

Bee-eater

Merops apiaster

Category A

Very rare vagrant.

15 records

Breeds mostly in Mediterranean and Central Europe, winters almost entirely in Africa in two distinct segments in west Africa and Senegal to Ghana and eastern and southern Africa mainly south of the equator and Congo basin forests. Its stronghold is the Iberian peninsula with up to 40,000 pairs, although there are at least 10,000 pairs in each of Russia, Ukraine, Romania and Turkey, with up to 5,000 pairs in France, where it has been increasing and extending its range to the north (Snow & Perrins, 1998).



Bee-eater at the Sands Estate, Dymchurch (Paul Apps)

Holling *et al* (2019) described it as an occasional breeder in Britain citing instances in the last decade in 2014 (Isle of Wight), 2015 (Cumbria) and 2017 (Nottinghamshire) and White & Kehoe (2019) considered it to be a scarce but increasing migrant to Britain, with an annual mean of 73 records in the last decade. Annual variability is described as high, with occasional influx years.

It is almost annual in its occurrence in Kent, with records in all but four years since 1990. A total of almost 150 had been logged up to the end of 2018 and it appears to be increasing in frequency, with about 45% of those records coming in the last decade. It is predominately a spring rarity in the county, with May and June contributing around 75% of sightings (KOS, 2020).

The first local record was seen at by Dale Gibson, Jamie Gibson and Ian Roberts at Abbotscliffe on the 16th May 1999 and there have been a further 14 records, as demonstrated by figure 1. This increasing frequency of appearance is in line with the county trend.

The records by year are shown in figure 1.

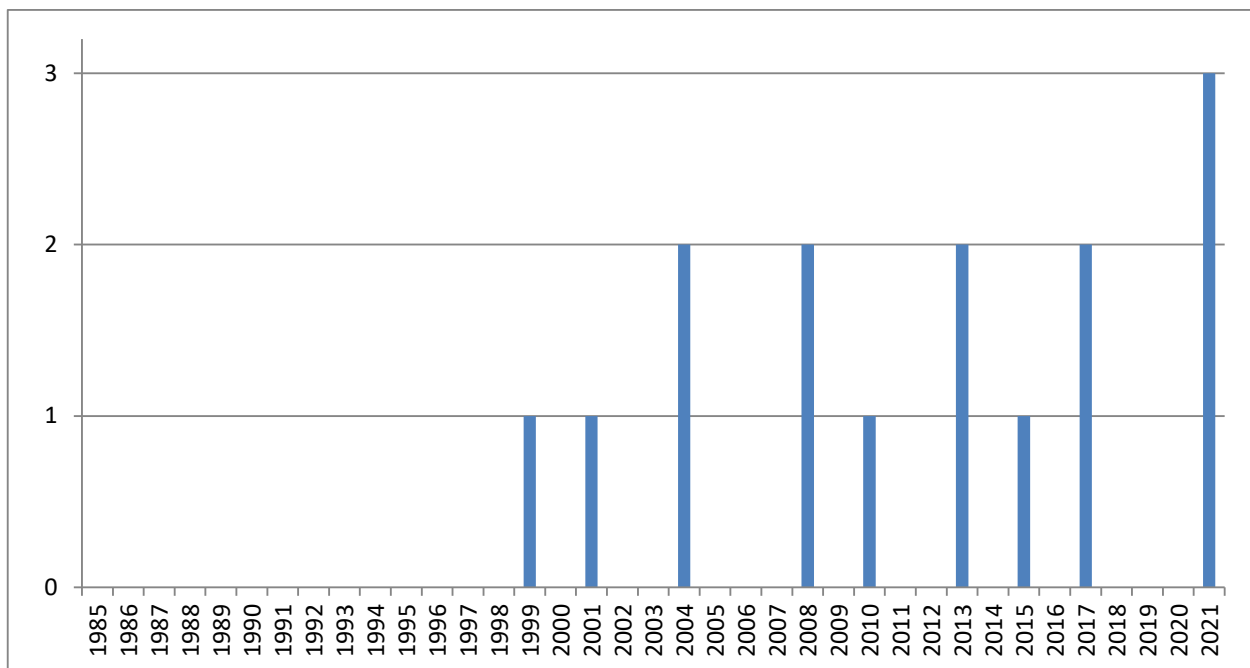


Figure 1: Bee-eater records at Folkestone and Hythe

The first year to produce more than one record was 2004 and the same year saw the first multiple sighting, with a flock of five birds, whilst 2021 was the first year to see three sightings. The largest flock recorded to date (ten) was in 2013, which equalled the second largest flock to be recorded in the county at the time.

All records to date have occurred in spring, between 14th May (week 20) and 26th June (week 26), with a distinct peak in week 20 (between the 14th to 18th May), as demonstrated by figure 2.

