

Alpine Swift

Apus melba

Category A

Very rare vagrant.

12 records,
20 birds

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

A widespread breeder across southern Europe north to the Alps and patchily eastwards to central Asia, south to India, also in eastern and southern Africa. West Palearctic populations probably winter all across the northern tropics of Africa.

Kent status (KOS 2022):

It is a scarce vagrant to the county.

Kent (KOS) records to end 2020: 79



Alpine Swift at Folkestone (Ian Roberts)

It is a scarce migrant to Britain, mainly in spring, with most records on the east and south coasts. It was formerly considered to be a national rarity but was removed from the list of species that the British Birds Rarities Committee assess at the end of 2005 (Bradshaw *et al.* 2006), when 576 had been recorded in Britain (BBRC no date). The annual mean number of British records has continued to steadily increase from six in the 1960s to 16 in the 2010s, although yearly totals are highly variable and three recorded in 2020 was the worst tally since 1971 (White & Kehoe 2022).

Tiechurst (1909) was able to document five records in the county, whilst Harrison (1953) added a further two, including the first local record, which was quite a remarkable one. Harrison describes how an account was “given by the late H. M. Wallis on the very positive information of Miss Margaret Barclay. This lady recounts how, at Hythe, [on the 16th] May 1916 she found three Alpine Swifts fluttering against the lowest panes of her windows, which were presumably partly open; the same night, another occupant, a Mr. Hake, found six of these birds in his room in the same house”. Further details are provided below within the account of the first area record.

The first modern record occurred 72 years to the day when Ian Roberts saw one at Mill Point, Folkestone in 1988. This was quickly followed by another record at the same site the following year. After a short gap there was a series of seven records in five years from 1992, five of which were at Capel-le-Ferne. However, since then there have only two further records. Figure 1 shows the modern records by year.

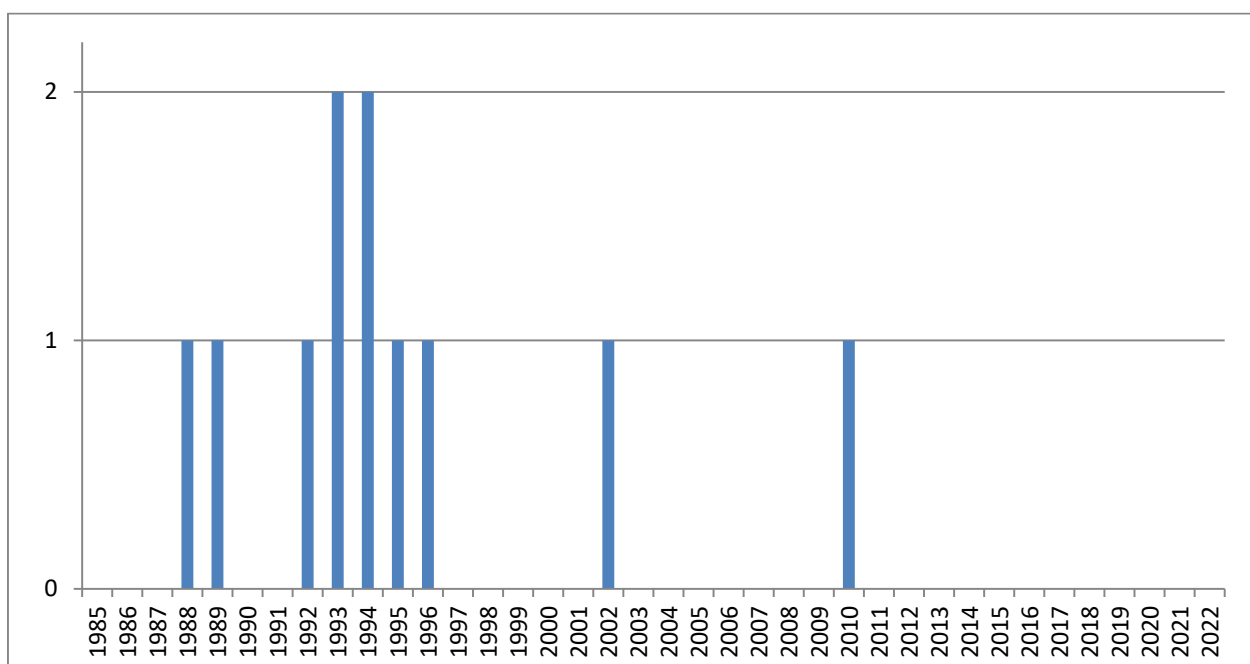


Figure 1: Alpine Swift records at Folkestone and Hythe since 1985

The Mill Point records (in 1988 and 1989) and Capel-le-Ferne/Folkestone records (in consecutive years between 1992 and 1996) both suggest the possibility of these being the same returning birds.

All but one record to date has occurred in spring or early summer, with eight occurring between 5th April (week 14) and 22nd May (week 21) and a further three between 29th June (week 26) and 12th July (week 28). The peak period for occurrence is 16th to 22nd May (weeks 20/21), with four. The sole autumn record was on 20th September (week 38). Figure 2 shows the records by week.

