

Kittiwake

Rissa tridactyla

Category A

Winter visitor and passage migrant.

Breeds along the Atlantic coast from Iberia north to Iceland and Fenno-Scandia, also on islands in the Arctic Ocean and along the Atlantic coast of North America, the northern Pacific and in the Siberian Arctic. There was a major expansion in Europe during the twentieth century when it colonised Portugal, Spain, Denmark and Sweden, with many new colonies becoming established in Britain. After breeding European birds disperse into the North Atlantic and other offshore waters. Immatures and non-breeding birds are chiefly pelagic (Snow & Perrins, 1998).



Kittiwake at Folkestone Pier (Brian Harper)

In Kent it is a passage migrant and winter visitor, which bred on the chalk cliffs in the east of the county between 1967 and 2012 (KOS, 2020).

The species 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 mile radius from Folkestone town hall. Whilst this range extends further inland than the current Folkestone and Hythe area it is an almost exclusively coastal species so seems certain to have been recorded within the modern boundary.

Ticehurst (1909) classed the Kittiwake purely as a winter visitor, but a marked change in status was recorded by Harrison (1953), with particular mention of small summering flocks at Dungeness in the late 1930s and 1940s. Harrison also gave details of one that had been ringed as a chick on the Farne Islands in summer 1946 and recovered at Folkestone on the 28th May 1947.

Roger Norman considered it to be scarce locally in the 1950s and was only able to provide five records: singles at the Dymchurch Redoubt on the 31st January 1953, 17th February 1957 and 27th February 1957, one found freshly dead at Hythe Ranges on the 21st March 1960 and one seen near the Little Tern colony at Hythe Ranges on the 4th June 1960. The Kent Bird Report for 1967 noted the presence of three adults at Folkestone at on the 4th June of that year.

