

Forster's Tern

Sterna forsteri

Category A

Very rare vagrant.

1 record

Breeds in North America, with two discrete populations, one in the prairies of Canada and the USA which migrates extensively overland towards the Pacific and Gulf of Mexico, and the other along the eastern and southern USA seaboard from Maryland to Texas, with migratory birds following the coasts south. Winters in the southern USA (north to California and Virginia), through Mexico south to Guatemala. It is a rare vagrant to Britain and western Europe (Snow & Perrins, 1998).



Forster's Tern at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)

There have been 21 records in Britain to the end of 2019, most recently in 2003 before the local record in 2016. Only one had previously occurred in Kent, at Margate in October 1986. Birds have been found in Britain between August and May, but most have been located in late autumn or winter (BBRC, 2021, RBA, 2021, KOS, 2021). The only area record relates to a first-winter bird found by Ian Roberts at Princes Parade on the 26th November 2016. An account of the find is provided below. The record by year is shown in figure 1.



Forster's Tern at Princes Parade (Martin Casemore)



Forster's Tern at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)

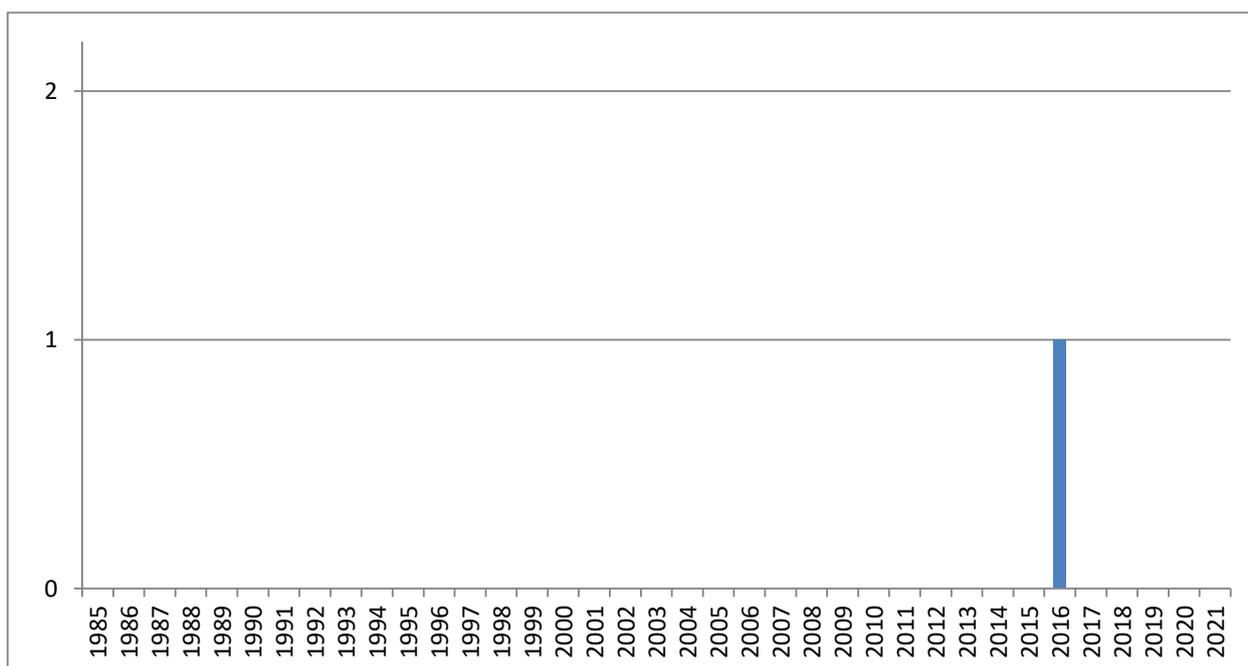


Figure 1: Forster's Tern records at Folkestone and Hythe

The record by week is given in figure 2.