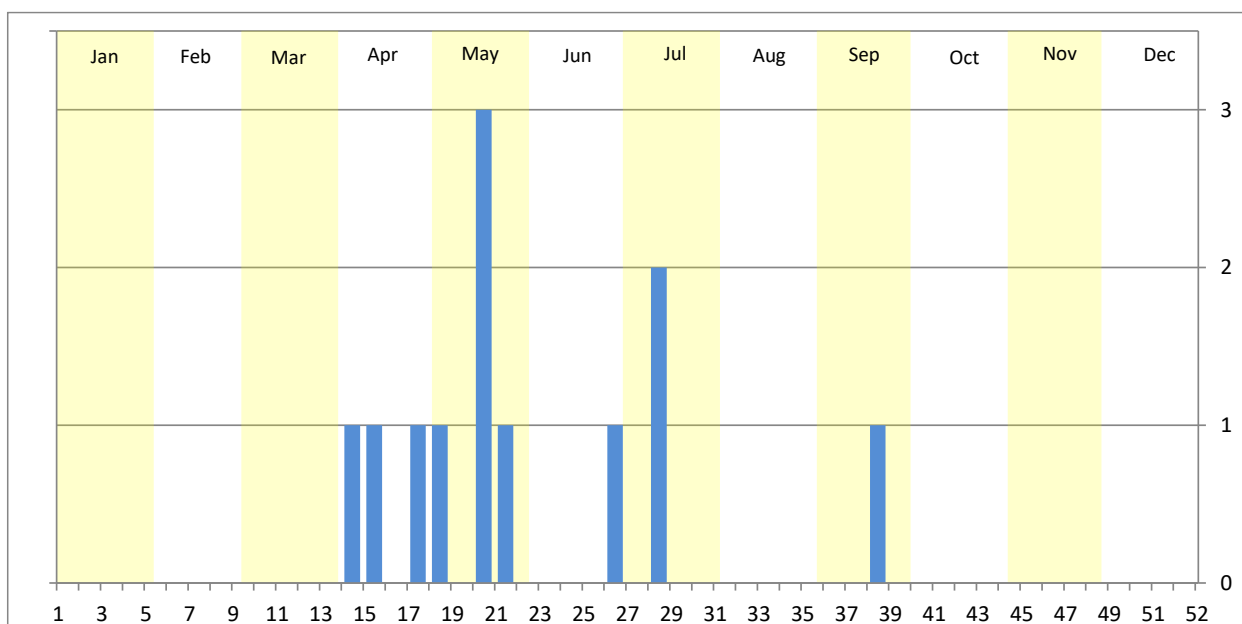


Figure 2: Alpine Swift records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Most records involve birds seen on a single day, but three lingered overnight, and one of these stayed for three days, and was seen roosting underneath the eaves of a building in The Durlocks, Folkestone.

Figure 3 shows the location of records by tetrad. All modern records have been either in the Cheriton/Folkestone area or at Capel-le-Ferne. The historic record lacks sufficient detail to be mapped to the tetrad level but the occurrence at “a lofty house overlooking the town and Channel” was presuming in TR13 M or TR13 S, perhaps on one of the roads on the escarpment above Hythe.



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

The full list of records is as follows:

- 1916 Hythe, nine, 16th May (M. Barclay, O. B. Hake)
1988 Mill Point, 16th May (I. A. Roberts)
1989 Mill Point, 22nd May (I. A. Roberts)
1992 Capel-le-Ferne Café and Abbotscliffe, 2nd to 3rd May (I. A. Roberts, J. P. Siddle), earlier seen at Dungeness and later seen at Dover
1993 Capel-le-Ferne Café, one flew east, 29th June (D. A. Gibson)
1993 Cheriton, one flew west, 20th September (D. A. Gibson)
1994 Capel-le-Ferne, 23rd April (D. A. Gibson)
1994 Capel-le-Ferne, 19th to 20th May, photographed (D. A. Gibson, B. Cox, J. A. Flynn)
1995 Capel-le-Ferne Gun Site, 10th July (D. A. Gibson, I. A. Roberts)
1996 East Cliff Gardens, Folkestone, 12th July (D. Featherbe)
2002 Capel-le-Ferne Café, one flew east, 10th April (I. A. Roberts)
2010 The Durlocks, Folkestone, 5th to 7th April, photographed (M. Kennett, I. A. Roberts *et al*)

An account of the first area record is given below.

9 Alpine Swifts at Hythe

16th May 1916

By H. M. Wallis

132

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ALPINE SWIFTS IN KENT.

WHEN in Norfolk recently I came upon the record of an incursion of Alpine Swifts (*Apus m. melba*) during May, 1916.

Miss Margaret Barclay, of Hanworth Hall, Norfolk (eldest daughter of Col. H. A. Barclay, himself an ornithologist, and herself, of recent years, a keen watcher of birds), was during the war nursing at Hythe and lodged in a lofty house, the end of a row, overlooking the town and Channel. Among other lodgers was a Mr. O. B. Hake.

