

Sandwich Tern

Thalasseus sandvicensis

Category A

Non-breeding summer visitor and passage migrant, rare in winter.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds in scattered colonies around the coasts of Europe, including the Black and Caspian Seas, and North America. Western European birds winter mainly along the west coast of Africa, from Mauritania south. Birds from the Black Sea winter in the eastern Black Sea, the Mediterranean Sea and along coasts of Spain and Portugal. Birds from the Caspian Sea winter mainly in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea.



Sandwich Tern at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)

Kent status (KOS 2021; Clements et al. 2015):

In Kent it is a summer visitor that currently breeds in the Medway estuary and also a passage migrant, with one or two wintering in most years. It formerly bred at Sandwich Bay and on the Dungeness Peninsula until the mid-nineteenth century, becoming temporarily re-established at Dungeness between 1978 and 1993 and from 1996 to 1997. A new colony became established on Burntwick Island in the Medway estuary in 1996 and steadily increased to a peak in 2003 but with evidence of a gradual decline since.

The Sandwich Tern was not included in Knight and Tolputt's "List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood" (1871) and neither Ticehurst (1909) nor Harrison (1953) made mention of any local records, so the first area occurrence involved one seen by Dave Musson off Hythe on the unseasonable date of the 27th December 1955, which was the only winter record in the county during the review period (1952-1976) of Taylor *et al.* (1981).

This was soon followed by two seen by Roger Norman as they flew up-channel past Hythe Ranges on the 29th April 1957. He also noted four on the shore there the following day and four fishing offshore there on the 1st September of that year. Two were seen offshore there on the 14th April 1958, whilst "several" were noted on the 28th June 1964, with at least two offshore on the 20th June 1968 (Norman 2006). Roger was also able to provide a record from Nickolls Quarry, where two were present on the 14th April 1958. In the 1980s R. & S. Philpott noted it as "seasonally regular" at Nickolls Quarry but provided no details regarding dates or numbers (Norman 2007).



Sandwich Tern at Folkestone Warren (Brian Harper)



Sandwich Tern at Folkestone Warren (Brian Harper)

The paucity of sightings in the 1970s and 1980s was no doubt attributable to lack of coverage as 46 were seen flying east past Copt Point on the 17th April 1983 and it has been noted annually since 1985.

Overall distribution

Figure 1 shows the distribution of all records of Sandwich Tern by tetrad, with records in 13 tetrads (42%).



Figure 1: Distribution of all Sandwich Tern records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Numbers are at their lowest in mid-summer but it is still regularly noted offshore, when birds are frequently fishing in Hythe Bay. These presumably originate from the colony at Rye Harbour in East Sussex, or formerly from Dungeness. Double-figure counts though are unusual in June, with maxima in that month of 29 flying past Mill Point on the 14th June 1988 and 25 flying past Hythe on the 1st June 2014.

Autumn passage commences in July with largest numbers usually in the last week of the month, when 41 were seen off the Dymchurch Redoubt on the 27th July 2004, 112 flew past Samphire Hoe on the 26th July 2006 and 30 were seen off Hythe on the 29th July 2016. Migration peaks during August or September, when counts in excess of 100 have been noted as follows:

- 155 west past Copt Point on the 28th August 1997
- 125 west past Copt Point on the 30th August 1997
- c.250 on the beach at Hythe Ranges on the 8th August 2002
- 130 west past Samphire Hoe on the 5th September 2006
- 200 on the beach at Copt Point 21st September 2007
- 500 west past Copt Point/Samphire Hoe on the 3rd August 2008
- 145 east past Copt Point on the 16th August 2011
- 119 on the beach at Hythe Ranges on the 29th August 2014
- c.250 off the Dymchurch Redoubt on the 28th September 2016
- 182 west past Seabrook on the 4th August 2017
- 198 west past Seabrook on the 5th August 2017
- c.1,000 off Hythe on the 23rd September 2018
- 300 off Copt Point on the 6th September 2019
- 200 off Seabrook on the 7th September 2019, with 166 there the next day

A count of c.250 off Mill Point on the 1st October 2021 is the only three-figure count in that month and numbers tend to dwindle quickly, with the only double-figure totals after mid-October comprising 10 off the Dymchurch Redoubt on the 21st October 2021 and 13 off Hythe Ranges on the 28th October 2018.

November records are a recent phenomenon, with the first occurring in 2010, when singles were seen flying east past Copt Point on the 8th November and flying east past Sandgate the following. No further sightings followed until 2018 but it has been noted in every year since. In 2018 singles were seen off Hythe on the 7th, Folkestone Pier on the 15th and Mill Point on the 19th November, whilst in 2019 there were sightings on nine dates to the 16th November, including exceptional counts of seven flying east past Folkestone Pier on the 14th and four flying east past Mill Point on the 16th November. In 2020 there were ones and twos on several dates to the 19th November and 2021 saw eight further records, including four off Hythe Ranges on the 7th November and one off Mill Point on the 29th November. The trend continued in 2022 when there were three double-figure counts, including 21 passing Mill Point on the 15th and 17 passing Princes Parade on the 21st November.