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

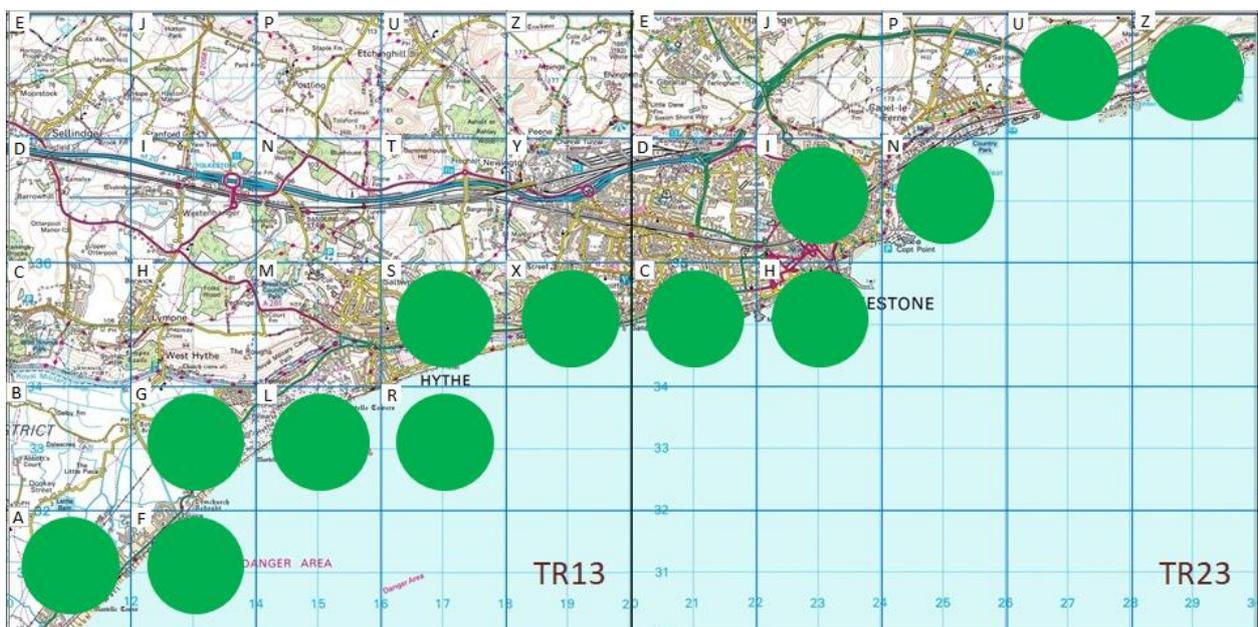


Figure 1: Distribution of all Kittiwake records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Taylor *et al* (1981) and Clements *et al* (2015) described its establishment as a breeding species in the county, with the first nesting in 1967, when 17 pairs were recorded on the cliffs at Dover. Numbers increased rapidly, with around 1,000 pairs in 1976 and over 2,000 pairs by the 1980s, reaching a peak of 2,878 pairs during the second atlas period (1988-1994). A steep decline followed, with 1,229 nests in 2001, 556 nests in 2003, 177 nests in 2005 and just seven nests in 2012, the last year that breeding was recorded. The decline was thought to be linked to local changes in prey abundance, including a collapse of the Lesser Sand Eel population. Reductions were also noted elsewhere, with a 44% decline in the British population over the period 1986 to 2011.

It has been recorded locally on an annual basis since the early 1980s. Small numbers were regularly noted in summer when the nearby colony was established, with double figure counts in 1988 (when 10 were seen off Mill Point on the 17th June), 1997 (when 62 flew east past Copt Point on the 1st June), 1998 (when there was a peak of 25 off Copt Point on the 2nd July) and 1999 (when 10 flew west past Copt Point on the 12th July). It has become much scarcer in summer since nesting ceased in 2012, with just ones and twos noted in June and July in recent years. Records of particular note have comprised a first-summer bird found dead on the beach at the Willop Outfall on the 14th June 2015 and a colour-ringed juvenile at Seabrook on the 15th July 2015 (which had been ringed in Finistere, Brittany, 12 days earlier).



Kittiwake at Folkestone Harbour (Brian Harper)



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Counts in the early autumn period were also much higher when the nearby colony was extant and there were three figure counts in August or September as follows:

- 130 west past Copt Point on the 27th August 1984
- 600 west past Copt Point on the 25th August 1987
- 180 west past Copt Point on the 1st September 1988

132 west past Copt Point on the 23rd August 1996
100 west past Copt Point on the 1st August 1997
124 west past Copt Point on the 30th August 1997

Double figure counts have been notable in recent early autumn periods, with a peak of 30 off Seabrook on the 20th September 2021. Conversely, the largest late autumn counts have occurred in more recent years. Three figure counts have been recorded in October or November as follows:

135 west past Copt Point on the 5th November 2000
908 east past Mill Point on the 8th November 2010
210 west past Mill Point on the 9th November 2012
108 west past Hythe on the 21st November 2016
100 west past Samphire Hoe on the 12th November 2017



Kittiwake at Seabrook (Ian Roberts)



Kittiwake at Folkestone Harbour (Elliot Ranford)

In the winter months counts in excess of 150 are noteworthy, having occurred as follows:

174 west past Mill Point on the 29th January 1990
350+ off Copt Point on the 29th to 31st January 2000
250 west past Copt Point on the 24th January 2001
235 west past Mill Point on the 1st February 2004
160 west past Samphire Hoe on the 20th January 2008
176 west past Samphire Hoe on the 24th December 2013
304 east past Samphire Hoe on the 7th January 2018
c.500 off Copt Point on the 2nd December 2019

An up-channel passage in spring is mainly noted between March and May, when three figure counts have occurred on several occasions:

170 east past Mill Point 31-Mar-90
136 east past Mill Point 30-Apr-90
302 east past Folkestone 08-Mar-93
231 east past Copt Point 12-May-96
164 east past Copt Point 29-Apr-98
215 east past Copt Point 01-May-00
122 east past Samphire Hoe 24-Apr-06
135 east past Mill Point 09-Mar-16

Taylor *et al* (1981) reported that inland records were less than annual in the county. Locally there have been six records from Nickolls Quarry and two from the Royal Military canal. At Nickolls Quarry, singles were noted on the 25th February 1997, 30th April 1997, 11th August 2000, 27th January 2003, 10th October 2004 and 29th November 2009. At the canal, one was seen circling over the Stade Street bridge on the 15th April 2009 and an oiled bird was seen on the canal by Princes Parade on the 1st December 2009.



Kittiwake at Folkestone Harbour (Brian Harper)

References

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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](#).



Kittiwake at Mill Point (Ian Roberts)

One of the record count of 908 that flew east during strong to gale force south-easterly winds and heavy rain on the 8th November 2010. Many passed by very close inshore, with some even passing along the beach.