

# Night Heron

*Nycticorax nycticorax*

Category A

Very rare vagrant.

3 records,  
3 birds

*World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):*

Night Herons are present on five continents, but within Europe are concentrated in warmer temperate zones with the largest numbers breeding in France (c.4,300 pairs), Italy (c.17,000 pairs) and Hungary (c.4,400 pairs), and further east into Russia (c.12,500 pairs) and the former Soviet states. The species is migratory and dispersive. In July/August juveniles disperse in all directions, mostly north and west of colonies. This dispersal merges into autumn migration which in Europe lasts through September and October, with some lingering into December in North Africa. The overwhelming majority of European birds winter in tropical Africa.



Night Heron at West Hythe (Brian Harper)

*Kent status (KOS 2022):*

It is a rare but increasingly regular vagrant in the county.

Kent (KOS) records to end 2020: 44 since 1952

Bourne (2006) wrote that, like the Little Egret, the presence of the Night Heron (then known as the 'Brewer') in Britain during medieval times had been overlooked by most authors. He considered that the disappearance of these species as breeding birds from Britain "may have been due to overexploitation and drainage but seems more likely to have been a consequence of the onset of the Little Ice Age".

Ticehurst (1909) stated that "of the rarer Herons that have visited the county from time to time, the [Night Heron] has, with the exception of the Bittern, been the most frequently observed. Adult, as well as immature specimens, have been met with, and it has occurred in summer and winter". He cites no local records however and it was not included in Knight & Tolpitt's "List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood" (1871).

Harrison (1953) was only to add two county records, whilst Taylor *et al.* (1981) noted a further ten during their review period (1952-76). It has been recorded in Britain with steadily increasing frequency since the 1950s, when there was an average of 2.2 per annum, to 3.3 in the 1960s, 6.1 in the 1970s, 14 in the 1980s and 18 in the 1990s, including a remarkable influx of 61 in 1990 (the mean excluding the influx was 14) (BBRC no date). There had been 612 British records to the end of 2001 when it was removed from the list of species which the British Birds Rarity Committee considered due to the increasing frequency with which it was occurring (BBRC 2001). The annual average since has remained fairly stable with 12 in the 2000s and 14 in the 2010s (to 2017, White & Kehoe 2019). The first confirmed (modern) breeding in Britain was confirmed in 2017, when a pair nested at the Avalon Marshes in Somerset (Holling *et al.* 2019).

There was a similar increase in Kent, with only 7 records before 1960, then 5 in the 1960s, 6 in the 1970s, 10 in the 1980s and 13 in the 1990s. Although there were only 4 in the 2000s there have been 12 since 2010 (KOS no date).

The first local record involved a long-staying adult that was present in the West Hythe area between the 22<sup>nd</sup> November and 24<sup>th</sup> January 2008. A full account of this occurrence is provided below. The second record also occurred in the winter, when a juvenile was seen at Nickolls Quarry from early January to the 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2015, whilst the most recent record was a more typical late spring adult at Princes Parade from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> June 2020. With no previous occurrences, it is notable that three of the 13 most recent county records have occurred in the Folkestone and Hythe area.

The records by year are shown in figure 1.

