

Velvet Scoter

Melanitta fusca

Category A

Scarce winter visitor and passage migrant.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds in Fenno-Scandia and northern Russia, moving south and west to winter mainly in coastal waters of north and north-west Europe, generally closer to breeding range than Common Scoter.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

A regular but scarce passage migrant and winter to visitor to coast in Kent.



Velvet Scoter at the Dymchurch Redoubt (Ian Roberts)

The Velvet Scoter 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, this species is almost exclusively marine so it is nearly certain that it would have been recorded from the coast and so within the modern boundaries. Furthermore, Ticehurst (1909) mentioned that there was one in the collection of H. Lemmon from Hythe, which was quite possibly the basis for its inclusion by Knight and Tolputt.

Ticehurst considered it to be "a regular winter visitor to the seas and estuaries round the Kent coast, but is only seen in numbers during hard weather. Off the south coast it is occasionally seen in large flocks, but most frequently it occurs in pairs or as single birds associating with the flocks of the commoner species".

Harrison (1953) wrote of an increase in the early twentieth century and gave details of a flock of up to 6,000 scoters in the bay to the west of Dungeness in winter of 1934/35, of which around half were of this species. The same winter provided the first dated record locally, when Miss Alice Stone saw two with a party of Guillemots off Folkestone on the 1st and 2nd December 1934.

Overall distribution

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



Figure 1: Distribution of all Velvet Scoter records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Taylor *et al.* (1981) remarked that such large numbers were unheard of during their review period (1952-76), and that any count in double-figures warranted special interest but were unable to speculate on a reason for the change. This same period provided at least a further 15 local records including seven off the Dymchurch Redoubt between 1951 and 1962, where there were sightings in winter (January), spring (April) and autumn (September and October), and maxima of 7 on the 8th October 1957 and 10 between the 11th and 20th April 1958 (Norman 2006). There were four records from Nickolls Quarry (which are still the only records away from the coast): two on the 13th January 1951 and single drakes on the 9th February 1951, 27th January 1952 and 13th January 1958 (Norman 2007). The remaining sightings relate to one of Hythe in early January 1966, one off Folkestone on the 21st August 1966 (the only summer record to date), ones or twos reported off the Dymchurch Redoubt in January/February 1970 and one off Hythe on the 16th January 1974.

After a scattering of records in the early 1980s, including seven flying east past Copt Point on the 30th April 1985, it has been recorded almost annually since 1989.

There have been October records in seven of those years, with the earliest on the 6th October (2016) and November records in nine, with only small numbers involved and a peak of five off Mill Point on the 25th November 1998. The winter (December to February) period has produced records in 17 (61%) of years since 1989, with ten flying west past Copt Point on the 9th December 1993, a flock of up to eight lingering off Mill Point from the 25th November to the 16th December 1998 and eight flying west past Samphire Hoe on the 24th December 2013 of note.

Spring passage may be noted from the last week of March until the third week of May, with records in 17 (61%) of years since 1989, and this season tends to produce the largest numbers, with double-figure counts as follows:

- 10 east past Copt Point on the 23rd April 2000
- 29 east past Copt Point on the 21st April 2003
- 14 east past Copt Point on the 10th May 2004
- 13 east past Samphire Hoe on 16th April 2005
- 13 east past Copt Point on the 19th April 2005
- 10 east past Samphire Hoe on 16th April 2008
- 10 east past Samphire Hoe on 3rd May 2013
- 10 east past Hythe on the 11th April 2016



Velvet Scoter with Common Scoters at Hythe Ranges (Ian Roberts)

References

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Acknowledgements

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Velvet Scoters at Mill Point (Brian Harper)