

Great White Egret

Ardea alba

Category A

Rare migrant and winter visitor.

41 records,
53 birds

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

It has a very wide distribution, breeding across mainly southern Europe, and central and eastern Asia, south-east to Australia, in Africa, and across the Americas. In Europe it has been increasing its range, both breeding and wintering, and is now a regular breeding species as close as the Netherlands and winters widely in France.

Kent status (KOS 2022):

It was a former vagrant to the county but is now a regular annual visitor, predominately during the winter months.



Great White Egret at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)

The Great White Egret was once a very rare vagrant to Britain, with only 13 records to 1976, but with almost annual sightings since. There had been 51 occurrences by 1990, 143 by 2000 and just over 300 by 2005, when it was removed from the list of species considered by the British Birds Rarities Committee (BBRC no date, Fraser *et al.* 2007). It first bred successfully in the UK in 2012 in Somerset, following potential breeding behaviour in 2010 (Holt 2013), and by 2020 up to 27 pairs nested across ten sites in Britain (including 15 in Somerset, which fledged 34 young) (Eaton *et al.* 2022).

In Kent it was first recorded in 1977, with the next sightings in 1988 and 1990, but then with almost annual records from 1995. It remained relatively rare until 2012, when an estimated 15-20 individuals were present in the county during the year, with at least 50 but possibly as many as 70 in 2013, and it has continued to increase (KOS no date).

It was first recorded locally in January 2010 when one was found by Charles and Tricia Keen at West Hythe during a period of very cold weather. It remained in the West Hythe/Botolph's Bridge area when the weather improved and lingered for over seven weeks, though it wandered widely. The following November one, quite possibly the same returning individual, was seen in the same area for just over eight weeks. The following winter saw yet another sighting in the Botolph's Bridge area, which again arrived during a cold snap, though this time it did not stay for long, and there were further records there in 2013 and 2015.

Elsewhere two were seen and photographed as they flew east past Samphire Hoe on the 5th July 2011, one was seen at Westenhanger on the 23rd August 2012 and three flew east distantly past Abbotscliffe on the 17th May 2014.



Great White Egret at West Hythe (Dale Gibson)



Great White Egrets at Samphire Hoe (Colin Fisher)

There have been annual and steadily increasing records since 2017, as demonstrated by figure 1. The records from West Hythe/Botolph's Bridge between 2010 and 2013 have been treated as separate individuals.

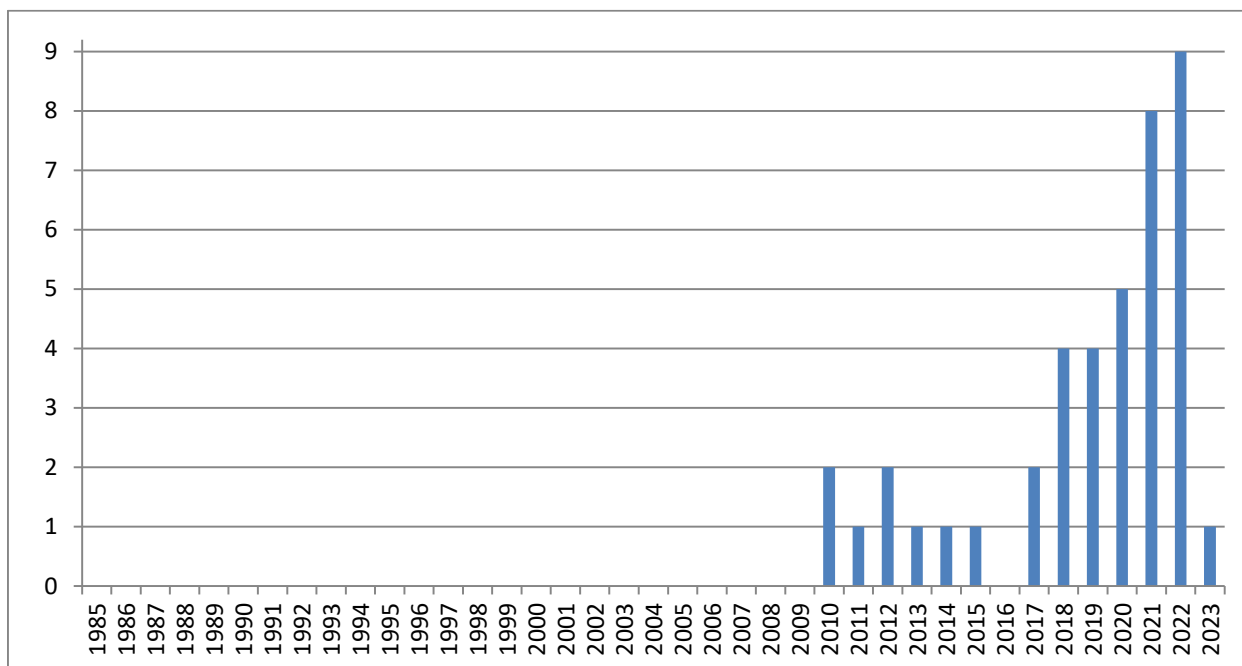


Figure 1: Great White Egret records at Folkestone and Hythe

The records by week are given in figure 2.