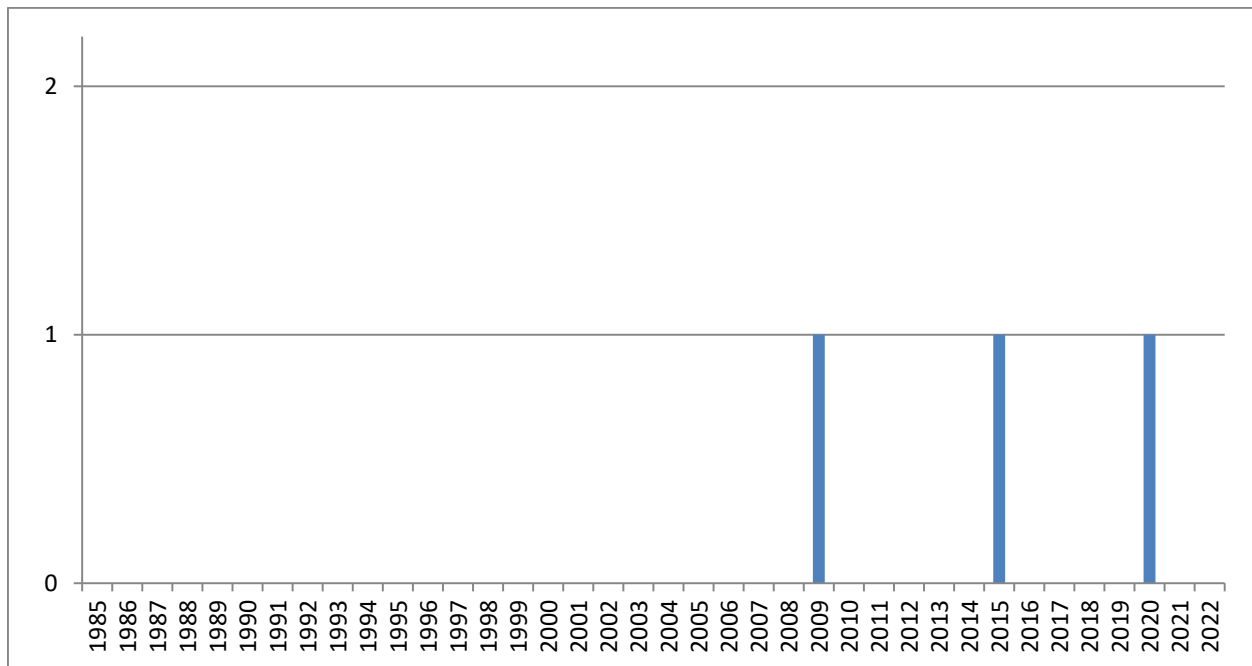


Figure 1: Night Heron records at Folkestone and Hythe

The records by week are given in figure 2.

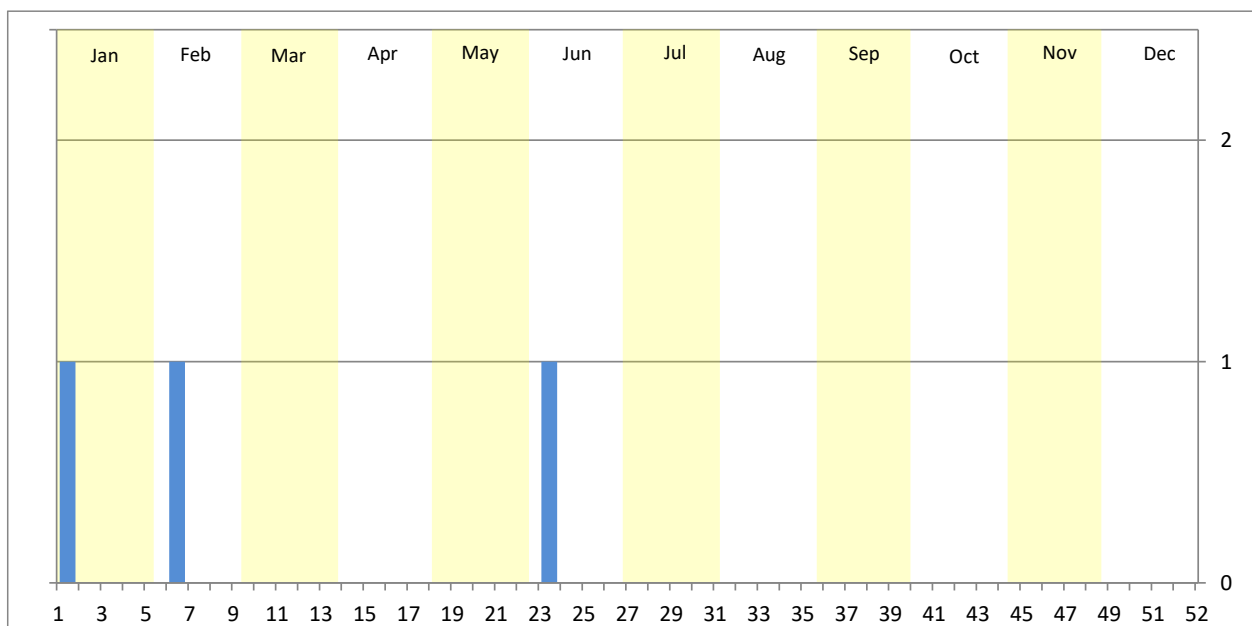


Figure 2: Night Heron records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Two of the area records have occurred in the winter period which is relatively unusual. The arrival dates of Kent records are shown in figure 3 (excluding one in 1890 with an arrival date of 'winter'), with the local records highlighted in red. There have been seven arrivals between October and January however this includes four of the most recent 20.

