

Guillemot

Uria aalge

Category A

Winter visitor and passage migrant.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds along the eastern Atlantic seaboard from Portugal north through north-west France, western and northern Britain, and Ireland to Iceland, and islands in the Arctic Ocean, eastwards to Novaya Zemlya, also in eastern Canada, Greenland and on coasts and islands of the North Pacific. When not breeding many birds (especially adults) are present all year in seas close to colonies, while others (especially first-years) disperse over long distances.



Guillemot at Folkestone Harbour (Ian Roberts)

Kent status (KOS 2021):

A passage migrant and winter visitor to Kent that is less frequent in summer.

The Guillemot 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 would have been very likely to have been recorded at the coast and so within the modern boundary.

Ticehurst (1909) remarked that "the only breeding place of the Guillemot in our county is situated on the chalk cliffs between Dover and St. Margaret's Bay. Formerly the numbers appear to have been quite large", citing a report from 1845 that "they bred there then in considerable quantities", with a later estimate of 60 pairs still being present by 1895, decreasing to 30 by 1908. Ticehurst believed that coast erosion, causing falls of cliff and reducing the availability of available nesting ledges, was responsible for the diminution. Harrison (1953) wrote that "consequent upon further cliff-falls, as indeed was predicted by Ticehurst, the colony became smaller and finally disappeared", and it would seem that 1926 was "approximately the year when the Guillemot became extinct as a Kentish breeding species".

As a non-breeding species, Harrison considered it to be "abundant off all the coasts of Kent and may be met with from August onwards, up to mid-April, and even exceptionally in the summer months" and cited a local record by way of illustration: "on the 1st and 2nd December 1936 Miss A. V. Stone noted a party of approximately a hundred off Folkestone, remarking that the breasts of all she could see showed contamination with crude oil".



Guillemot at Folkestone Harbour (Elliot Ranford)



Guillemot at Folkestone Harbour (Ian Roberts)

Roger Norman mentioned that single Guillemots were noted off the Dymchurch Redoubt on a few scattered winter dates in 1950s, with three there on the 13th October 1957 (Norman 2006), but most early records relate to birds that have been found dead or stranded, although 30 were noted alive off Folkestone in March 1968.

In early December 1967, 38 oiled birds were found at Folkestone whilst in the first week of January 1970 a total of 21 oiled birds were found at Folkestone. The Kent Bird Report for 1983 described “a huge wreck of auks” that “took place along the whole of the east coast of Britain, marked in Kent by appearance of about 2,500 dead or stranded birds, mostly not oiled”, driven south by a “spell of strong north-westerly and northerly winds”. As part of this wreck a total of 87 Guillemots were found at Folkestone.

It has been recorded annually since regular seawatching commenced in the late 1980s. Taylor *et al.* (1981) considered it practical to discuss both the Guillemot and Razorbill together as “such a high proportion of the larger auks remain unidentified”, and locally a number of movements have been recorded as “Guillemot/Razorbill”. Taylor *et al.* stated that “at Dungeness peak day-totals rarely exceed 40” and gave a maximum count there of 71 (in May 1975), with one larger count from north Kent of 315 (in November 1969). A considerable change in status has since occurred as four-figure counts have now occurred locally on several occasions.

Overall distribution

Figure 1 shows the distribution of all records of Guillemot by tetrad, with records in 13 tetrads (42%).

