

Red-breasted Merganser

Mergus serrator

Category A

Winter visitor and passage migrant.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds across northern Europe, Asia and North America. Movements of British breeders are not fully known but are thought to winter around the coast not far from the breeding areas. Those breeding in Finland, Poland, Baltic States, north-west Russia, and some from areas to the south, migrate to winter in the Baltic and further west to the Netherlands and Britain.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

Passage migrant and winter visitor, with occasional summer records and uncommon inland.



Red-breasted Merganser at Seabrook (Brian Harper)

The Red-breasted Merganser was included in Knight and Tolputt'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 it would have been very likely to have been recorded at the coast and so within the modern boundary. Furthermore, Ticehurst (1909) considered it to be "the only "Saw-bill" that occurs every year in Kent", being "a common winter visitor to the creeks of the Thames, Medway and Swale and the estuary of the Stour, and is to be found in numbers at these localities when the weather is severe... Under like conditions it also occurs at sea round the remainder of the Kent coast, but is not nearly so regular in its appearance there as it is in the north of the county".

Harrison (1953) considered it to be "prevalent off the whole of the Kentish coast from late October up to about the first ten days of April" and cited one local record in particular: "some idea of the winter prevalence of this bird off east Kent is given by the information sent to me by Mr. E. D. Elcombe (*in litt.*), who counted 158 inshore off Sandgate on the 29th February 1940, adding that he lost count after that, but believed that there must have been over two hundred of them in one flock, with other smaller flocks nearby. On 1st March the numbers had diminished to 35 there".



Red-breasted Merganser on the sea off Battery Point (Brian Harper)

Taylor *et al.* (1981) considered this record to be "exceptional" and were able to provide no comparable count in their review period (1952-76), although numbers did reach 180 in the Thames in the 1950s. The authors provided evidence of a 56% decrease in the population wintering in the three main estuaries in the north of the county.

Balmer *et al.* (2013) reported a 28% contraction in breeding range since the 1968-72 atlas and also mentioned that a long-term decline in wintering population had been documented through the BTO Wetland Bird Surveys.

There were few local reports between the 1950s and 1970s which was probably a reflection of limited coverage, however Roger Norman saw two drakes at Nickolls Quarry on the 23rd March 1958 and there were five on the Royal Military Canal at Hythe between the 18th and 25th February 1978, whilst Dave Weaver saw a pair at Nickolls Quarry on the 23rd January 1979 and two 'redheads' there on the 10th March 1979 (Norman 2007). Records away from the coast continue to be unusual today.

There have records in all but one year since 1981 and it has proved to a regular, though uncommon, winter visitor and passage migrant.

Overall distribution

Figure 1 shows the distribution of all records of Red-breasted Merganser by tetrad, with records in 12 tetrads (39%).

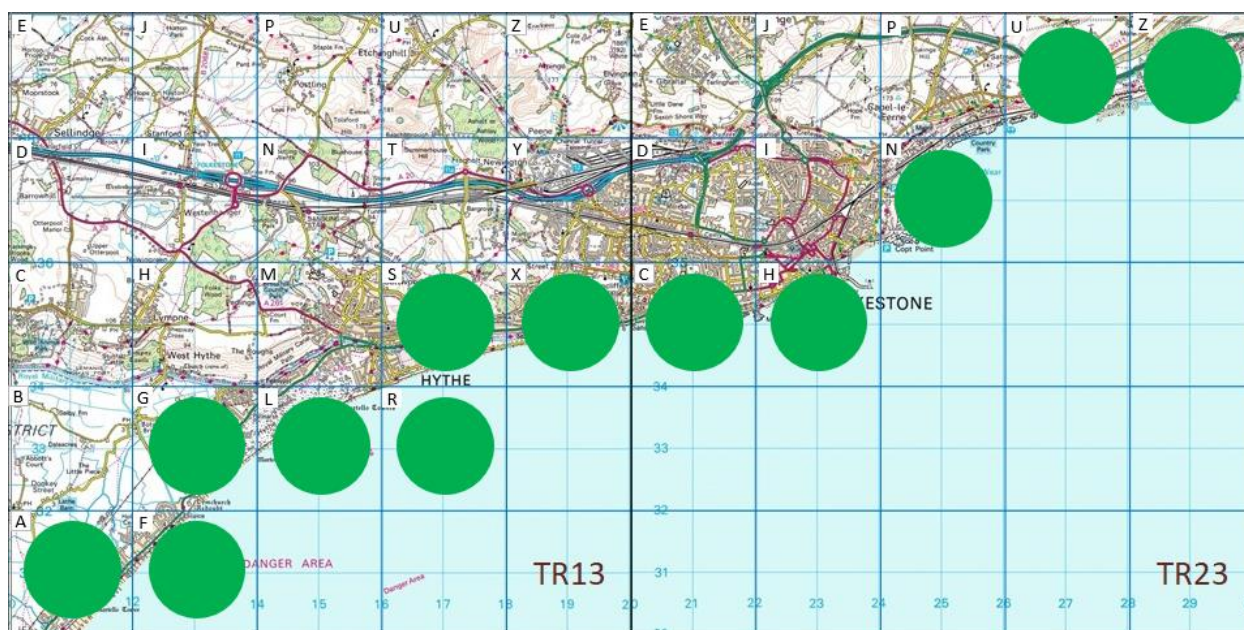


Figure 1: Distribution of all Red-breasted Merganser records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The first autumn migrants typically occur in October and the few earlier records are worthy of note. In 1981 one lingered off Copt Point between the 15th and 24th July, whilst in 1987 one remained offshore from Abbotscliffe between the 24th July and 3rd August. Five flew west past Copt Point on the 26th August 2003, one flew west there on the 30th August 1997, a pair flew west past Mill Point on the 1st September 1988 and one flew east past Copt Point on the 23rd September 2002.

October and November records are frequent and double-figure counts have been noted on several occasions:

- 16 west past Copt Point on the 10th November 1996
- 16 west past Copt Point on the 2nd November 1998
- 12 west past Copt Point on the 6th November 2000
- 10 west past Mill Point on the 8th November 2010
- 15 east past Samphire Hoe on the 6th November 2011 (when 14 were also seen off the Willop Outfall)
- 13 west past Samphire Hoe on the 11th November 2013
- 13 west past Princes Parade on the 20th November 2022

Autumn records have been exclusively coastal. Winter sightings occur in most years, with never more than five recorded (apart from the record cited by Harrison), and inland records are scarce, with up to three (a drake and two ducks) that frequented Nickolls Quarry between the 10th and 29th February 1996 being of particular note.

Spring passage can occur between early March and late May, with a mean total over the last 20 years of 37. The peak year during this period was 2005, producing a total of 77 birds, and the peak counts were as follows:

23 east past Mill Point on the 24th April 1991
17 east past Abbotscliffe on the 7th April 1992
22 east past Folkestone on the 23rd April 1995
14 east past Mill Point on the 1st April 2004
26 east past Mill Point on the 2nd April 2004
18 east past Mill Point on the 20th March 05
17 east past Samphire Hoe on the 2nd April 2005
14 east past Folkestone Pier and Samphire Hoe on the 9th Apr 2013
14 east past Mill Point on the 4th April 2014



Red-breasted Merganser at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)

References

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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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Red-breasted Merganser on the Royal Military Canal at Seabrook (Brian Harper)