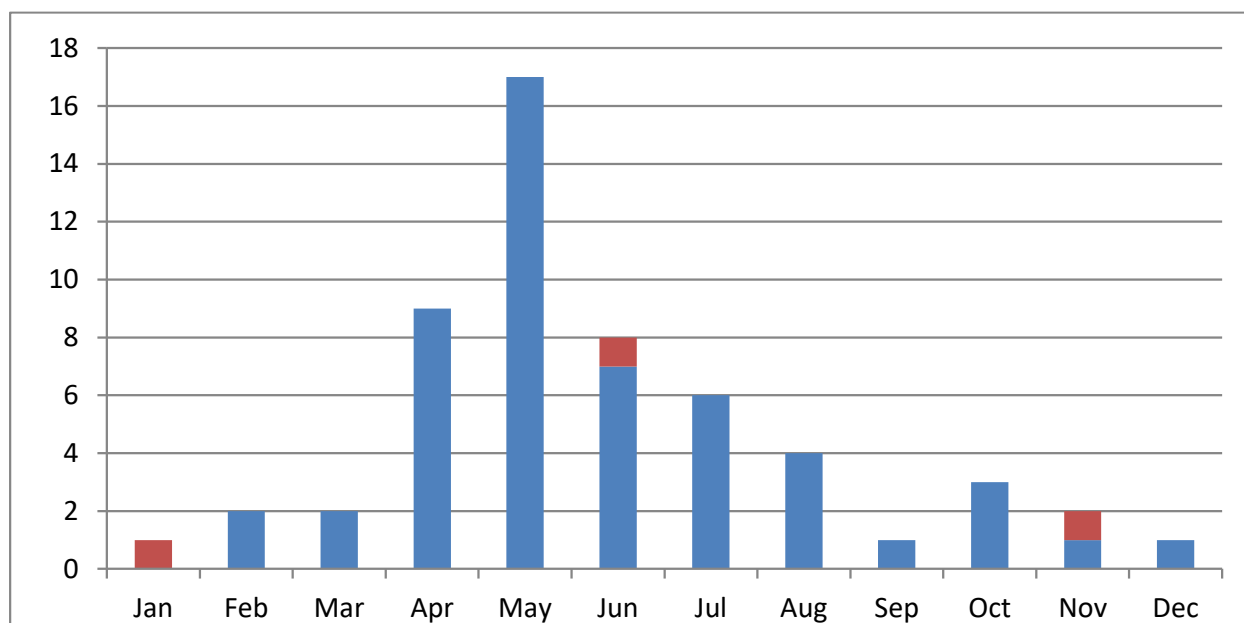


Figure 3: Night Heron records in Kent by week (with Folkestone and Hythe records highlighted)

Figure 4 shows the location of records by tetrad. Whilst there have only been three area records two were rather mobile and were noted in multiple tetrads.



Figure 3: Distribution of all Night Heron records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The full list of records is as follows:

- 2008** West Hythe, adult, 22<sup>nd</sup> November to 24<sup>th</sup> January 2009, photographed (I. A. Roberts *et al*)
- 2015** Nickolls Quarry, juvenile, early January to 23<sup>rd</sup> January, photographed (I. A. Roberts *et al*), possibly seen earlier in Essex in late December 2014, and later in Sussex in late January 2015
- 2020** Princes Parade, adult, 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> June, photographed (M. Whybrow, I. A. Roberts, B. Harper *et al*)

An account of the first area record is given below.

**Night Heron at West Hythe**  
**22<sup>nd</sup> November 2008 to 24<sup>th</sup> January 2009**

By Ian Roberts

**Circumstances of the find:**

On the evening of Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2008 I received a call informing me that an adult Night Heron had been reported at West Hythe that afternoon. Precisely 4 weeks earlier I had received a call from the same person about a Green Heron at exactly the same site, identified by the same angler, and this too was just after it had got dark. Needless to say, there was a real sense of déjà vu!

