

Caspian Gull

Larus cachinnans

Category A

Rare but increasingly frequent visitor, mostly in winter. 22 records, 26 birds

World/British distribution (Olsen & Larsson 2005):

Breeds on sandy dunes, islands, steppe lakes and along rivers, mainly in Russia (where there are c.30,000 pairs), but has spread recently into Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland and southern Germany. The main winter areas are the Black and Caspian seas and the Gulf States although, following breeding, many move west and north-west to reach northern and western Europe, including Britain.

Kent status (KOS 2022):

In Kent it is a scarce but increasingly frequent visitor, especially in the Dungeness area (KOS 2022).



1CY Caspian Gull at Sandgate (Chris Powell)

The Caspian Gull was formerly treated as a form of Herring Gull but several authors, including Olsen & Larsson, elevated the Caspian Gull to full species status, and this treatment was adopted by the British Ornithologist's Union in 2007 (Sangster *et al.* 2007).

It was first recorded locally in 2006 when Ian Roberts found a first calendar year bird in Folkestone Harbour on the 19th February and this was quickly followed by an adult on Folkestone Sunny Sands on the 24th November and a first calendar year bird in Folkestone Harbour from the 11th to 13th December of the same year.

There were no further sightings however until 2011, when a first calendar year bird was seen on the beach at Hythe. It was seen to have a yellow colour-ring and, although the ring could unfortunately not be read, it was presumed to have originated from Poland. An adult was then noted at Folkestone Harbour on the 27th November 2012 and there have been annual records since 2014, as figure 1 demonstrates. Another colour-ringed bird seen at Sandgate in September 2022 had been ringed in central Germany.

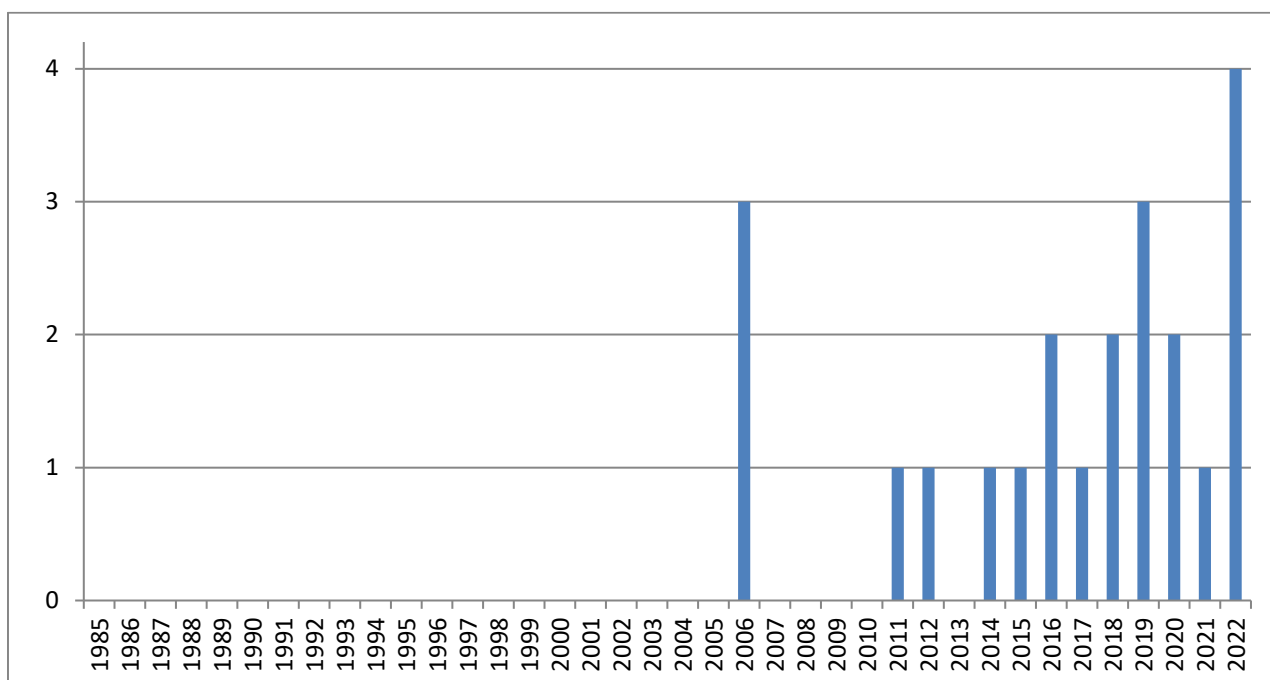


Figure 1: Caspian Gull records at Folkestone and Hythe

Apart from one in August and two in September, all records to date have been in the winter period, as shown in figure 2, with most having been found between late November and early January.

