

# Smew

*Mergellus albellus* Category A  
Rare passage migrant and winter visitor. 19 records, 60 birds

*World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):*  
Breeds eastwards from Norway, through Finland into northern Russia, eastwards across northern Asia to Kamchatka. Those from Fenno-Scandia (and some from north-west Russia) winter in Britain, the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark.

*Kent status (KOS 2022):*  
A scarce and decreasing winter visitor to Kent, with occasional cold weather influxes.



Smew at Botolph’s Bridge (Brian Harper)

Ticehurst (1909) concluded that Smews might “almost be called annual winter visitors to the estuaries and seas round the coast of Kent”, although “their numbers are small, and unless driven close inshore by stress of weather they escape observation”. He noted that “they have been obtained along the whole length of the Kent coastline”, considering that records were so numerous that it was not necessary to detail them, thus not citing any local occurrences should indeed there have been any. It was not known locally to Knight & Tolputt (1871) as it did not appear in their “List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood”.

Its status had changed little by the time of the review period (1952-76) of Taylor *et al.* (1981), who considered it to be a scarce annual winter visitor, with larger parties occurring in hard winters. It was during this period that the first local record was noted, when Brian Uden shot one along the Royal Military Canal between Palmarsh and West Hythe on the 26<sup>th</sup> February 1955 (Norman pers. comm.), whilst Geoffrey Munns then noted four at Hythe on the 26<sup>th</sup> January 1963. There were no further records until 1985, however it has since occurred with some regularity, as shown in figure 1, although has become less frequent since 2002.

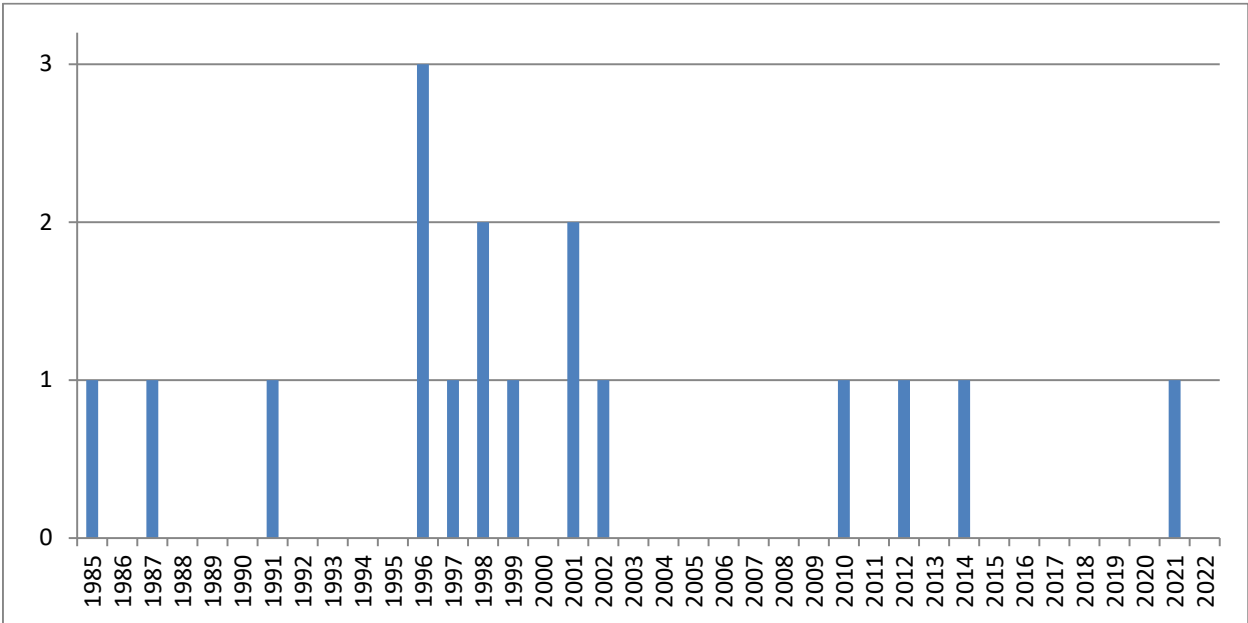


Figure 1: Smew records at Folkestone and Hythe since 1985

One was seen at Nickolls Quarry during cold weather in the 1985/86 winter, with four present there on the 25<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> January 1987 and there was an exceptional influx at Nickolls Quarry during hard weather in February 1991: one on the 9<sup>th</sup> increased to four the next day, and then 13 (a drake and 12 “redheads” (immature/females)) were seen on the 13<sup>th</sup>, decreasing to six the following day before increasing again to 11 (two drakes, 9 “redheads”) on the 16<sup>th</sup>, with ten remaining until the 18<sup>th</sup> and two to the 24<sup>th</sup> (Norman 2007).

The first coastal record involved a “redhead” flying west past Copt Point on the 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1998 and from 1996 it became almost annual in occurrence at Nickolls Quarry, being seen in six out of seven years to 2002, but then the deeper section of the pit was in-filled and there have been just one record there since (during cold weather in 2021).

The only subsequent sightings were a “redhead” at Botolph’s Bridge in February 2010 and 2012, a “redhead” flying west past Hythe in December 2014 and a “redhead” flying past the Willop Outfall (with presumably the same individual later at Nickolls Quarry) on the 8<sup>th</sup> February 2021.

Apart from a migrant which passed Copt Point on the 3<sup>rd</sup> November, all have been recorded between the 24<sup>th</sup> November (week 47) and 26<sup>th</sup> February (week 9), with a peak arrival time of late January/early February, as shown in figure 2. The vast majority of records were associated with severe weather.