I was on site (again) before light and a small heron became visible as dawn broke. As the gloom slowly lifted it eventually became possible to be sure it was a Night Heron. A couple of other observers arrived shortly after this and we enjoyed good views over the next hour or two. The bird was mobile and quite wary, at one point flying c.2 miles to the south, but eventually returning. The bird remained in this area for most of the day, though continued to be mobile and readily flushing, however most observers finally caught up with it, including the locals Dale Gibson and Brian Harper (with Brian managing to get the first photos – see below).

A passing dog-walker informed us that the bird had been present the previous morning, and this appears to be the first report of it.

I went on holiday for a week that evening, so did not look for it again in that time and received no reports from anyone else while I was away, so when I returned, I assumed it had moved on. However, on the 9<sup>th</sup> December Neil Frampton saw it again at the dam. It was then seen regularly in this area into 2009, though at times it ranged quite widely to the west and the south.

The last report of the bird was of it flying off to the south when flushed on the 24<sup>th</sup> January. It had done this before and returned, but this time it was not seen again.

**Description of the bird:**

Size, shape, jizz: A small, stocky compact heron.

Head and upperparts: Black cap and mantle. White supercilia over the eye meeting across the bill. Grey wings and tail.

Underparts: White.

Bare parts: Bill greyish-horn upper, paler lower mandible. Red eye. Yellowish-orange legs.

Age/sex: Adult.

**Origin:**

Whenever a bird is found at an unusual time of year, in fairly unfavourable weather conditions and proceeds to stay a relatively long time, there is bound to be discussions about its origin, especially when the species is known in captivity. An objective summary of the facts are presented below:

Behaviour: birds of a captive origin are generally thought to be less wary than wild individuals, however this is not categorically true as some wild birds can be closely approached, and some captive birds remain difficult to get near. This bird was quite wary when it first arrived: on the 23<sup>rd</sup> November it would not allow close approach and I managed to flush the bird twice despite not getting that near to it.



When flushed it would fly a reasonable distance before landing, at one point being lost to view in the distance, though it did later return. In the afternoon of the same day, it was reported as wary and mobile by those trying to catch up with it. It was certainly not as confiding as the definitely wild Green Heron which frequented the same stretch of canal a month earlier. However, it did seem to become more used to people during its stay and it let me approach much closer in January than it had originally.

Condition of bird: signs of captivity can include excessive feather wear, abnormal moult and damage to feet. When the bird was re-found and more widely seen in December there was some discussion about the fairly heavy feather wear on the primaries of both wings. Apparently, the European race at least should complete a post-nuptial moult in August-October, so would be expected to appear reasonable fresh in November. Some primary tips were broken and the extent of the wear can be seen in the photos below.

However, when I and others saw it in November no one mentioned feather wear, which is strange as the thought of captive origin was on my mind as I was careful to check for rings – my notes say un-ringed and wary, but no mention of if it had feather wear or not. This makes me think that the feather wear could not have been as obvious, if indeed it was present, and perhaps the bird was becoming worn during its stay, not unusual for a bird that spends a lot of time in reeds. When I saw it on 1<sup>st</sup> January (for the first time since November) I was struck by how muddy and bedraggled it looked, though when I saw later in the month it looked cleaner though still worn of course.



Night Heron at West Hythe (Mike Gould)



Night Heron at West Hythe (Brian Harper)

There was a report in mid-December that it appeared to be missing a toe. However, that had not been noted by other observers and when Dylan Wrathall saw it well through a telescope on 28th December he was “unable to see any evidence of damage to the nails on either foot”. The toes are visible in the flight shots above and photographs of the feet when perched appear below.

A couple of observers commented that it was immobile at times, “spending long periods hunched up with its eyes half closed” and that it could perhaps be ill, though others saw it catching plenty of fish and it successfully survived the severe frosts in early January. There were certainly no signs of a ring, either above or below the knee.

