

Yellow-legged Gull

Larus michahellis

Category A

Rare migrant.

36 records,
39 birds

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

The breeding range has spread northwards since the 1970s from the Mediterranean up the Atlantic coast of France and the Rhone Valley, first breeding in Britain in 1995 (where still a very rare breeder, and most records relate to mixed pairs). Following this expansion to the north and west, considerable post-breeding dispersal (particularly of young birds) takes place in these directions, from the Mediterranean along rivers such as the Rhone and Rhine to large lakes in Austria, Switzerland and southern Germany, with some continuing on to the southern North Sea coast and south-east England.

Kent status (KOS 2022):

It is a regular passage migrant in Kent, particularly to the inner Thames in autumn.



Adult Yellow-legged Gull at Folkestone Harbour
(Ian Roberts)

The Yellow-legged Gull was formerly considered to be a sub-species of the Herring Gull but has been recognised as a full species by the British Ornithologist's Union since 2005 (Sangster *et al.* 2005).

In Kent it was first mentioned by Taylor *et al.* (1981) who described it as "now being seen regularly between July and November, with several records of up to four birds each year since 1973". It continued to increase in the county in the late 1970s, with the first double-figure count of 17 Higham Bight (near Gravesend) in September 1979, and the first local record followed the next year, when one was seen at Folkestone on the 2nd November 1980.

The 1980s saw larger numbers still, but primarily in the inner Thames, with the first three-figure count at Higham Bight of 115 in August 1983, which was exceeded in 1988, when 133 were counted at Stone (near Dartford), and three were seen locally at Mill Point on the 5th September.



1CY Yellow-legged Gull at Folkestone Harbour (Ian Roberts)

It has been recorded with some regularity locally since 1992, with 33 records in 30 years, as demonstrated by figure 1. The best year to date was 2021, with six records.

The records by year are shown in figure 1.