Sandwich Tern at Folkestone Sands (David Featherbe)



Sandwich Tern at Folkestone Sands (David Featherbe)



Sandwich Tern at Battery Point (Ian Roberts)



Sandwich Tern at Hythe (Glenn Tutton)

Sightings in December remain very rare but are also showing indications of becoming more regular. The bird seen off Hythe on the 27th December 1955 was the only winter record in the county prior to 1978 and it was still rare in 1989, when one was seen flying east and then later west past Mill Point on the 6th December 1989. However, 2020 produced two records, with two seen off the Willop Outfall on the 12th and 20th December, whilst in 2022 there were eight in Hythe Bay on the 1st, five off Hythe on the 2nd, seven off Battery Point/Hythe on the 4th and one off Hythe Ranges on the 26th December.

January has seen three occurrences, with singles at Copt Point on the 8th January 1985 and 6th January 2000, and flying east past Samphire Hoe on the 13th January 2018, and February two, with singles off Hythe on the 18th February 2017 and Copt Point on the 26th February 1986.

As the Kent Bird Report for 2019 noted “there is no doubt that Sandwich Terns are present for longer than in the past”, with progressively earlier arrivals and later departures, and with small numbers wintering regularly since 1978, concluding that “the brevity of the period between departure and arrival of migrants now makes it hard to decide if a bird [occurring in the winter months] is wintering or a migrant”.

Figure 2 shows the departure dates of Sandwich Tern since 1995, demonstrating a progressively later departure.

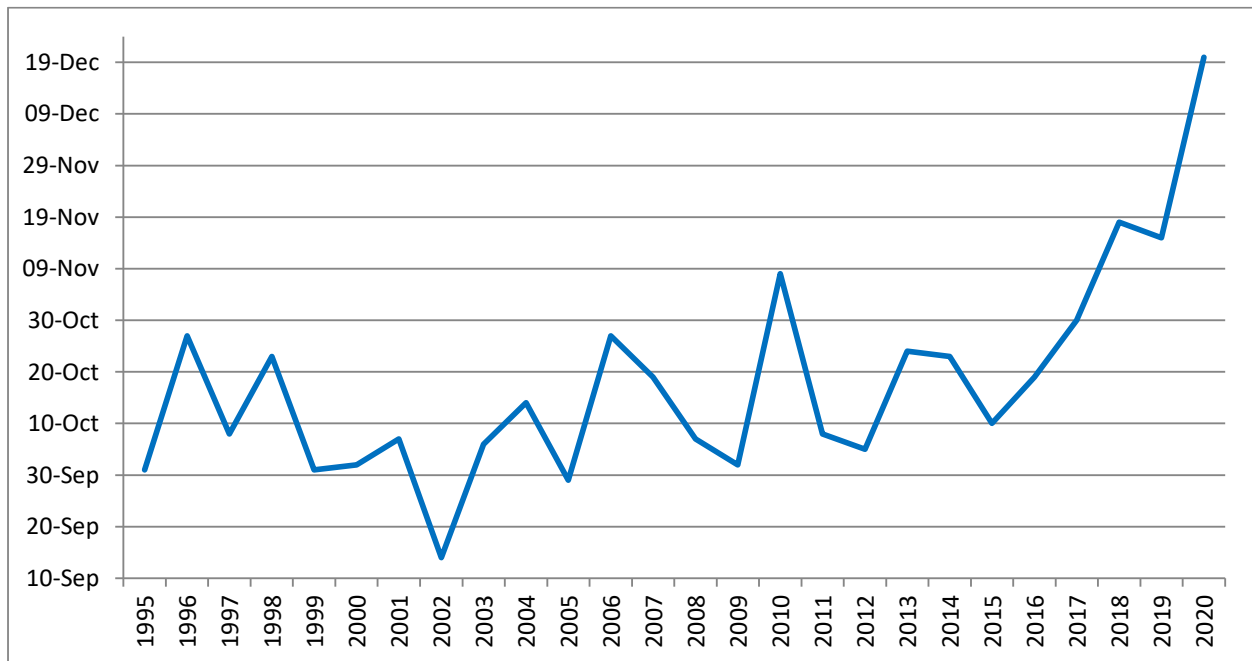


Figure 2: Departure dates of Sandwich Tern at Folkestone and Hythe since 1995

Figure 3 shows the arrival dates of Sandwich Tern since 1990, demonstrating a progressively earlier arrival.