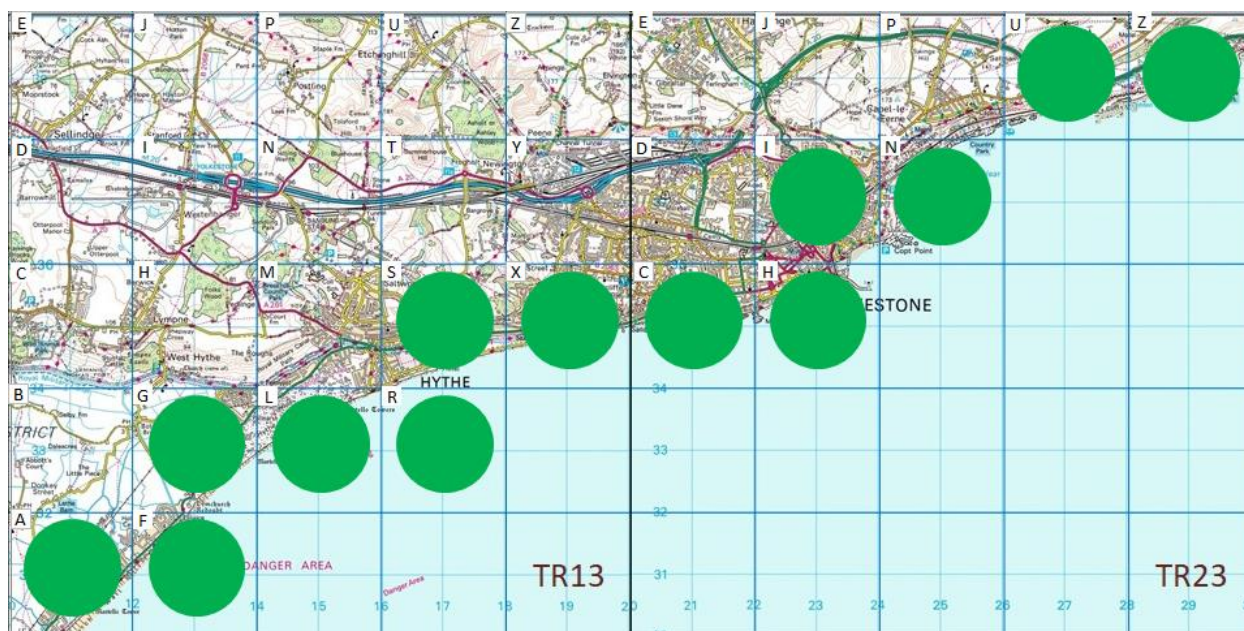


Figure 1: Distribution of all Guillemot records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad



Guillemot at Folkestone Pier (Don Mooney)



Guillemot at Folkestone Harbour (Elliot Ranford)

Although there have been sightings in all weeks of the year, it has only been noted in small numbers in the summer months, with no double-figure counts noted between late May and the end of September.

Numbers can increase rapidly during October, with double-figure counts possible from the first week of the month and totals in excess of 50 from mid-month. Three-figure movements have been noted from late October, with counts of 200 or more (of Guillemot or “Guillemot/Razorbill”) having occurred on five occasions in November/December:

405 (390 west, 15 east) Guillemot/Razorbill past Folkestone Beach on the 9th November 2012
255 (235 east, 20 west) “most if not all” Guillemots past Folkestone Beach on the 14th December 2012
443 Guillemots west past Samphire Hoe on the 24th December 2013
460 “mostly Guillemots” west past Mill Point on the 13th December 2017
709 Guillemot/Razorbill west past Samphire Hoe on the 12th December 2020

Peak numbers tend to occur in January or February, when four-figure counts (of Guillemot or “Guillemot/Razorbill”) have been logged on a number of occasions (and once in early March). With the most of the large movements in January and February, totals have been assigned to either species based on the proportion that could be identified:

1,005 “mostly Guillemots” west past Copt Point on the 24th January 2002
1,400 Guillemots east past Copt Point on the 29th January 2003
1,600 Guillemots east past Copt Point on the 30th January 2003
1,110 Guillemots east past Mill Point on the 25th January 2005
2,000 Guillemots east past Samphire Hoe on the 10th January 2013
1,665 Guillemots east past Samphire Hoe on the 11th January 2013
1,040 Guillemots east past Samphire Hoe on the 24th January 2013
2,800 Guillemots east past Samphire Hoe on the 8th January 2018
1,550 “mostly Guillemots” east past Samphire Hoe on the 3rd March 2018
5,000 Guillemots west past the Willop Outfall on the 24th January 2021

The largest ever movement on the 24th January 2021 involved 10,000 auks, around 50% of which were thought to be Guillemots.



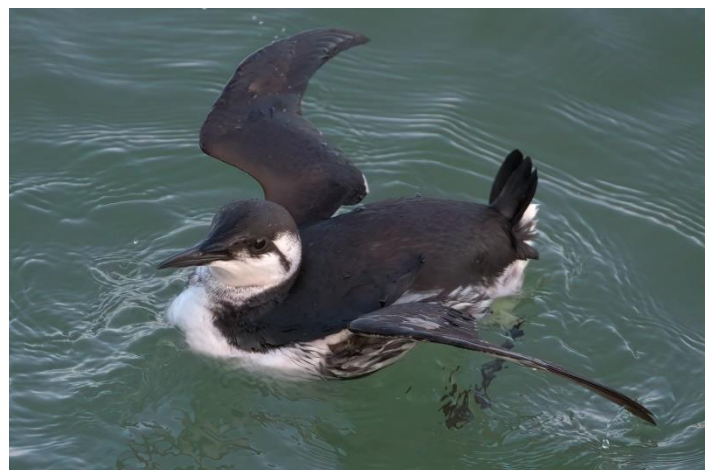
Guillemot at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)



Guillemot at Folkestone Pier (Ian Roberts)



Guillemot at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)



Guillemot at Folkestone Harbour (Elliot Ranford)

A small spring passage is observed in April and May, with peak counts of 40 Guillemot/Razorbill east past Samphire Hoe on the 8th April 2021, 43 Guillemot/Razorbill east past Samphire Hoe on the 7th May 2017 and 64 Guillemot/Razorbill east past Copt Point on the 22nd April 2001.

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](#).

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Guillemot and Razorbill at Hythe (Glenn Tutton)