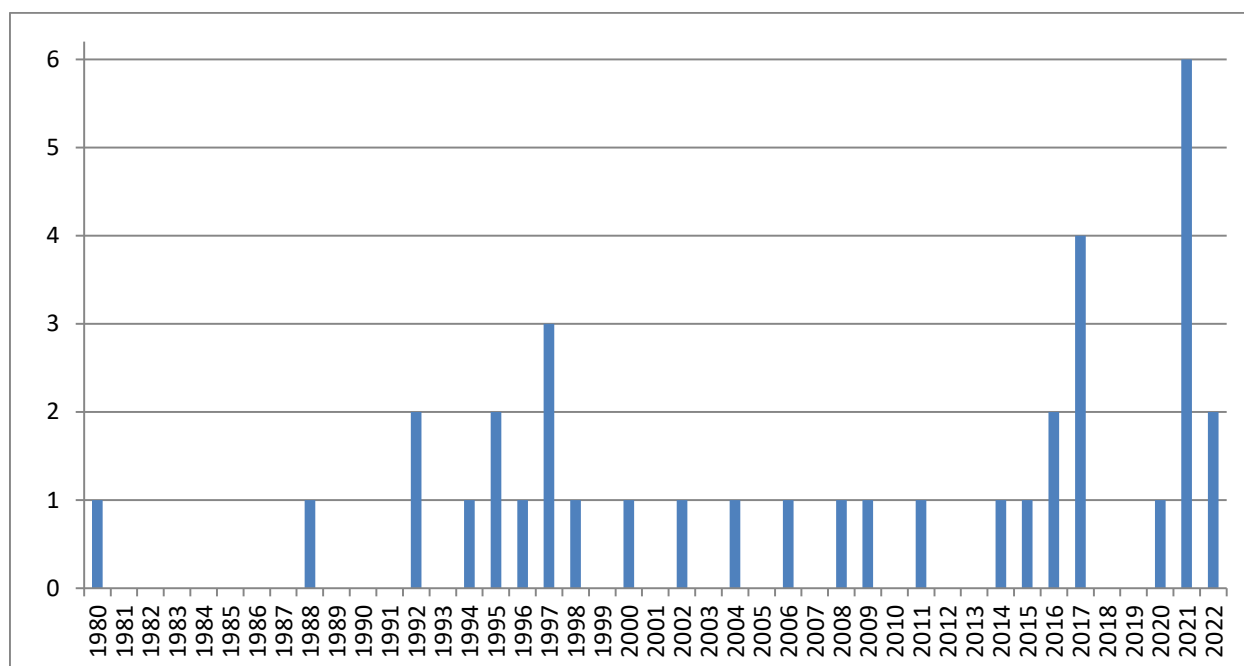


Figure 1: Yellow-legged Gull records at Folkestone and Hythe

Large numbers continued to be seen in the inner Thames in the 1990s and 2000s, with a new record count of 141 at Higham Bight in August 2001, and numbers also increased at Dungeness, where up to 40 were noted. However peak counts were considerably smaller after 2013 and the Kent Bird Report for 2018 commented that “there have been few reports of the former large autumn numbers in the Thames estuary during recent years, and this year there was only one report of more than five. As that concerned 60 at Shorne on 21st Aug, it seems likely that the low totals are the result of under-reporting rather than a decrease”.

Records appear to fall into two distinct periods: late summer/early autumn, from the 3rd July to the 10th September (weeks 27 to 37); and late autumn/early winter, from the 27th October to 19th December (weeks 43 to 51), with a handful of sightings in February, April and May, as shown in figure 2.

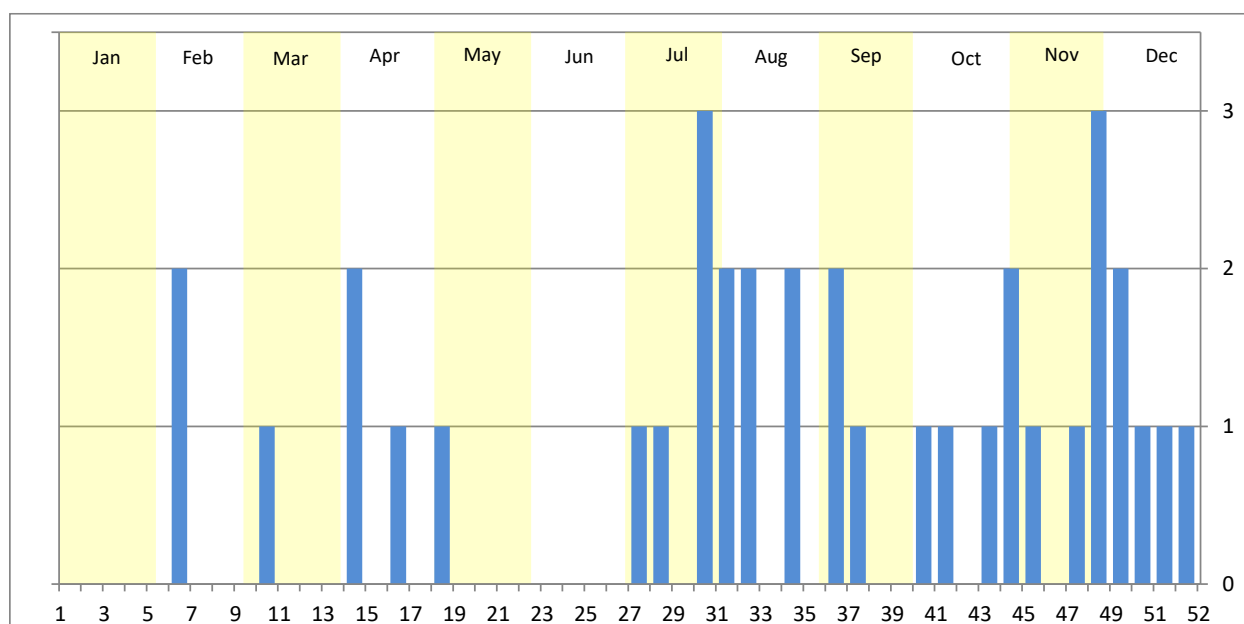


Figure 2: Yellow-legged Gull records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Where the age of birds has been given all but two have been adults, which suggests that younger individuals are being overlooked.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of records by tetrad. Most of the records have been coastal, with 15 between Copt Point and Mill Point, six at Samphire Hoe, four at Battery Point/Sandgate, and two at Hythe and the Willop Basin, but there have also been six at Nickolls Quarry and one at Saltwood.