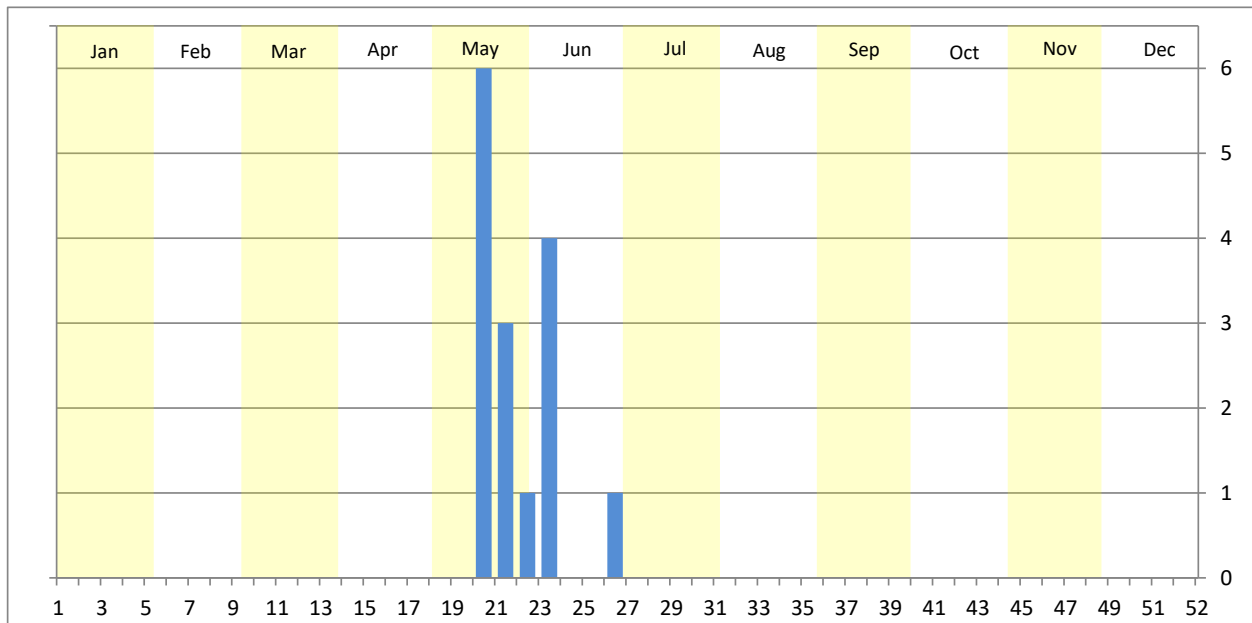


Figure 2: Bee-eater records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Figure 3 shows the distribution of records by tetrad, with records in 9 tetrads (29%).



Figure 3: Distribution of all Bee-eater records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Just over half of the records are from the cliffs, between Folkestone Warren and Samphire Hoe, with two others just inland at Church Hougham, and the others scattered between Hythe, Saltwood, Newingreen and Dymchurch.

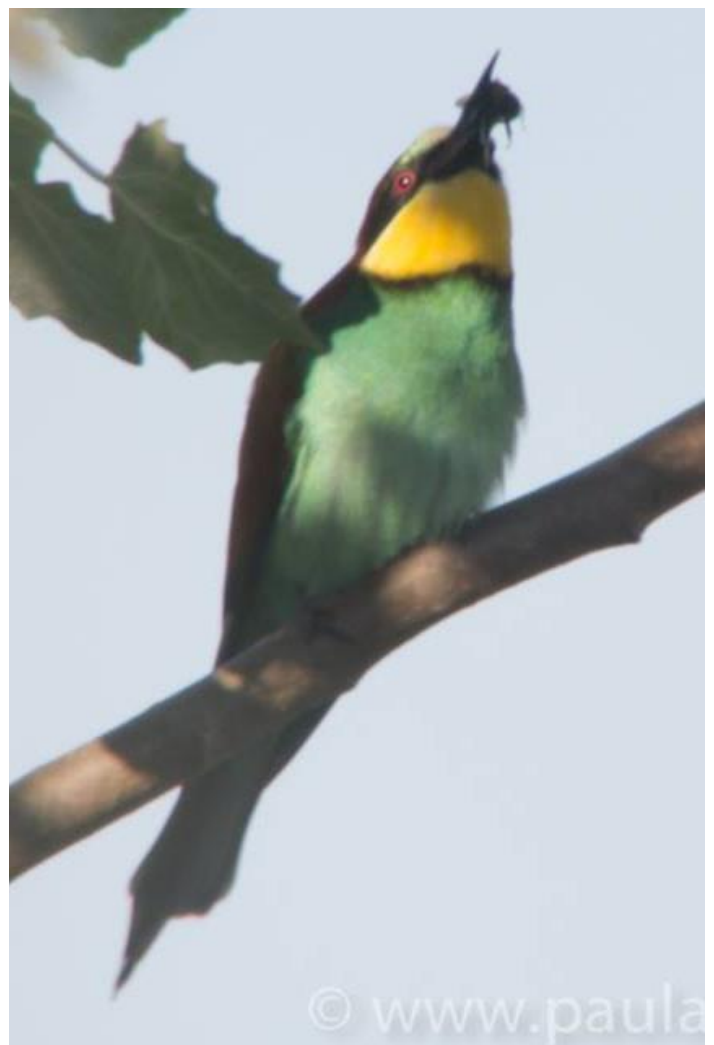
The full list of records is as follows:

