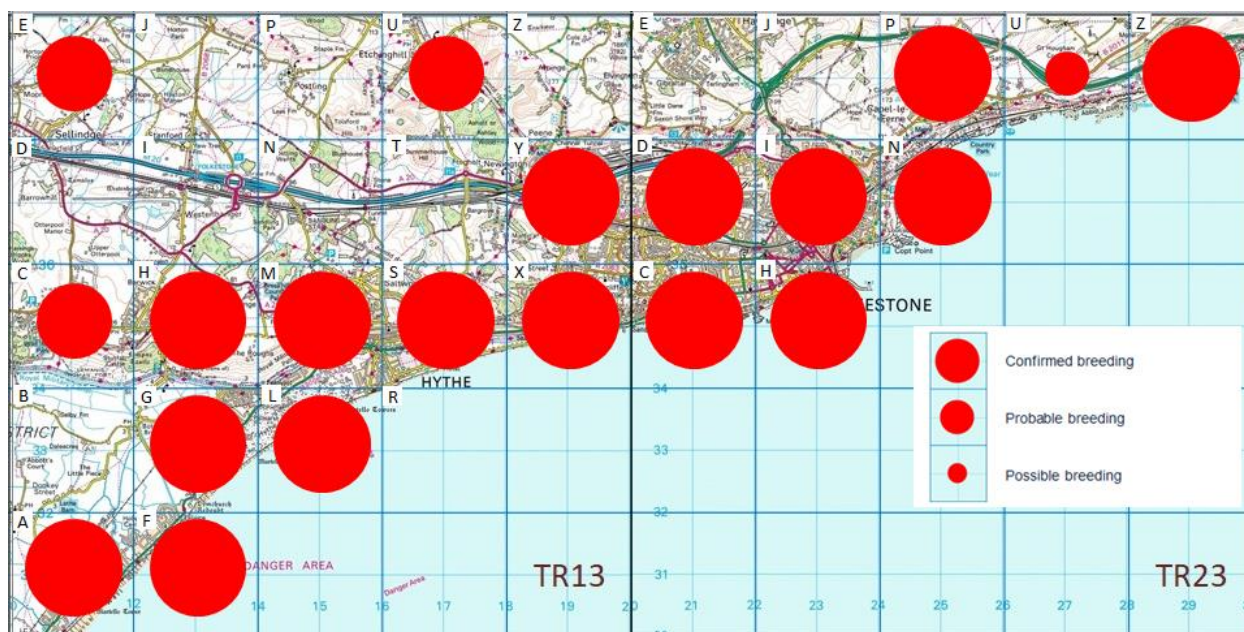


Figure 1: Breeding distribution of Herring Gull at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was confirmed in 16 tetrads, with probable breeding in three more and possible breeding in one other. The table below shows how this compares to previous atlases (Taylor *et al.* 1981; Henderson & Hodge 1998). The confirmed and probable breeding categories have been combined to account for differing definitions of these in the first atlas.

Breeding atlases	1967 - 1973		1988 - 1994		2007 - 2013	
Possible	0	(0%)	6	(19%)	1	(3%)
Probable/Confirmed	8	(26%)	14	(45%)	19	(61%)
Total	8	(26%)	20	(65%)	20	(65%)
Change			+12	(+150%)	0	(+0%)

The table below shows the changes in tetrad occupancy across the three atlas periods.

Trends	First to second atlas (1967-73 to 1988-94)	Second to third atlas (1988-94 to 2007-13)	First to third atlas (1967-73 to 2007-13)
Local	+150%	+0%	+150%
Kent	+215%	+46%	+359%



Herring Gulls at Folkestone (Brian Harper)



Herring Gull at Folkestone (Brian Harper)

There was a marked spread its in range between the first and second atlases but no overall change in distribution between the second and third atlases, although the higher proportion of probable/confirmed record presumably reflects the increase in population having made the gathering of necessary evidence easier.

The atlases made no attempt to assess population levels. The results of the 2019 census found probable/confirmed breeding in 21 tetrads (68%) confirming that the distribution continues to change little.

Overall distribution

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of Herring Gull by tetrad, with records in 31 tetrads (100%).