Figure 3: Distribution of all Yellow-legged Gull records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad



1CY Yellow-legged Gull at Sandgate (Chris Powell)



Adult Yellow-legged Gull at Mill Point (Ian Roberts)

The full list of records is as follows:

- 1980** Folkestone, one, 2nd November (reported)
- 1988** Mill Point, three adults (4+ CY), 5th September (IAR)
- 1992** Folkestone Harbour, adult (4+ CY), 3rd July (I. A. Roberts)
- 1992** Folkestone Harbour, adult (4+ CY), 8th August (I. A. Roberts)
- 1994** Nickolls Quarry, adult (4+ CY), 29th November (R. K. Norman)
- 1995** Copt Point, one, 24th July (D. A. Gibson)
- 1995** Nickolls Quarry, adult (4+ CY), 9th August (R. K. Norman)
- 1996** Nickolls Quarry, adult (4+ CY), 21st August (I. A. Roberts, D. A. Gibson)
- 1997** Copt Point, adult (4+ CY), 30th July (D. A. Gibson)
- 1997** Copt Point, adult (4+ CY), 4th August (I. A. Roberts)
- 1997** Nickolls Quarry, adult (4+ CY), 21st August (R. K. Norman)
- 1998** Copt Point, one, 1st November (reported)
- 2000** Copt Point, adult (4+ CY), 10th September (P. French)
- 2002** Nickolls Quarry, adult (4+ CY), 27th October (I. A. Roberts)
- 2004** Nickolls Quarry, adult (4+ CY), 11th December (R. K. Norman)

2006 Folkestone Beach, adult (4+ CY), 26th July (I. A. Roberts)
2008 Samphire Hoe, adult (4+ CY), 24th July (I. A. Roberts)
2009 Samphire Hoe, 8th September (per D. E. Smith)
2011 Mill Point, adult (4+ CY), 8th November, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
2014 Hythe Imperial Golf Course, one, 21st April (N. Webster)
2015 Saltwood, one, 23rd November (G. Cooke)
2016 Sandgate, adult (4+ CY), 26th November, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
2016 Folkestone Harbour, adult (4+ CY), 19th December, photographed, video-recorded (I. A. Roberts)
2017 Hythe, one, 1st May (C. Nuttman)
2017 Folkestone Harbour, juvenile (1 CY), 13th July, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
2017 Folkestone Harbour, adult (4+ CY), 29th November (I. A. Roberts)
2017 Folkestone Harbour, adult (4+ CY), 8th December, photographed (I. A. Roberts), possibly same as above
2020 Willop Basin, adult (4+ CY), 7th December (I. A. Roberts)
2021 Willop Basin, adult (4+ CY), 9th February (I. A. Roberts)
2021 Sandgate, adult (4+ CY), 11th February (C. Gillard)
2021 Samphire Hoe, adult (4+ CY), 9th March, photographed (P. Smith)
2021 Samphire Hoe, two adults (4+ CY), 6th April, photographed (P. Smith)
2021 Samphire Hoe, adult (4+ CY), 8th April (P. Smith), possibly same as one of the above
2021 Samphire Hoe, adult (4+ CY), 8th October (G. J. A. Burton)
2022 Sandgate, first-winter (1 CY), 1st October, photographed (C. Powell), ringed in Switzerland on 1st June 2022
2022 Battery Point, adult (4+ CY), 26th December (C. Gillard)

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



Adult Yellow-legged Gull at Sandgate (Ian Roberts)



Adult Yellow-legged Gulls at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)



Adult Yellow-legged Gull and 3CY Caspian Gull at Sandgate (Ian Roberts))

References

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

Sangster, G., Collinson, J. M., Helbig, A. J., Knox, A. G. & Parkin, D. T. 2005. Taxonomic recommendations for British birds: third report. *Ibis* 147: 821–826.

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

Taylor, D., Davenport, D. & Flegg, J. 1981. *Birds of Kent*. Kent Ornithological Society.

Acknowledgements

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

I am indebted to Andrew Henderson and Tim Hodge for providing access to the Kent Ornithological Society archives.