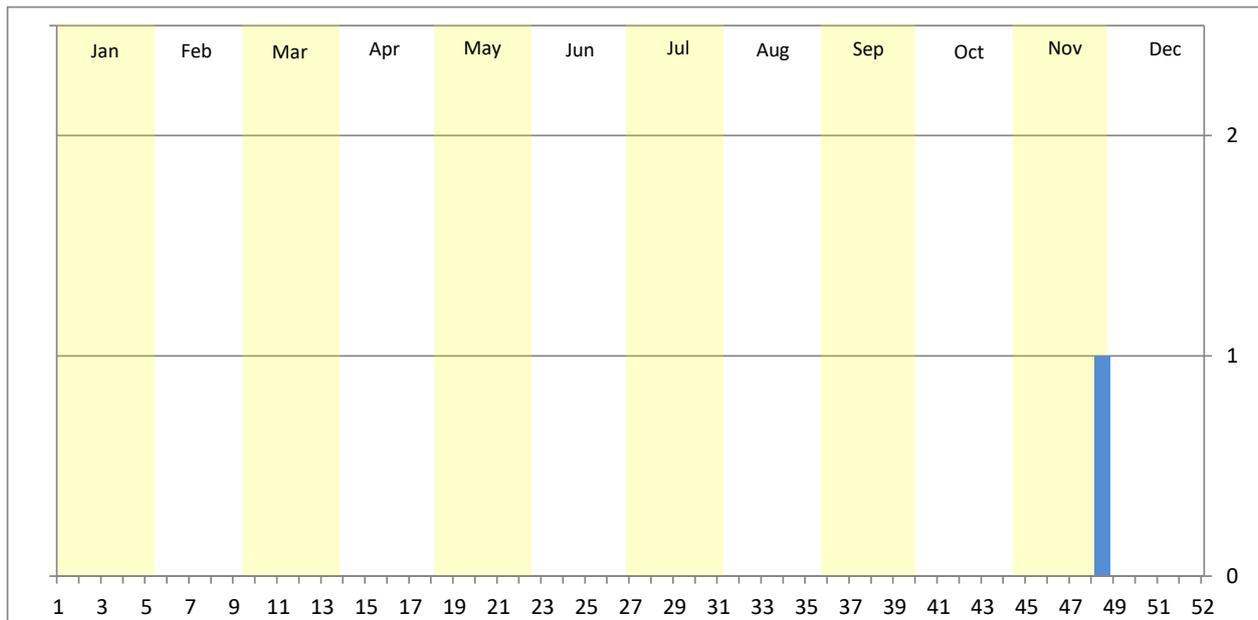


Figure 2: Forster's Tern records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Figure 3 shows the distribution of records by tetrad. The single occurrence visited the adjacent tetrads TR13 S and TR13 X.



Figure 3: Distribution of all Forster's Tern records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Confirmation of the only area record is as follows:

2016 Princes Parade, first-winter, 26th November, photographed and video-recorded (I. A. Roberts, B. Harper, P. Smith *et al*)

Click [here](#) to access a series of video recordings of the single area record.

An account of the first area record is given below.

Forster's Tern at Princes Parade

26th November 2016

(I. A. Roberts, B. Harper, P. Smith *et al*)

Weather conditions:

Overcast but dry, with a fairly light easterly breeze.

Circumstances of the find:

At about 10:15 on the 26th November 2016 I was driving back from Sandgate, where I had been photographing a Caspian Gull and a Yellow-legged Gull on the beach, heading west along Princes Parade when I noticed a tern flying towards me along the beach. I assumed it was going to be a late Sandwich Tern but as it flew past it looked too small for that species so I began to think about the other possibilities - there had been an exceptionally late Common Tern at Ramsgate recently and of course a Forster's Tern in Essex.

After a hasty three-point turn I caught up with it again, drove on a little ahead and jumped out with camera at the ready. As it approached I could clearly see the distinctive 'bandit mask' characteristic of Forster's Tern! I was very relieved to be able to secure some record shots in case it quickly disappeared but fortunately it turned back towards Hythe and appeared to be feeding happily along the strand. I put the news out and kept the bird in view as I waited for people to arrive. A couple of times it strayed as far as Hythe and was nearly lost to view but thankfully it doubled back and then landed on the beach right in front of me, which is where it was when Brian Harper and Phil Smith arrived. They were the first of many who were able to enjoy excellent views of the bird as it spent the four hours or so feeding along the beach and roosting on the shingle. Some excellent photographs were obtained as were a couple of clips of video footage.

At around 14:30 it headed off eastwards towards Folkestone and there were no further sightings.

Description of the bird:

Head: The bill was completely black and rather long. The head was mostly white apart from the obvious black 'bandit mask' and some faint streaking on the crown, particularly towards the rear.

Upperparts: The mantle was grey and the rump white. The upperwings were grey with darker primary tips, a faint dark carpal bar and some dark markings on the primary coverts. The underwings were white with darker primary tips. The tail was grey with darker tips to the outer tail feathers.

Underparts: The underpart were clean white. Legs red.

Comments on the record:

It was presumed to be the same bird as one seen in Essex between the 19th and the 20th November 2016. The record was accepted by the BBRC and appears in their report for that year (Holt *et al*, 2017).

References

BBRC statistics: <https://www.bbrc.org.uk/main-information/statistics> (accessed 2021)

Holt, C. & the Rarities Committee, 2017. Report on rare birds in Great Britain in 2016. *British Birds*: 110, 562-631

Kent Bird Reports. Kent Ornithological Society

KOS Kent list: <https://kentos.org.uk/kent-list> (accessed 2021)

Rare Bird Alert Previous Records: www.rarebirdalert.co.uk/RealData/rarityrecords.asp?id=6180 (accessed 2021)

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



Forster's Tern at Princes Parade (Glenn Honey)



Forster's Tern at Princes Parade (Martin Collins)

Acknowledgements

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



Forster's Tern at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)