One evening in May, 1916, Miss Barclay on reaching her room heard a sound of scraping and fluttering against the glass of her open window, and found three very large brown Swifts with white undersides flattened against the lowest pane of glass. She gave them their liberty, noticing their "hugeness," their white undersides, how bulky they seemed in the hand, and when they flew their wide spread of wing.

Her fellow-lodger, Mr. Hake, found six of the same sort of bird in his room the same night. At my request the lady has written to Mr. Hake, who endorses her story, adding very little except that he remembers their size and brown backs and white underparts. He is not an ornithologist.

I may say that in the hall at Hanworth is a well-stuffed Alpine Swift (history unknown).

Miss Barclay was unaware of the value of her record at the time, nor knew that there was such a bird, having taken no especial notice of birds until after the war.

On her return home from nursing she recognised that the birds which had invaded her room at Hythe (Kent) were exactly like her father's Alpine Swift, having been *brown* above, not sooty, and *white* beneath. Also that their size, bulk and spread of wing exceeded any Swifts she had seen then, or since.

H. M. WALLIS.

The record was recently reviewed by Phil Chantler (1990) following his research into records at Kingsdown in the previous year (1915) which led to their rejection. The Hythe record however stood up to scrutiny and remains acceptable. Phil commented that:

“In *Birds of Kent* (1953), Harrison considered the Hythe record and the Kingsdown records as ‘remarkable in that they refer to the species in numbers’. He could equally have considered them remarkable for the behaviour exhibited in both cases. The Kingsdown birds settled in a stubble field, whilst the Hythe birds entered a building and landed against the windows. In the former case, the highly improbable behaviour deems the record unacceptable; in the latter case, the remarkable but entirely plausible behaviour deems the record worthy of great interest and closer scrutiny.

The Hythe record was sent to British Birds not by the finders of the Alpine Swifts but by H. M. Wallis. Wallis made efforts to authenticate Margaret Barclay’s story, explaining that ‘at my request the lady has written to Mr. Hake, who endorses her story, adding very little except that he remembers their size and brown backs and white underparts’. Wallis, our man on the ground at the time, was certainly willing to accept it after his investigation.

So, does the behaviour described call out for reassessment? Alpine Swifts may not be as dependent on human habitation as Common *A. apus*, Pallid *A. pallidus* or Little Swifts *A. affinis*, but they certainly can show close association with human habitation. In Croatia, in 2002, I watched Alpine Swifts sitting (indeed mating) alongside windows, and others entering eaves and gaps in walls in a busy street. During cold weather, Alpine Swifts will cluster on suitable structures, including those made by humans. Liley & Watson (*British Birds* 90: 148) recorded such a gathering in the city of Fès, Morocco. One of two Alpine Swifts at Reculver, Kent, in 1993, tried to enter a tower, hitting the window. One last example that shows that the behaviour observed by Barclay and Hake is not unprecedented among swifts comes, fittingly, from east Kent. It is related to us in the charming *British Birds in their Haunts* by Rev. C. A. Johns (1909), quoting Mr. F. Smith (*Zoologist* 1856, p. 5249). On a ‘disagreeably cold’ 8th July 1856, at Deal, Common Swifts arrived en masse; ‘they flew unsteadily, fluttered against the walls of the houses, and some even flew into open windows’.

Different standards were applied before the days of BBRC and many ‘old’ records do not stand up well to close scrutiny. We must, however, be careful to wield the knife only in cases where there is overwhelming doubt. In this case, we have adequate descriptions, corroboration and plausible behaviour”.



Alpine Swift roosting at Folkestone (Ian Roberts)



Alpine Swift at Folkestone (Ian Roberts)

An account of the first modern area record is given below:

Alpine Swift at Mill Point
16th May 1988

By Ian Roberts

Weather conditions:

Light north-easterly wind (force 2-4), dry with about 50% cloud cover.

Circumstances of the find:

I had only adopted Mill Point as my local patch eleven days earlier (finding a Hoopoe on my first visit!) and was visiting whenever I could to add new species to the list. On the 16th May I paid an evening visit, arriving at around 19:00, but the first hour and a half was fairly quiet apart from a few Common Swifts coming in off and a trickle of terns going east.

Then, at just before 20:30, I picked up a large swift, almost falcon-like in appearance, out in the bay towards Sandgate. It was clearly an Alpine Swift (a species which I had seen very well at Broadstairs only six weeks previously), having brown upperparts, a white belly, dark breast and undertail coverts, and an indistinct pale throat.

It was in view for about 20 minutes before it was lost to sight over the cliff top with two Common Swifts. There seems a fair chance that it roosted locally but it could not be located the following morning.

Description of the bird:

Size, shape, jizz: A large swift, with an almost falcon-like appearance. Typical swift shape, with long wings and a notched tail. Wing-beats were slower than those of Common Swift and the bird clearly larger in direct comparison.

Head and upperparts: Brown upperparts.

Underparts: White belly. Dark breast and undertail coverts. Quite indistinct pale throat. Brown flanks merging into belly.

Comments on the record:

The record was accepted by the British Birds Rarities Committee and appears in their annual rarity report for 1988 (Rogers *et al.* 1989). There had been 31 previous records in Kent and 399 nationally.

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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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Alpine Swift at Folkestone (Brian Harper)