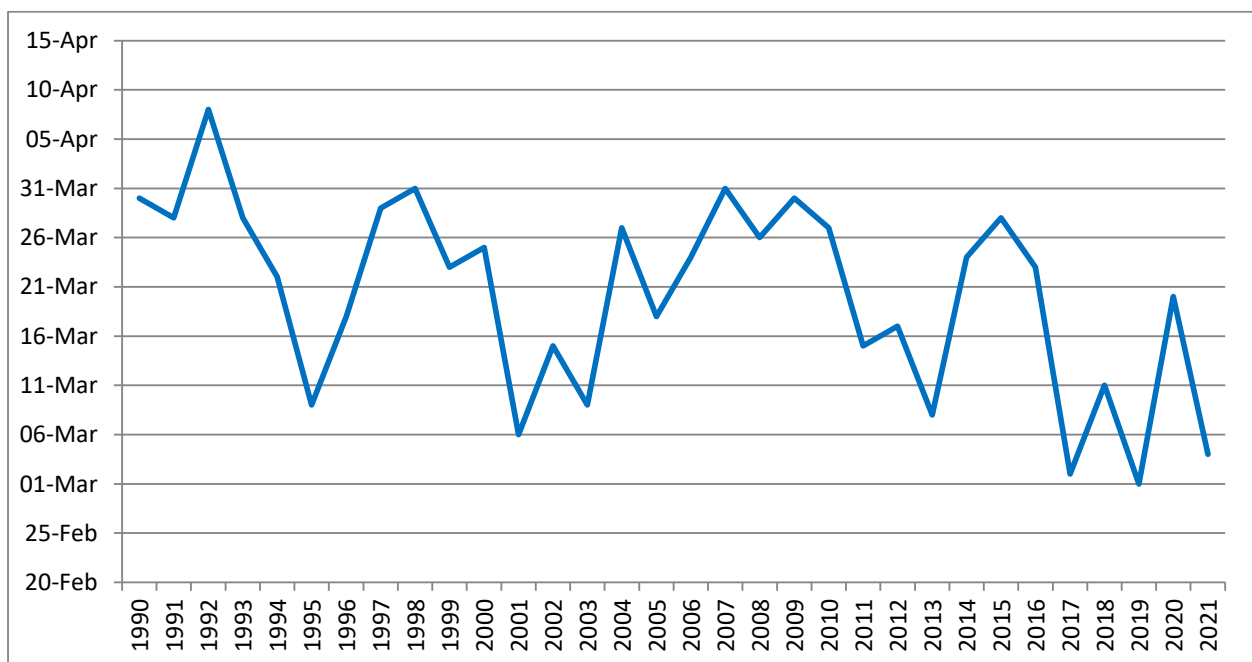


Figure 3: Arrival dates of Sandwich Tern at Folkestone and Hythe since 1990

Due to the difficulty of distinguishing between wintering birds and early migrants, a pragmatic approach that assumes that birds seen during January and February relate to winter records has been adopted here. As the graphic above demonstrates, spring arrivals have been becoming progressively earlier and three of the four earliest dates have occurred in the last four years:

- 8 east past Mill Point on the 2nd March 2019
- 1 east past Mill Point on the 3rd March 2017
- 1 east past Seabrook on the 4th March 2021



Sandwich Tern at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)



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Sandwich Tern at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)



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There have been just four other arrival dates within the first ten days of March:

- 2 east past Copt Point on the 7th March 2001
- 4 east past Samphire Hoe on the 9th March 2013
- 1 east past Folkestone on the 10th March 1995
- 1 east past Mill Point on the 10th March 2003

Although the earliest ever sighting involved a total of eight birds, the earliest double-figure count has not occurred until the 17th March (2001), when 13 flew east past Copt Point, but migration soon gathers pace, with four movements in excess of 100 having been noted in the last ten days of the month:

- 157 east past Samphire Hoe on the 27th March 2011
- 165 east past Samphire Hoe on the 22nd March 2013
- 142 east past Mill Point on the 24th March 2017
- 136 east past Samphire Hoe on the 26th March 2018



Sandwich Terns with Mediterranean Gulls at Folkestone Warren (Brian Harper)

The largest numbers occur in April or early May, with peak passage typically taking place in the second half of April. Counts in excess of 250 have been noted as follows:

296 east past Copt Point on the 13th April 2003
 285 east past Copt Point on the 15th April 2003
 330 east past Mill Point on the 25th April 2003
 320 east past Copt Point on the 26th April 2003
 270 east past Mill Point on the 16th April 2004
 268 east past Copt Point on the 25th April 2004
 290 east past Copt Point on the 27th April 2004
 495 east past Copt Point on the 30th April 2004
 330 east past Samphire Hoe on the 16th April 2005
 850 east past Mill Point on the 19th April 2005
 296 east past Mill Point on the 23rd April 2005
 750 east past Samphire Hoe on the 3rd May 2005
 421 east past Samphire Hoe on the 16th April 2008
 260 east past Copt Point on the 6th April 2009
 300 east past Mill Point on the 23rd April 2014
 285 east past Mill Point on the 24th April 2015
 375 east past Samphire Hoe on the 29th April 2018
 360 east past Samphire Hoe on the 6th May 2018
 293 off Samphire Hoe on the 9th May 2018
 265 east past Mill Point on the 5th April 2019
 467 east past Mill Point on the 12th April 2022

Numbers decrease during May and the latest three-figure count involved 100 off Copt Point on the 19th May 2006.

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Acknowledgements

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