

Gull-billed Tern

Gelochelidon nilotica

Category A

Very rare vagrant.

1 record

A small population breeds in northern Germany and Denmark, and it is widespread though localised in Spain. To the east it breeds discontinuously from Turkey and south-west Russia, through Kazakhstan, Mongolia and north-west China. The European population winters in coastal western Africa, south to the Gulf of Guinea. Asian populations winter in the Persian Gulf to the Indian subcontinent and south-east Asia. Also occurs in the Americas (Snow & Perrins, 1998).

It is a rare but regular vagrant to Britain, with 377 records to the end of 2019, with a recent average of between three and four records per annum. 56 of these sightings were in Kent, but most occurred prior to 1980, with only seven records since. Kent records have fallen between late April and early October, with a peak in August. There had not been a July record in Kent prior to 1971, but five of the last 13 have occurred in that month.

The only local record involved one seen off Copt Point by Dale Gibson on the 11th July 1997.

The record by year is shown in figure 1.

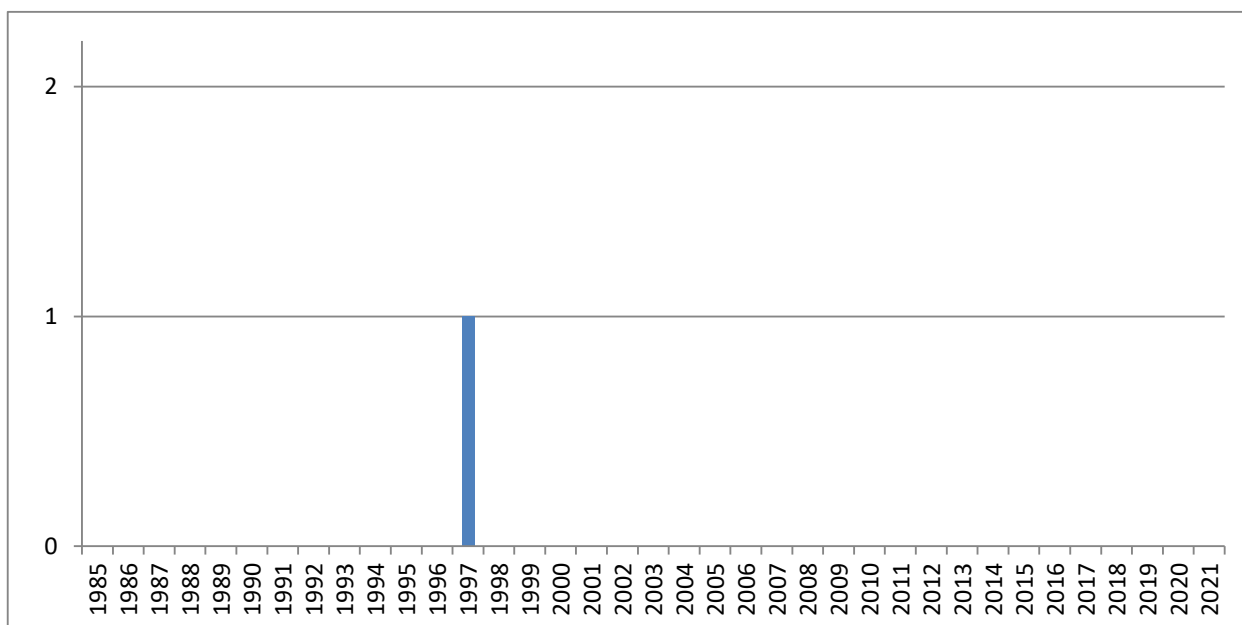


Figure 1: Gull-billed Tern records at Folkestone and Hythe

The record by week is given in figure 2

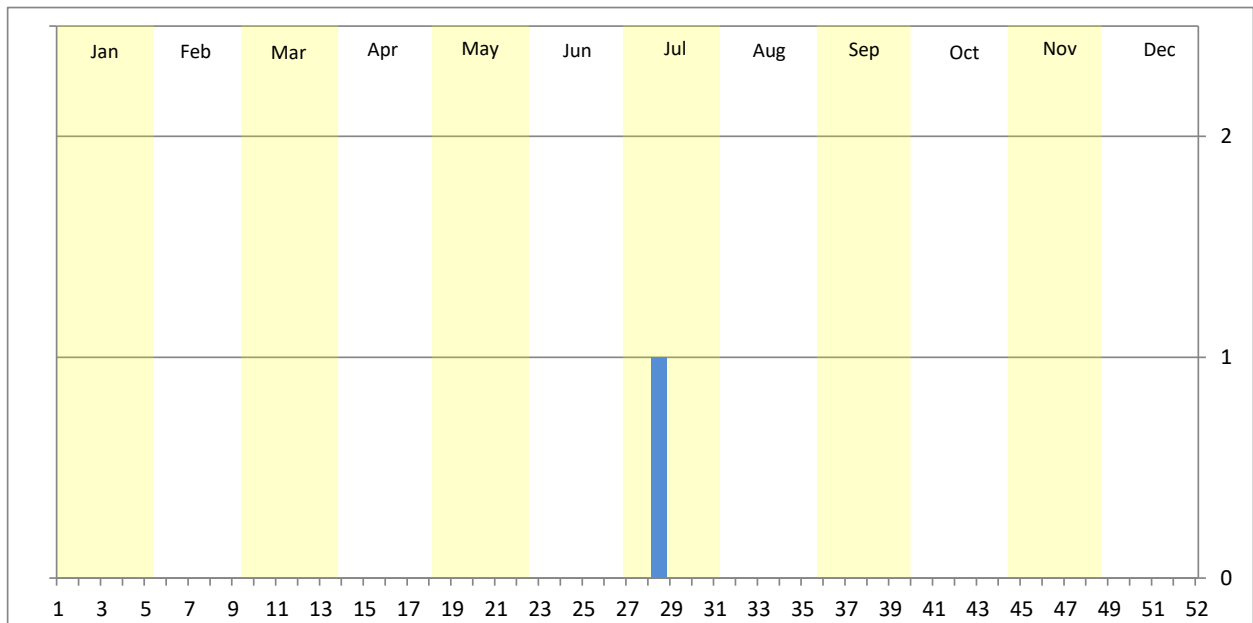


Figure 2: Gull-billed Tern records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Figure 3 shows the distribution of records by tetrad.



Figure 3: Distribution of all Gull-billed Tern records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Confirmation of the only area record is as follows:

1997 Copt Point, 11th July (D. A. Gibson)

An account of the first area record is given below.

Gull-billed Tern at Copt Point

11th July 1997

(Dale A Gibson)

Weather conditions:

A sunny, mild day with good visibility to about 1 to 1.5 miles, but with haze further out and high mist overhead. There was a light to moderate (force 3-4) north-easterly wind.

Circumstances of the find:

