

Great Black-backed Gull

Larus marinus

Category A

Winter visitor and passage migrant, with small numbers over-summering. Bred for the first time in 2022.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds along coasts of north-west Europe (from Brittany northwards), Greenland and the west Atlantic coast from Labrador south to North Carolina, and inland to the Great Lakes. Populations from north of the Arctic Circle are completely migratory, whilst in the southern part of the breeding range it is merely dispersive. The main European winter range extends south to the Bay of Biscay.



Great Black-backed Gull at Hythe (Brian Harper)

Kent status (KOS 2021):

It is also a common winter visitor to Kent with non-breeding birds also present all year round.

The Great Black-backed Gull 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 is very likely to have occurred at the coast and so within the current boundaries. Furthermore, Ticehurst (1909) wrote that "immature examples of the Great Black-backed Gull are to be found on the Kent coast throughout the year; adults are in the main autumn and winter visitors only".

In Britain it is mainly found in northern and western parts, however it has recently undergone a loss of range in these areas but gains in the south and east, where they have adapted to urban living and foraging on farmland and landfill sites. Although it colonised much of the English south coast over recent years, a pair that nested at Dungeness in 2003 was the first recorded breeding in the county for 160 years. Since then, pairs have been recorded at several other locations, including successful roof-nesting at Ramsgate in 2007 (Balmer *et al.* 2013; Clements *et al.* 2015).

Clements considered that "it seems likely that Great Black-backed Gulls will continue to colonise suitable habitat throughout the county". In 2021 a pair nested successfully just outside of the local area, on a roof at the western end of Dover seafront (pers. obs.), whilst in 2022 the first local breeding was noted, when a pair raised two young on a roof at Park Farm Industrial Estate in Folkestone, and it could become established as a regular breeding species, alongside the roof-nesting Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls.



Great Black-backed Gull at Folkestone Harbour
(Ian Roberts)



Great Black-backed Gull at Folkestone Harbour
(Ian Roberts)

Overall distribution

Figure 1 shows the distribution of all records of Great Black-backed Gull by tetrad, with records in 23 tetrads (74%). It has a more coastal distribution than other large gulls, with fewer inland records.

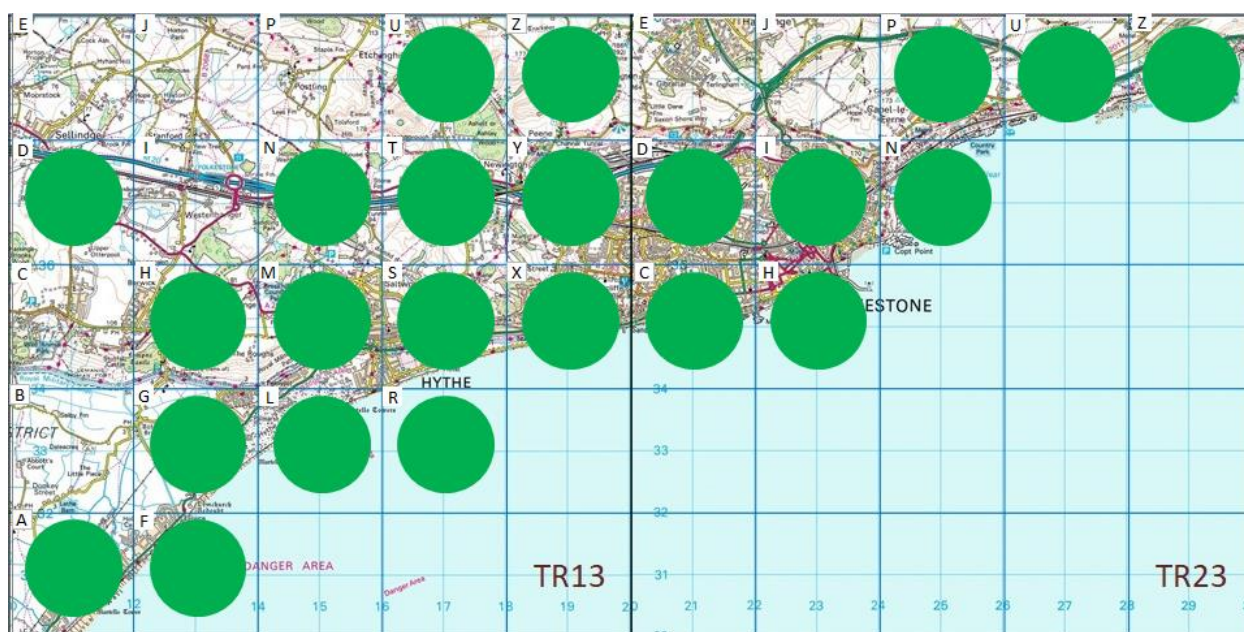


Figure 1: Distribution of all Great Black-backed Gull records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad



Great Black-backed Gull at Hythe (Ian Roberts)



Great Black-backed Gulls at Hythe Ranges (Brian Harper)



Great Black-backed Gull at Hythe (Brian Harper)



Great Black-backed Gull at Hythe (Brian Harper)

Numbers are typically at their lowest during the late spring and summer months, when double-figure counts are unusual and the largest congregation recorded between April and July was 27 at Sandgate on the 26th July 2012, apart from the notable exception of at least 200, possibly as many as 300, seen off the Dymchurch Redoubt on the 8th June 2001.

An increase is usually noted during August, with counts of 50 flying east past Samphire Hoe on the 22nd August 2020 and 47 at Seabrook on the 25th August 2012, into September, when there were 80 at Nickolls Quarry on the 15th September 1996 and 50 flew west past Samphire Hoe on the 27th September 2016, and October, when 120 were at Mill Point on the 7th October 1989.

Winter usually produces peak counts in the region of 50 to 70 birds, with larger counts as follows:

150 at Hythe in January 1968
100 at Folkestone Harbour on the 13th November 2006
300 at Mill Point on the 18th December 2006
92 at Blackhouse Hill on the 3rd February 2007
90 at Botolph's Bridge on the 18th November 2009
75 at Folkestone Harbour on the 29th November 2010
114 at Folkestone Harbour on the 1st December 2014
72 at Samphire Hoe on the 19th November 2018
74 at Seabrook on the 26th December 2019
96 flying west at Seabrook on the 7th October 2022

There is little evidence of any passage in spring.

Birds colour-ringed as nestlings in northern France, Denmark, Sweden and Norway have been recorded locally.



Great Black-backed Gull at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)



Great Black-backed Gull at Hythe (Brian Harper)

References

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Great Black-backed Gull nest at Park Farm Industrial Estate (Ian Roberts)



Great Black-backed Gull with chick at Park Farm Industrial Estate (Ian Roberts)

Acknowledgements

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