

Great White Egret

Ardea alba

Category A

Rare passage migrant and winter visitor. 37 records

The Great White Egret has been increasing its range, both breeding and wintering, and was removed from the list of species considered by the BBRC in 2005, after just over 300 occurrences (BBRC 2020). It is now a regular breeding species as close as the Netherlands and winters widely in France (Snow & Perrins 1998). It first bred successfully in the UK in 2012 in Somerset, following potential breeding behaviour in 2010 (Holt 2013), and in 2017 at least 8 pairs, possibly as many as 12, nested in Britain (Holling *et al.* 2019).

In Kent it was a former vagrant, and is now a regular annual visitor, predominately during the winter months. There had only been nine records in the county before 2002 (KOS, 2020) but it has occurred annually since and by 2017 up to 20 could be seen at Dungeness during the autumn.



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

It was first recorded at Folkestone and Hythe 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 however 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 was another report there in 2013.

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. Further singles have been recorded at Botolph's Bridge on the 22nd November 2015, the Willop Basin on the 13th October 2017, flying west at Mill Point on the 7th November 2017, West Hythe on the 5th March 2018 and Botolph's Bridge on the 15th April 2018.

One flew east over Donkey Street on the 18th November 2018 and up to two were present there between the 26th and 28th December 2018 with at least one remaining until the 2nd April 2019, and there were four further records in 2019, with five records in 2020, eight in 2021 and at least six in 2022.



Great White Egret at West Hythe (Dale Gibson)



Great White Egrets at Samphire Hoe (Colin Fisher)

With records in 12 of the last 13 years, and with the species being seen with increasing frequency in the county, further occurrences seem highly likely.

The flock in 2014 was the largest multiple occurrence to date, although three were also seen together in October 2021. Confirmation of the records by year is provided by figure 1. The records from West Hythe/Botolph's Bridge between 2010 and 2013 have been treated as separate individuals in the figures.

The records by year are shown in figure 1.

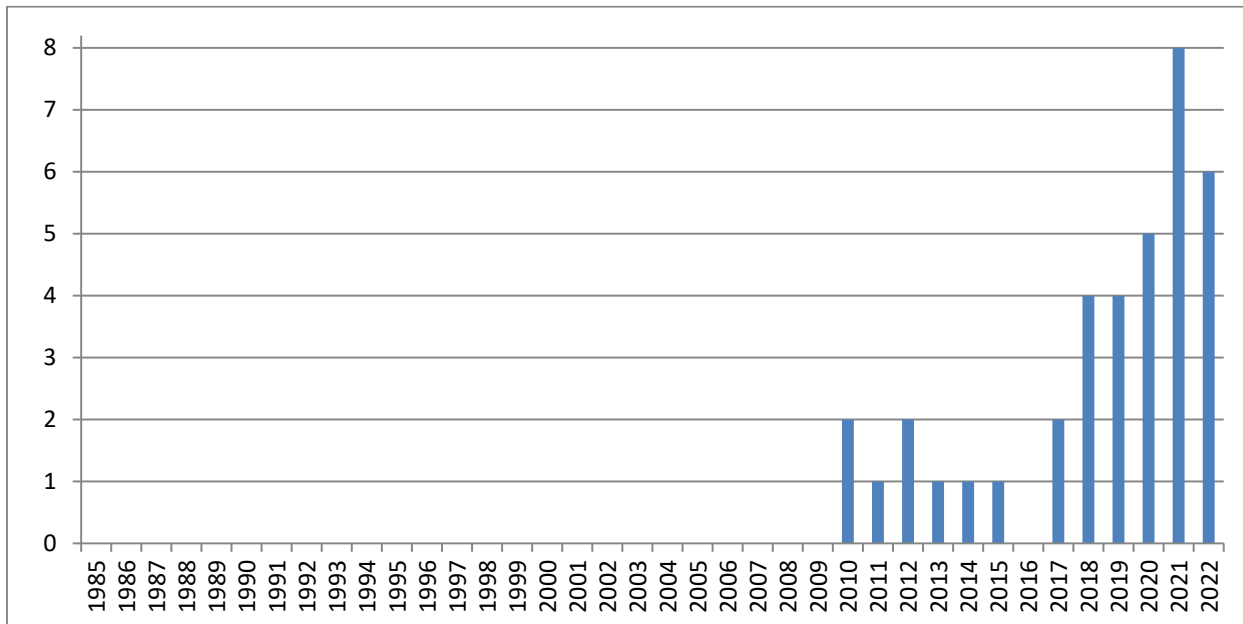


Figure 1: Great White Egret records at Folkestone and Hythe

The records by week are given in figure 2 and figure 3 shows the distribution of records by tetrad.

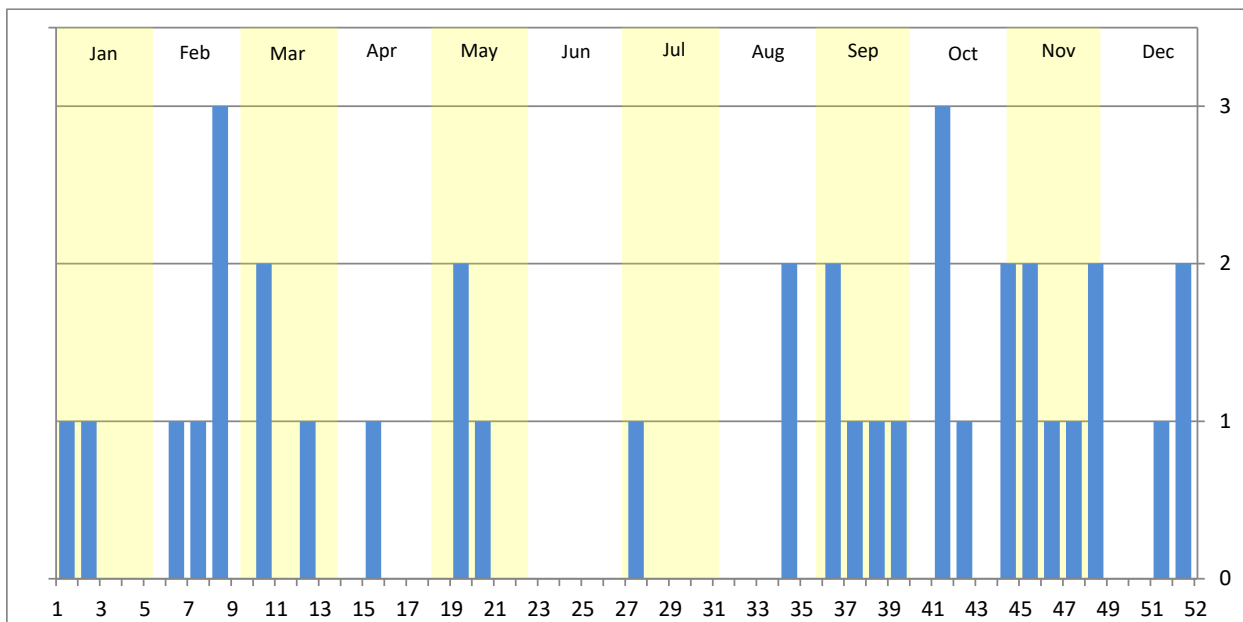


Figure 2: Great White Egret records at Folkestone and Hythe by week



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)

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.

Voice: It was not heard to call.

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

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