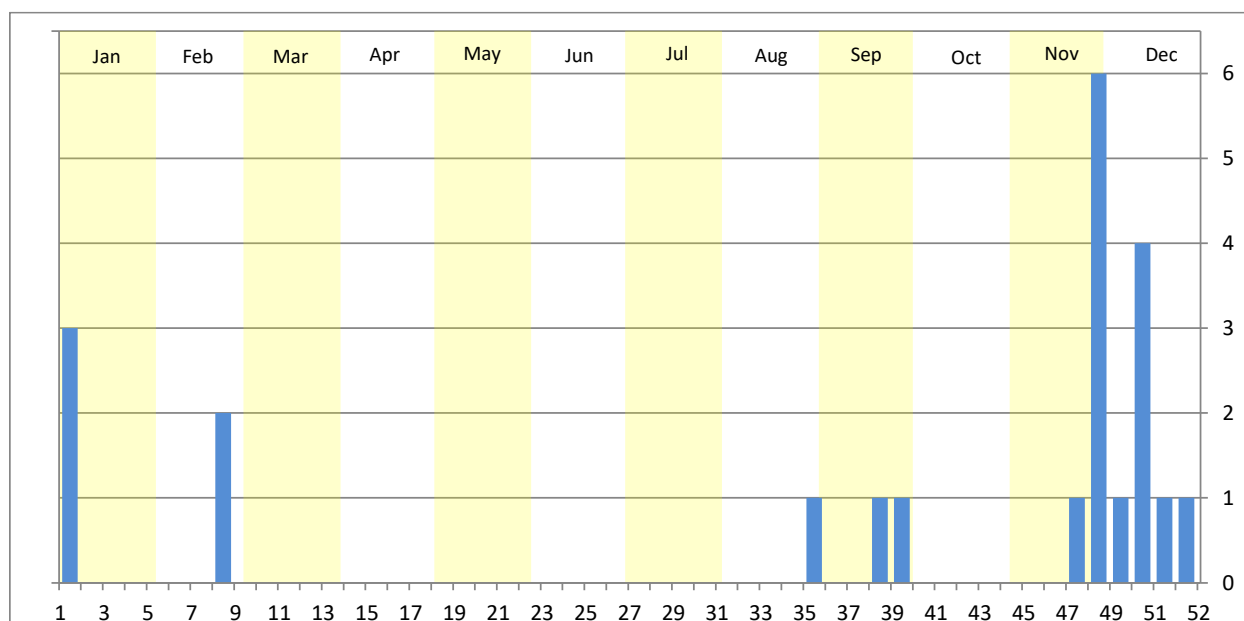


Figure 2: Caspian Gull records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Figure 3 shows the distribution of records to date. Nine have been found in the Folkestone Harbour area, with the others at Battery Point/Sandgate (5), Nickolls Quarry (3), Hythe (2), Hythe Ranges, Haguelands and the Willop Basin.



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

The majority of records have involved first calendar year birds (37%) or adults (52%).

The full list of records is as follows:

- 2006** Folkestone Harbour, first-winter (1CY), 19th February, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
- 2006** Folkestone Sands, adult (4+CY), 24th November (I. A. Roberts)
- 2006** Folkestone Harbour, first-winter (1CY), 11th to 13th December, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
- 2011** Princes Parade, first-winter (1CY), 14th December, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
- 2012** Folkestone Harbour, adult (4+CY), probably female, 27th November, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
- 2014** Folkestone Harbour, first-winter (1CY), 1st December, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
- 2015** Hythe Imperial golf course, third-winter (3CY), 30th November, photographed (I. A. Roberts)

2016 Sandgate, second-winter (2CY), 26th November, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
2016 Folkestone Harbour, first-winter (1CY), 19th December, photographed, video-recorded (I. A. Roberts)
2017 Folkestone Harbour, adult (4+CY), 2nd December, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
2018 Nickolls Quarry, two adults (4+CY), 15th December, photographed (B. Harper)
2018 Nickolls Quarry, adult (4+CY), 28th December (B. Harper), possibly one of above
2019 Nickolls Quarry, two adults (4+CY), 1st to 2nd January, with one on 3rd January (B. Harper, I. A. Roberts), possibly same as 2018
2019 Hythe Ranges, adult (4+CY), 3rd January, photographed (B. Harper), possibly one of above
2019 Folkestone Harbour, adult (4+CY), 7th January (I. A. Roberts)
2020 Folkestone Beach, juvenile (1CY), 30th August (T. Donegan)
2020 Willop Basin, first-winter (1CY), 11th December (B. Harper, I. A. Roberts)
2021 Haguelands, first-winter (1CY), 19th February, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
2022 Sandgate, first-winter (1CY), 21st September, photographed (C. Powell)
2022 Sandgate, first-winter (1CY), 26th September, photographed (C. Powell), ringed in Germany on 2nd June 2022
2022 Sandgate, second-winter (2CY) and adult (4+CY), 28th November, photographed (I. A. Roberts. B. Harper)
2022 Sandgate, two adults (4+CY), 9th December (B. Harper)