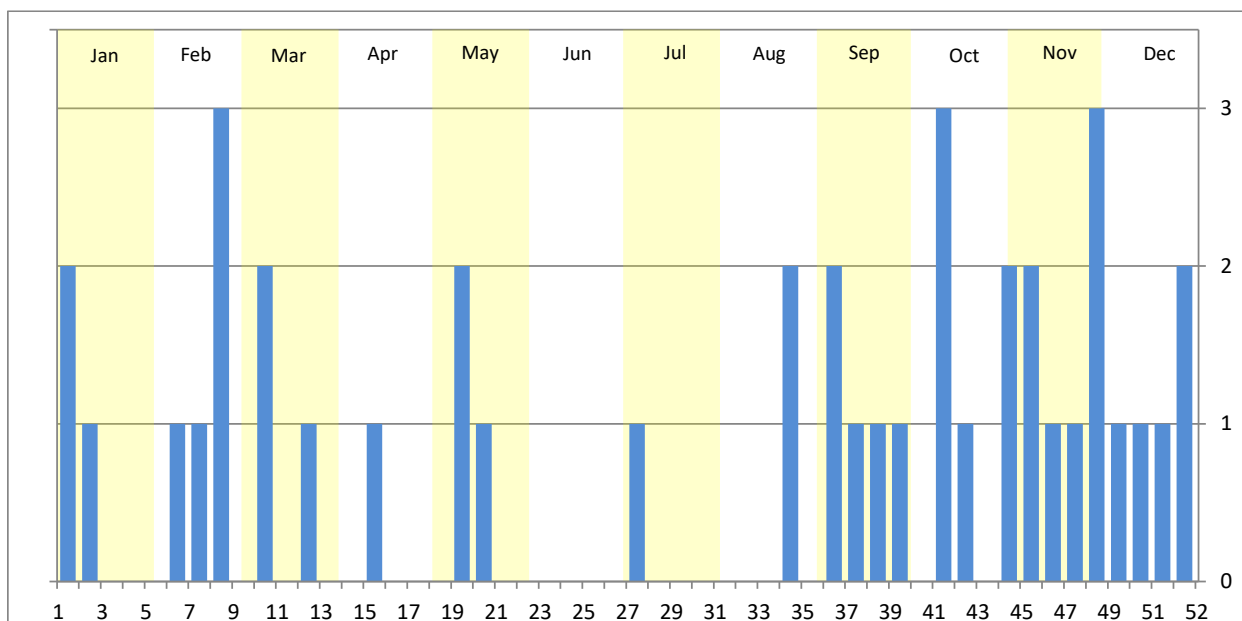


Figure 2: Great White Egret records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Figure 3 shows the location of records by tetrad.



Figure 3: Distribution of all Great White Egret records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The full list of records is as follows:

- 2010** Botolph's Bridge/West Hythe area, one, 10th January to 22nd March, photographed (C. & T. Keen, I. A. Roberts *et al*)
- 2010** Botolph's Bridge/West Hythe area, one, 27th November to 24th January 2011, photographed (B. & M. Harper, I. A. Roberts *et al*)
- 2011** Samphire Hoe, two flew east, 5th July, photographed (C. Fisher, P. Holt)
- 2012** Botolph's Bridge/West Hythe area, 7th to 11th February, one, photographed (I. A. Roberts *et al*), also reported at Nickolls Quarry on 27th January
- 2012** Westenhangar, one, 23rd August (D. Featherbe)
- 2013** Botolph's Bridge, one flew south, 25th February (B. Findlay)
- 2014** Abbotscliffe, three flew east, 17th May, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
- 2015** Botolph's Bridge, one, then flew west, 22nd November (I. A. Roberts)
- 2017** Willop Basin, one, 13th to 14th October, also seen at Nickolls Quarry on latter date (I. A. Roberts, B. Harper)
- 2017** Mill Point, one flew west, 7th November (I. A. Roberts)
- 2018** West Hythe dam, one, 5th March (I. A. Roberts)
- 2018** Botolph's Bridge, one, 15th April, photographed (B. Harper)
- 2018** Donkey Street, one flew east, 18th November, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
- 2018** Donkey Street, one, 26th to 27th December, with two present on 28th December and one from 1st January to 2nd April 2019, photographed (D. Brown, C. Gillard, B. Harper *et al*)
- 2019** Copt Point, two flew west, 26th August (M. Collins)
- 2019** Folkestone Warren, one, 6th September (M. Collins, P. Holt)
- 2019** Botolph's Bridge, one, 3rd November (B. Harper)
- 2019** Donkey Street, two, 27th December (B. Harper)
- 2020** West Hythe, one, 19th February (I. & M. Marshall)
- 2020** Capel-le-Ferne Gun Site, one flew in off the sea, 11th September (D. A. Gibson)
- 2020** Aldergate Bridge, one flew east, 7th October, presumed same Donkey Street, 10th October (B. Harper)
- 2020** Abbotscliffe, one flew in off the sea, 12th October, photographed (I. A. Roberts, P. Edmondson)
- 2020** Abbot's Court Farm, three, 16th October, present intermittently until 4th March 2021, appearing to roost near Aldergate Bridge and feed at various sites on the marsh during the day (B. Harper *et al*)
- 2021** Seabrook, one, 16th February (P. Howe)
- 2021** Lympne, one flew south, 20th February (P. Sharp)
- 2021** Samphire Hoe, one flew east, 7th March (M. Collins)
- 2021** Junction of A20/A260, one flew east, 21st March (P. Smith)
- 2021** Hythe, one flew east, 13th May (P. Howe)