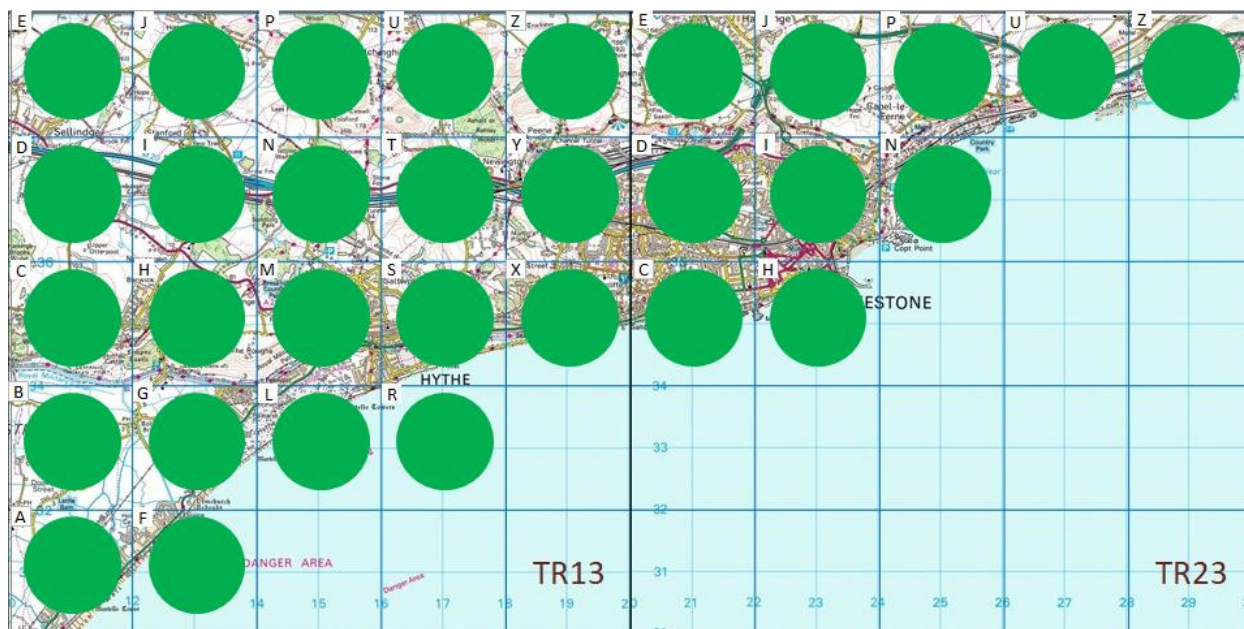


Figure 2: Distribution of all Herring Gull records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Counts of 1,000 or more are not infrequent in the winter months roosts are rarely counted

Outside of the breeding season large congregations may be noted in any month, although this species is often taken for granted and infrequently counted. Gatherings in excess of 500 have been noted as follows:

- 700 at Church Hougham on the 8th September 1997
- 550 at Church Hougham on the 6th March 1998
- 800 at Copt Point on the 16th January 1999
- 1,000 at Copt Point on the 16th and 19th Mar 1999
- 800 at Folkestone Harbour on the 16th January 2000
- 1,500+ at Copt Point on the 29th January 2000
- 1,000 at Copt Point on the 29th February 2000
- c.1,250 off the Dymchurch Redoubt on the 8th June 2001
- 1,200 at Mill Point on the 18th December 2006
- 600 at Copt Point on the 1st March 2009
- c.1,000 at Hythe on the 16th December 2012
- 650 at Botolph's Bridge on the 22nd October 2013

There has been little indication of any visible migration.

A large number of colour-ringed birds have been noted, many of which were ringed by the North Thames Gull Group at the Essex Landfill Tips and reveal a frequent interchange of birds between south-east England and northern France. Longer distance movements have included a bird ringed as a juvenile at Raversijde in Belgium in July 2012 that was then noted in the Netherlands and France before visiting Hythe in December 2014, and a first-year bird ringed in Essex in March 2017 that travelled north to Northumberland in August 2017 before being noted at Folkestone in January 2019.

A bird ringed as an adult in Essex in January 2013 was noted in summer 2018 and 2019 on territory at Hawkinge, providing evidence of breeding site fidelity.



Herring Gull at Folkestone (Brian Harper)



Herring Gull on nest at Hythe (Ian Roberts)



Herring Gull with chicks at Hythe (Ian Roberts)



Herring Gull with chicks at Hythe (Ian Roberts)



Herring Gulls at Samphire Hoe (Martin Collins)



Herring Gull at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)

References

- Cramp, S., Bourne W. R. P. & Saunders, D. 1974. The Seabirds of Britain and Ireland. London.
- Harrison, J. M. 1953. *The Birds of Kent*. Witherby, London.
- Henderson, A. & Hodge, T. 1998. The Kent Breeding Bird Atlas 1988-94. *Kent Bird Report 1996*: 134-272.
- Kent Ornithological Society (KOS). 1953-2021. *Kent Bird Reports*. Kent Ornithological Society.
- Knight, V. & Tolputt, F. 1871. List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood. *Fourth Annual Report of the Folkestone Natural History Society*. Available at: www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/46103
- Monaghan, P. & Coulson, J. C. 1977. Status of Large Gulls Nesting on Buildings. *Bird Study* 24:2, 89-104.
- Raven, S. J. & Coulson, J. C. 1997. The distribution and abundance of *Larus* gulls nesting on buildings in Britain and Ireland. *Bird Study* 44:1, 13-34.
- Roberts, I. A. 2021. Roof-nesting Gulls in Folkestone & Hythe 2019. *Kent Bird Report 2019*. Kent Ornithological Society.
- Snow, D. & Perrins, C.M. 1998. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, D., Davenport, D. & Flegg, J. 1981. *Birds of Kent*. Kent Ornithological Society.
- Ticehurst, N. F. 1909. *A History of the Birds of Kent*. Witherby, London.
- Worsfold, D. C. H. 1996. Roof-nesting gulls in Kent 1994: a review. *Kent Bird Report 1994*: 53-161. Kent Ornithological Society.

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.



Herring Gull at Folkestone (Brian Harper)



Herring Gull at Folkestone Harbour (Ian Roberts)