I was on the rocks at Copt Point scanning the sea, when from behind the pier I noticed five terns coming towards the point. I got my telescope (Kowa 30x) on to them, and could see that they were Sandwich Terns, however the last bird looked different. It had a short, stubby, all-black bill, more rounded wing-tips, broader wings and a more stocky body.

As they passed by feeding, I saw a dark smudge on the underside of the primaries, darker than that shown by the Sandwich Terns, and a greyer wash to the upperparts. It came within 100-150 metres, and I had views at this range in good light for 30-40 seconds, then a few minutes in poorer light as it flew towards the sun. The combination of structure and plumage left no doubt that it was an adult Gull-billed Tern.

As it was flying away, it was still easily picked out from the other terns, even when silhouetted, as the more languid gull-like flight was obvious.

Description of the bird:

Size, shape, jizz: The shape and flight were very different from Sandwich Tern, and made it easy to pick out. The wings were broader, with more rounded wing-tips, and the body was more stocky. The flight was more languid, and more like that of a small gull.

Head and upperparts: Crown black. Mantle grey, perhaps a shade darker than Sandwich Tern. Rump grey, unlike Sandwich. Tail and wings darker grey, with darker tips to the outer primaries.

Underparts: Whitish body, with grey underwings and a darker smudge on the tips of the underside of the primaries, which was more prominent (extended further along the trailing edge) than on Sandwich Tern.

Bare parts: The bill was shorter and stubbier than that of Sandwich Tern, and was all-black, lacking the yellow tip.

References

BBRC statistics: <https://www.bbrc.org.uk/main-information/statistics> (accessed 2021)

Kent Bird Reports. Kent Ornithological Society

KOS Kent list: <https://kentos.org.uk/kent-list> (accessed 2021)

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

Acknowledgements

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