

Common Scoter

Melanitta nigra

Category A

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

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998; Holling et al. 2019):

Breeds in northern Fenno-Scandia and Russia, eastwards across Siberia to the Pacific, with up to around 50 pairs nesting in Scotland. Winters along seacoasts mainly in western Europe, and south to Morocco.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

It is a common passage migrant, winter visitor and non-breeding summer visitor in Kent.



Common Scoter at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)

The Common Scoter was included in Knight and Tolpuitt'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.

Ticehurst (1909) considered it to be "an annual winter visitor to the Channel, where it may be seen in flocks, often of large size, from two to three miles off shore". He continued to remark that "besides being a winter visitor, ... flocks are to be met with during every month of the year", "in the narrow seas of the Channel", "and it is clear that a considerable number of presumably immature birds spend the breeding season on the sea off the Kent coast".

Harrison (1953) wrote of several thousand wintering on the east and south coasts of Kent, particularly to the west of Dungeness, and also cited a record off 2,000 off Dymchurch in July 1938. Taylor *et al.* (1981) reported that there was obviously a marked change in status in the mid-twentieth century as these flocks no longer occurred during their review period (1952-76) and they considered that any winter count exceeding 100 was noteworthy.

During the 1950s/early 1960s Roger Norman saw 300 on the sea off the Dymchurch Redoubt on the 8th August 1951, Geoffrey Manser saw 400 on the sea off Hythe on the 6th February 1956, Roger saw 200 on the sea off the Dymchurch Redoubt on the 3rd February 1958 and on the 1st March 1960, and 300 there on the 6th June 1960 (Norman 2006). A further count of 250 on the sea off Hythe during hard weather on the 15th January 1963 was also logged.



Common Scoter at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)



Common Scoters at Princes Parade (Ian Roberts)

The same period produced a series of records at Nickolls Quarry, with sightings on nine dates between 1951 and 1958, with four in January, three in February, one in March and one on the 27th April. Seven of these involved singletons but there were three on the 21st January 1951 and seven (five drakes) on the 9th February 1951 (Norman 2007). There have been no records away from the coast since.

Overall distribution

Figure 1 shows the distribution of all records of Common Scoter by tetrad, with records in 13 tetrads (42%). There have been records from all coastal tetrads and all records have been coastal, except for the sightings at Nickolls Quarry in the 1950s that are described above.

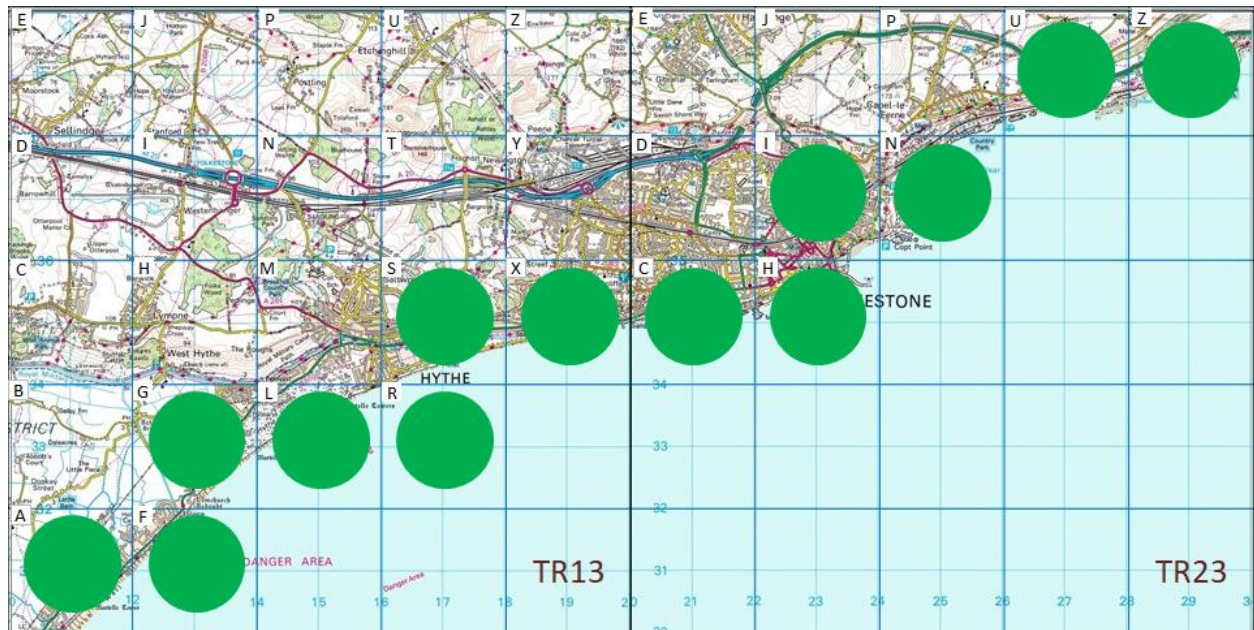


Figure 1: Distribution of all Common Scoter records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Three figure counts can still occur in the summer months in the modern era and the following are the more notable: up to 730 off Hythe in the summer of 1992, 700 offshore there on the 6th June 2006, 240 flying west past Samphire Hoe on the 17th August 2008, 300 off the Willop Outfall on the 6th August 2017 and 200 off the Dymchurch Redoubt on the 17th June 2018.

Autumn passage is modest and counts over 50 are notable, with peaks in September of 50 west past Samphire Hoe on the 15th September 2002 and 29th September 2010; in October of 64 west past Samphire Hoe on the 9th October 2011; and in November of 111 west past Samphire Hoe on the 11th November 2013.

Winter counts into three figures continue to be notable today, having occurred in eight of the last 20 winters: 1998/99 (240), 2000/01 (120), 2001/02 (100), 2008/09 (120), 2010/11 (110), 2013/14 (1,135), 2016/17 (100), 2017/18 (105) and 2020/21 (100).

The 2013/14 winter is worthy of further comment. A flock of 50 were noted in Hythe Bay on the 28th October and steadily grew to 80 on the 13th November, 100 on the 17th, 130 on the 18th, 250 on the 24th November, 400 on the 1st December and peaked at a record winter count of 750 on the 3rd December, with up to 400 remaining until the end of December, and 250 to the end of February 2014. The largest count of that winter however involved 1,135 flying west past Samphire Hoe on the morning of the 24th December following a severe overnight storm.

Taylor *et al* remarked that by far the largest numbers are now seen on spring passage, and the same remains true today, with the following counts of over 500:

535 east past Copt Point on the 17th April 1986
 590 east past Abbotscliffe on the 2nd April 1992
 669 east past Copt Point on the 21st April 2003
 1,680 east past Mill Point on the 1st April 2004

2,550 east past Mill Point on the 2nd April 2004
2,235 east past Mill Point on the 19th April 2005
575 east past Samphire Hoe on the 30th Mar 2018
540 east past Samphire Hoe on the 2nd April 2018
650 east past Samphire Hoe on the 15th April 2018
830 east past Samphire Hoe on the 24th April 2021



Common Scoters at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)

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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](#).

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