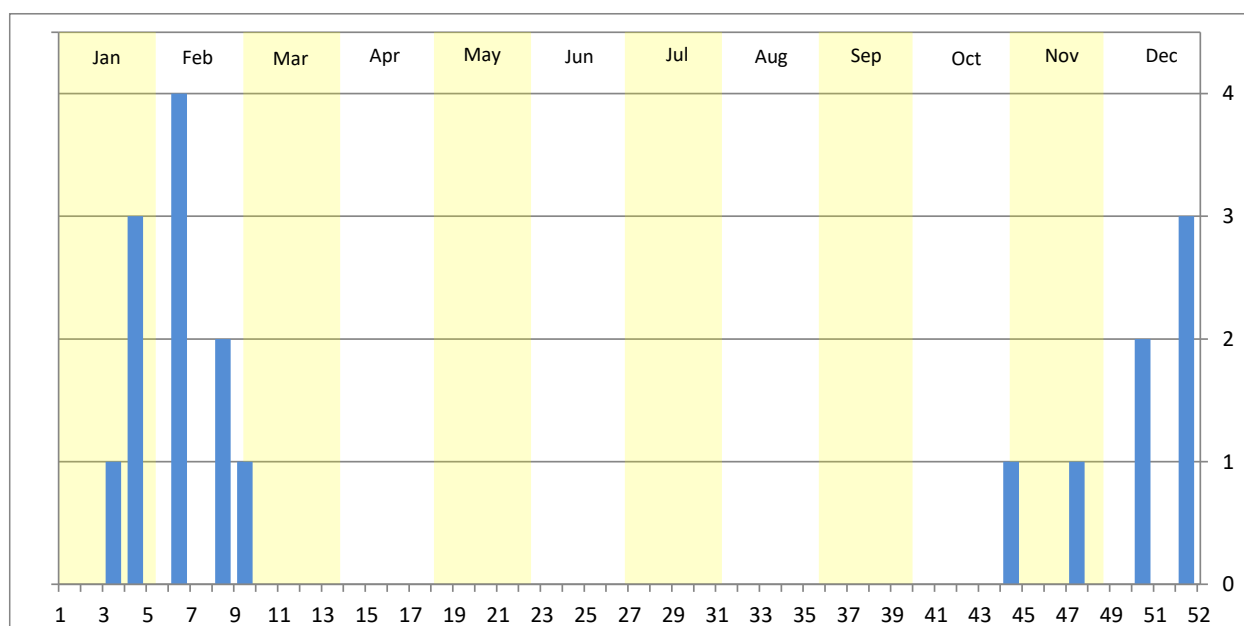


Figure 2: Smew records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Almost all records have been from Nickolls Quarry or Botolph’s Bridge (TR13 G), apart from the first which was along the canal and three coastal records. Figure 3 shows the location of records by tetrad.



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

The full list of records is as follows:

- 1955** Hythe Canal (between Palmarsh and West Hythe), one shot, 26<sup>th</sup> February (B. Uden, per R. K. Norman)
- 1963** Hythe, four, 26<sup>th</sup> January (G. F. A. Munns)
- 1985** Nickolls Quarry, recorded in cold weather period in winter 1985 (per R. K. Norman)
- 1987** Nickolls Quarry, four, 25<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> January (per R. K. Norman)
- 1991** Nickolls Quarry, present from 9<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> February, with a maximum of 13 (2 males) on the 13<sup>th</sup> (R. K. Norman)
- 1996** Nickolls Quarry, two to five redheads from 8<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> February (R. K. Norman)
- 1996** Nickolls Quarry, one to two redheads from 23<sup>rd</sup> February to 6<sup>th</sup> March (R. K. Norman)
- 1996** Nickolls Quarry, three redheads from 29<sup>th</sup> December, increasing to 8 on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1997 (R. K. Norman, I. A. Roberts, D. A. Gibson)
- 1997** Nickolls Quarry, four redheads, 25<sup>th</sup> January, with one to 26<sup>th</sup> (R. K. Norman)
- 1998** Copt Point, redhead flew west, 3<sup>rd</sup> November (D. A. Gibson)
- 1998** Nickolls Quarry, redhead, 24<sup>th</sup> November (R. K. Norman)
- 1999** Nickolls Quarry, redhead, 30<sup>th</sup> December (R. K. Norman)
- 2001** Nickolls Quarry, one male and two redheads, 20<sup>th</sup> January, with 2 redheads remaining until the 21<sup>st</sup> (R. K. Norman, I. A. Roberts)
- 2001** Nickolls Quarry, redhead, 16<sup>th</sup> December (R. K. Norman, I. A. Roberts)
- 2002** Nickolls Quarry, six seen briefly in flight, 12<sup>th</sup> December (R. K. Norman)
- 2010** Botolph's Bridge, two redheads, 20<sup>th</sup> February, photographed (B. Harper)
- 2012** Botolph's Bridge, redhead, 11<sup>th</sup> February, (B. & M. Harper, I. A. Roberts)
- 2014** Hythe, redhead flew west, 27<sup>th</sup> December (I. A. Roberts)
- 2021** Willop Outfall, redhead flew east, 8<sup>th</sup> February, photographed (B. Harper)
- 2021** Nickolls Quarry, redhead, 8<sup>th</sup> February, photographed (B. Harper, I. A. Roberts), presumed same as above



Smew with Wigeon and Teal 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](#).

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



Smew with Wigeon at the Willop Outfall (Brian Harper)