Captive populations: there are no captive birds kept by the adjacent Port Lympne zoo park other than Ostrich. The nearest captive birds are at Wildwood, near Herne Bay, where a couple of colour-ringed adult birds are kept in an enclosed area with Little Egrets, Spoonbill and various wildfowl. The famous Edinburgh zoo collection has a few free-flying birds (much reduced from the 35 present in 1998) and Great Witchingham in Norfolk apparently has 5-10 birds, but neither population is particularly close to Hythe (Edinburgh being almost equidistant to the Camargue).



Feet and toes of the Night Heron at West Hythe (Brian Harper)

Race: probably prompted by it turning up at the same site as the Green Heron (and the occurrence of a presumed Great Egret with the Humberside Green Heron) there was some discussion about the bird perhaps being of the American race, *hoactli*. This form has been predicted as a potential vagrant, and has been mooted in the UK on several occasions - based on the timing and location of records and the prevalent weather conditions (e.g. Scilly in October 1985, Mere Sands (Lancashire) in Feb 2008), as well as 2 historic claims in Ayrshire, pre-1880, though it is not on the British list yet. It appears from current knowledge that this subspecies is not safely separated in the field, at least outside of the breeding season, and that biometrics are the safest means of identification. Some authors suggest that some adults can be identified to form by the facial pattern, but the BBRC have recommended that any formal submission of this race should contain biometrics.

If it was of the European race (*nycticorax*) it could possibly have arrived from further east in the species range, perhaps with the notable arrival of eastern vagrants into Britain in early November 2008. Or of course it could have just been come from one of the more usual parts of their range.

Changing distributions: at the current time a number of species are occurring at times of the year at which they did not in the past. A good example are some other 'southern' herons, the egrets - just a few years ago winter records in Britain Cattle Egret were very few, but now there appears to be winter influxes of the species. Going back not much further in time Little Egret was scarce at all times of year, though with a spring bias, but is now resident. Great White Egrets also appear to have been increasing, having recently been dropped from the species which are considered by BBRC, and now also regularly occur in the winter months.

There was another mid-winter record of Night Heron in 2008/09, with one seen on the Isles of Scilly on 15<sup>th</sup> January 2009. Might there be further winter records to come?

Conclusion: As there does not appear to be strong case for it being an escape it is best treated as a wild bird.

#### **Comments on the record:**

The view on likely origin was shared by the KOS committee who accepted the record and it appears in the Kent Bird Report for 2008 (KOS 2010).

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### ***Acknowledgements***

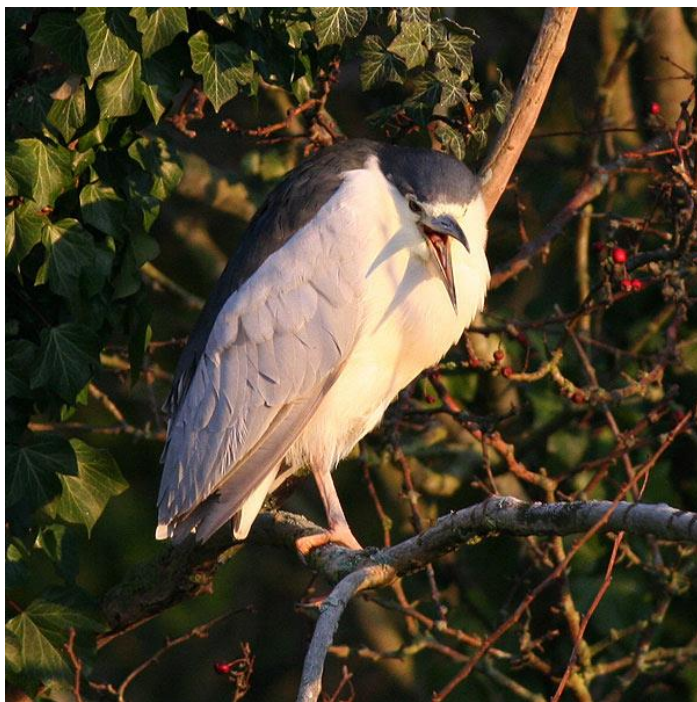
The tetrad map images were produced from the Ordnance Survey [Get-a-map service](#) and are reproduced with kind permission of [Ordnance Survey](#).

I am indebted to Andrew Henderson and Tim Hodge for providing access to the Kent Ornithological Society archives.



Night Heron at Nickolls Quarry (Ian Roberts)





Night Heron at West Hythe (Brian Harper)



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