2021 Copt Point, one flew south-east out to sea, 30th October (D. A. Gibson)

2021 Haguelands Farm, one flew east and landed near Willop Sewage Works, 2nd December, presumed same at Willop Sewage Works, 21st December (I. A. Roberts)

2021 Selby Farm, two, 22nd December, photographed (I. A. Roberts, D. Brown)

2022 Donkey Street, one, 1st January, possibly one of the individuals from late 2021, with singles (possibly the same) in the Donkey Street/West Hythe area on seven further dates to 12th February (B. Harper, I. A. Roberts *et al.*)

2022 Mill Point, one flew east, 9th May (I. A. Roberts)

2022 Samphire Hoe, two flew west, 4th September (M. D. Kennett)

2022 Abbotscliffe, two flew east, 18th September (D. A. Gibson)

2022 Copt Point, one flew in off the sea, 25th September (D. A. Gibson)

2022 near Capel-le-Ferne, one, 10th November (A. Mackay)

2022 Nickolls Quarry, one, 2nd December (I. A. Roberts)

2022 Seabrook, three flew west, 8th December (M. Whybrow)

2022 Botolph's Bridge, 10th December (C. Gillard), possibly same as Nickolls Quarry on 2nd December

2023 Donkey Street, 1st January (I. A. Roberts, B. Harper), presumed same West Hythe, 3rd January (C. Gillard), possibly same as above

An account of the first area record is given below.

Great White Egret at West Hythe 10th January to 22nd March 2010

By Ian Roberts

Weather conditions:

The bird arrived in the midst of a period of very cold weather which had frozen a lot of the ditches across the marsh. The canal cutting in the Botolph's Bridge / West Hythe area however stayed clear and also attracted a concentration of around 12 Grey Herons and 2 Little Egrets. Conditions on the near continent were severe and caused an unprecedented influx of Woodcock, amongst other things, into the local area. It seems likely that the conditions led to the Great White Egret being forced out of another wintering area, perhaps elsewhere on Romney Marsh, or further afield.

Circumstances of the find:

Charles and Tricia Keen found a Great White Egret at West Hythe on 10th January 2010. They emailed me some photos that evening and I visited the site the next morning, but only got brief and distant flight views. There was no sign on the 12th or 13th-15th, however it was reported further west along the canal at Gigger's Green (near Bilsington).

Saturday 16th January was a foul day and I received a real soaking through checking Gigger's Green, the Aldergate Bridge area and Botolph's Bridge, but it was well worth it as I eventually re-found the bird at the latter site, where it showed well.

It was seen by several other observers on that day and the next, including Brian Harper and Dale Gibson who took more photos.

I saw it on several other dates until 22nd March which was the last reported sighting. It wandered to the west of West Hythe, often frequenting the Selby Farm area, and ranging as far as Tame Lane (Burmarsh) and Gigger's Green.

Description of the bird:

Size, shape, jizz: At least as large as Grey Heron but more elegant in appearance, with a finer bill, a longer, slimmer neck and thinner legs. It dwarfed the Little Egrets which were also present.

Head and upperparts: Pure white.

Underparts: Pure white.

Bare parts: Dark iris, yellow eye-ring. Yellowish bill. Greyish-black legs and feet.

Comments on the record:

The record was accepted by KOS rarities committee.



Great White Egret with Grey Heron at West Hythe
(Charles and Tricia Keen)

References

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Acknowledgements

The tetrad map images were produced from the Ordnance Survey [Get-a-map service](http://get-a-map.service) and are reproduced with kind permission of [Ordnance Survey](http://ordnancesurvey.gov.uk).

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Great White Egret at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)



Great White Egret at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)



Great White Egret with Grey Herons at West Hythe (Ian Roberts)