Click [here](#) to watch a local short video recording of a first calendar year bird at Folkestone Harbour in December 2016 (Ian Roberts).

An account of the first area record is given below.

Caspian Gull at Folkestone Harbour **19th February 2006**

By Ian Roberts

Circumstances of the find:

At c.09:50 on 19th February I arrived at Folkestone Harbour, having already checked through the gulls at Sandgate and Mill Point. The tide was quite low and there were a good number of gulls roosting in the harbour. Due to overcast skies there was no glare from the sun, and viewing conditions were ideal.

I set up a scope and scanned through the flock. A very pale-headed bird became obvious fairly quickly, and I focused my attention on it. It was a long-billed, long-necked, slender bird, with a protruding breast and flat belly angled behind the legs. The legs were long, thin, and pale pink. The head and underparts were white except for streaking on the hind-neck, breast sides, and a little on the flanks.

The dark lesser coverts formed a distinct contrast with the white underparts, the median and especially the greater coverts were plain brown with pale tips (apart from some new feathers), and the mantle had bars and diamond-shaped spots. The tertials formed a dark block with pale tips (although worn) and the primaries looked long. So structurally and plumage-wise it appeared very good for Caspian Gull, and over the next 30 minutes or so I took detailed notes and some record shots.

Description of the bird:

Structure: The forehead was long and sloping, accentuating the long bill. The gull looked long-necked, slender, and long-winged, with a protruding breast and flat belly angled behind the legs.

Bill: The bill was long and thin, with the basal half parallel-sided, leading to a gently drooping tip: the upper mandible was gently decurved, and the lower mandible appeared to curve upwards slightly before curving down to the tip. There appeared to be some paleness on the upper and lower mandibles before a dark terminal band, although the cutting edges of both mandibles were dark throughout. There was a hint of a pale tip to the bill. The bill was a very distinctive feature, and quite unlike any that I have seen on a Herring.

Legs: Long, thin and pale pink, with more exposed tibia than Herring.

Head and underparts: The head was white with a little dark before the eye, and the white eyelids were noticeable. The underparts were plain and white, apart from some streaking on the hind-neck, breast-sides and a little on the flanks. There was a little mottling behind the legs, but the under-tail coverts looked pale.

Upperparts: The mantle was grey with bars and diamond-shaped spots. The lesser coverts were dark and formed a distinct contrast with the white underparts. There were some new feathers in the outer median and greater coverts, with the older feathers plain and brown, with paler tips especially on greater coverts. The tertials formed a dark block with pale tips (although worn) and the primaries were dark. The upper-part pattern matched closely the illustration in Olsen & Larsson (2005, plate 42, p. 310, bird no.3).



Caspian Gull at Folkestone Harbour



Caspian Gull (left) at Folkestone Harbour

References

Kent Ornithological Society (KOS). 1953-2022. *Kent Bird Reports*. Kent Ornithological Society.

Olsen, K. M. & Larsson, H. 2005. *Gulls of Europe, Asia and North America*. Christopher Helm.

Sangster, G., Collinson, J. M., Knox, A. G., Parkin, D. T. & Svensson, L. 2007. Taxonomic recommendations for British birds: fourth report. *Ibis* 149: 853-857.

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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1CY Caspian Gull at Folkestone Harbour (Ian Roberts)



1CY Caspian Gull at Princes Parade (Ian Roberts)



1CY Caspian Gull at Sandgate (Chris Powell)



1CY Caspian Gull at Sandgate (Chris Powell)



1CY Caspian Gull at Sandgate (Chris Powell)



1CY Caspian Gull at Sandgate (Chris Powell)



2CY Caspian Gull and adult Yellow-legged Gull at Sandgate (Ian Roberts)



2CY and adult Caspian Gulls at Sandgate (Ian Roberts)



3CY Caspian Gull at Hotel Imperial golf course
(Ian Roberts)



Adult Caspian Gull at Folkestone Harbour
(Ian Roberts)



Adult Caspian Gull at Folkestone Harbour (Ian Roberts)



Adult Caspian Gull at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)