- 1999** Abbotscliffe, one flew west, 16th May (D. A. Gibson, I. A. Roberts, J. A. Gibson)
- 2001** Capel-le-Ferne Gun Site, one, 25th May (I. A. Roberts, D. A. Gibson *et al*)
- 2004** Samphire Hoe, five flew east, 16th May (C. S. Johnson). This flock had originally been seen at Dungeness, and were later tracked over St. Margaret's, Bockhill, and Kingsdown, to Sandwich Bay
- 2004** Abbotscliffe, one flew east, 18th May (I. A. Roberts)
- 2008** Church Hougham, one, 14th May (M. Kennett)
- 2008** Samphire Hoe, one, 3rd June (P. Holt)

- 2010** Samphire Hoe, two flew west, 8th June (P. Holt, D. E. Smith)
- 2013** Saltwood, ten, then flew east, 14th May (G. Cooke)
- 2013** Hythe, one, 24th May (S. McMinn), presumed same later flying north-west over Nickolls Quarry (I. A. Roberts)
- 2015** Newingreen, one on wires, 26th June (P. Coleman)
- 2017** Hythe, at least one heard calling, 14th May (I. A. Roberts)
- 2017** Sands Estate (Dymchurch), six, then flew east, 26th May (P. Apps)
- 2021** Samphire Hoe, one heard calling, 31st May (P. Holt)
- 2021** Folkestone Warren, nine flew in off the sea then flew east, 9th June (I. A. Roberts)
- 2021** Church Hougham, one heard calling, 9th June (M. D. Kennett)



Bee-eater at the Sands Estate, Dymchurch (Paul Apps)



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An account of the first area record is given below.

Bee-eater at Abbotscliffe

16th May 1999

(Dale A Gibson, Jamie A Gibson, Ian A Roberts)

Weather conditions:

A dry day with a cool north-easterly wind (force 4-5), 3-7/8 cloud cover and good visibility.

Circumstances of the find:

At about 09:50 Dale, Jamie and I were at Abbotscliffe, and with the area done we had settled down to watch any visual migration, which up to then had involved just a trickle of Swallows and House Martins. Dale was sheltering from the cool north-easterly breeze just below the cliff-top, I was doing likewise behind my car and Jamie was catching up on some sleep in his, when I heard what sounded like a Bee-eater.

I did not believe for a moment that it would be and was looking around for a Starling or something else giving an odd call when it called again, closer and clearer and very much like a Bee-eater. At this point Dale appeared from below the cliff-top looking very agitated and shouting something that involved the words "Bee-eater" and I bellowed something of a similar nature into Jamie's ear.

Mercifully all three of us were onto the bird quickly as it emerged from behind the cliff, really quite close (probably about 100 yards range) and with the sea as a backdrop to its stunning colours. We got scopes on it and had superb views as it slowly headed west and steadily gained height over Folkestone Warren, pausing in flight occasionally to hawk insects. We eventually lost it to view high and distant and beyond the Gun Site at Capel-le-Ferne.

Description of the bird:

Size, shape, jizz: unmistakable shape with a long, tapering body, long, broad, triangular wings and long extending tail streamers and very distinctive flight, undulating and gliding, with series of rapid, deep, elastic wing-beats.

Head and upperparts: the upperparts were colourful and fairly complex with yellow, russet-brown, blue and green areas, being difficult to describe accurately when only seen for a few minutes. It appeared that the crown, upper back and inner wings were russet-brown, with the scapulars and perhaps the lower back being a bright yellow. The outer parts of the wings and tail were blue or green, with a darker trailing edge to the wings.

Underparts: the underparts were simpler, with a bright yellow throat neatly separated from the blue underside by a black collar. The underwings were a peachy brown, with a broad dark trailing edge.

Bare parts: the bill and eye looked dark.

Call: a loud, liquid and very distinctive 'prrup'.

Comments on the record:

The record was accepted by the KOS rarities committee and appears in the Kent Bird Report for that year.

References

Holling, M. & the Rare Breeding Birds Panel, 2019. Rare breeding birds in the UK in 2017. *British Birds*, 112: 706-758

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KOS Kent list: <https://kentos.org.uk/kent-list> (accessed 2020)

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

White, S. & Kehoe, C., 2019. Report on scarce migrant birds in Britain in 2017. *British Birds*, 112: 444-468.

Acknowledgements

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