

Little Egret

Egretta garzetta

Category A

Non-breeding visitor at any time of year, now regular in winter and on passage.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds mainly in lower latitudes across Europe and Asia eastwards to Japan and south-east to Australia, also being widespread in Africa. It has expanded northwards in recent years, having colonised Britain after first breeding in 1995.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

In Kent was formerly scarce but is now common and widespread, especially in the north of the county, with 174 apparently occupied nests across eight colonies.



Little Egret at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)

The Little Egret bred in Britain until the end of medieval times and was then probably quite common. It was widely hunted and probably also affected by drainage of marshland habitats but seems likely to have become extinct as a consequence of the onset of the Little Ice Age in the fourteenth century. The species retreated to southern Europe, becoming a rare vagrant to Britain until the late twentieth century, but is currently increasing northwards again presumably due to a warming climate (Bourne 2003).

The first modern Kent record was in 1957 and there were a further 11 sightings during the Birds of Kent review period (to the end of 1976) Taylor *et al.* (1981). The first local record involved one seen flying low over Folkestone town on the 12th December 1980 which was the fifteenth county and one of only seven recorded in Britain in that year. Sightings continued to be assessed by the British Birds Rarities Committee until 1991 when it was removed from their list following totals of over 100 records in the two preceding years (Rogers *et al.* 1991; BBRC no date).

Further local sightings involved one flying west over Nickolls Quarry on the 13th July 1993, one flying east at Abbotscliffe on the 15th October 1993 and one at Nickolls Quarry in mid-August 1994. The first confirmed breeding record in Britain was in Dorset in 1996 and there have been local records annually since then.

In 1996 one was present at Nickolls Quarry on the 18th August and a flock of six flew east at Seabrook on the 6th October, in 1997 one flew east at Nickolls Quarry on the 18th May and three flew west at Copt Point on the 20th May and in 1998 two were at Nickolls Quarry on the 28th July and one was at Botolph's Bridge on the 28th December. In 1999 one that flew west at Capel-le-Ferne on the 22nd June was seen to land in a garden near Radnor Park, where it remained for 30 minutes, whilst a flock of five flew south-east over Cheriton on the 24th August, on which date singles flew east over Hythe Ranges and south-east over Nickolls Quarry.

Breeding was first confirmed in Kent in 2000, at Northward Hill, and there were at least nine local records in that year, between April and October, including a flock of six flying over Nickolls Quarry on the 1st August and one seen on the shoreline between Abbotscliffe and Copt Point on four dates between the 10th and 23rd September (the first to be recorded on more than a single date). At least five were noted in 2001, and there were at least 13 in 2002.

In 2003 it was noted regularly, with 44 sightings and a total of 57 bird/days, with records in all months except April. Nickolls Quarry hosted the majority of these (36) including some birds that appeared to stay for prolonged periods. There were also several records from Samphire Hoe in the late winter period. This pattern of records has continued.

In recent years birds have found to be roosting at the Port Lympne Reserve during the winter months (with up to eight there in the 2020/21 winter and seven in the 2021/22 winter) and feeding during the day in the Nickolls Quarry area or other sites on the Romney Marsh. Most other sightings have come from the coastline between Copt Point and Samphire Hoe, although it has occurred from 27 tetrads (87%) as demonstrated in figure 2, and frequently appears in gardens with ponds in built up areas.

Most sightings involve one or two birds but counts of more than five (in addition to those given above) have occurred as follows:

- 6 at Abbotscliffe on the 29th October 2006
- 6 at West Hythe dam on 30th December 2014
- 6 at Botolph's Bridge on 7th November 2015
- 12 flying west at Abbotscliffe on the 5th July 2017
- 7 flying west at Hythe seafront on the 13th October 2017
- 8 at Donkey Street on the 23rd June 2018
- 7 flying east at Samphire Hoe on the 14th October 2018
- 6 flying west at Samphire Hoe on the 2nd October 2021
- 8 at Samphire Hoe on the 11th September 2022

Breeding atlas distribution

Almost all records during the 2007-13 BTO/KOS atlas fieldwork period involved birds at coastal sites or flying over but there were three inland sightings from the Fairmead Farm area, near Westenhangar in TR13 I (in April 2010, May 2011 and June 2012), with another at Barrowhill in adjacent TR13 D in June 2009. There was no apparent evidence of nesting, but these records qualified as possible breeding under the BTO definitions. A further sighting occurred near Fairmead Farm in May 2021. Figure 1 confirms the results of the breeding atlas by tetrad.

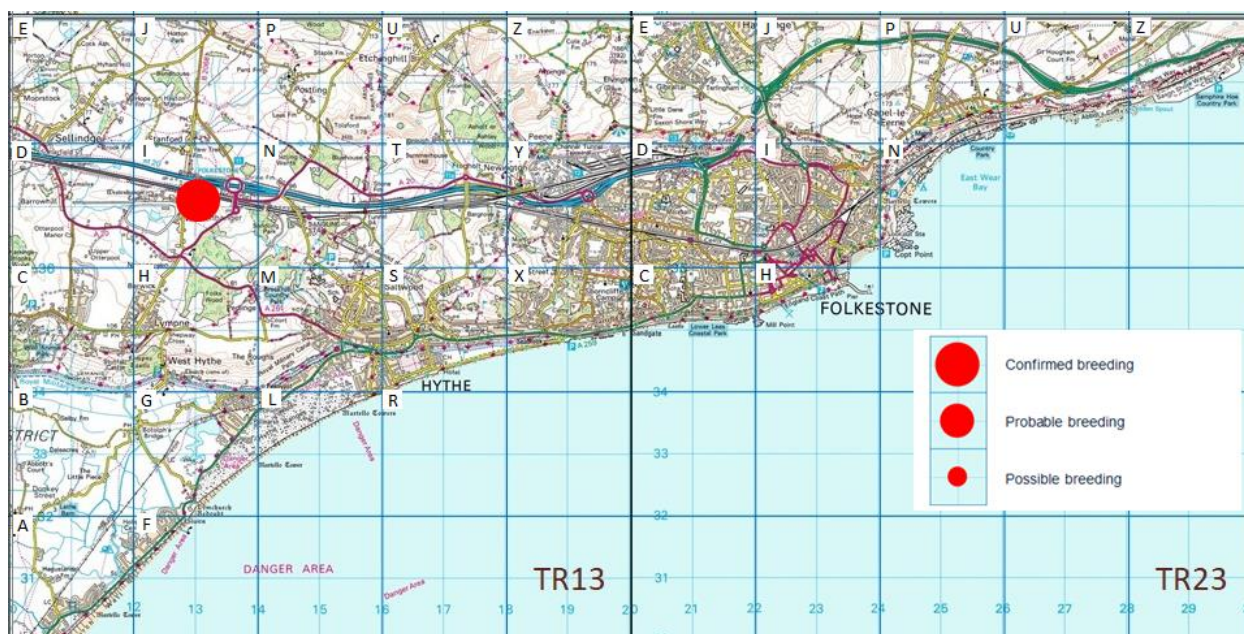


Figure 1: Breeding distribution of Little Egret at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

The table below shows how this compares to previous atlases (Taylor *et al.* 1981; Henderson & Hodge 1998).

Breeding atlases	1967 - 1973		1988 - 1994		2007 - 2013	
Possible	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	1	(3%)
Probable/Confirmed	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
Total	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	1	(3%)
Change			0	(--%)	+1	(--%)

One was seen in the heronry at Lympne Park Wood on a single date in April 2013 but there have been no further sightings there or any other indications of local breeding.

Overall distribution

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of Little Egret by tetrad.

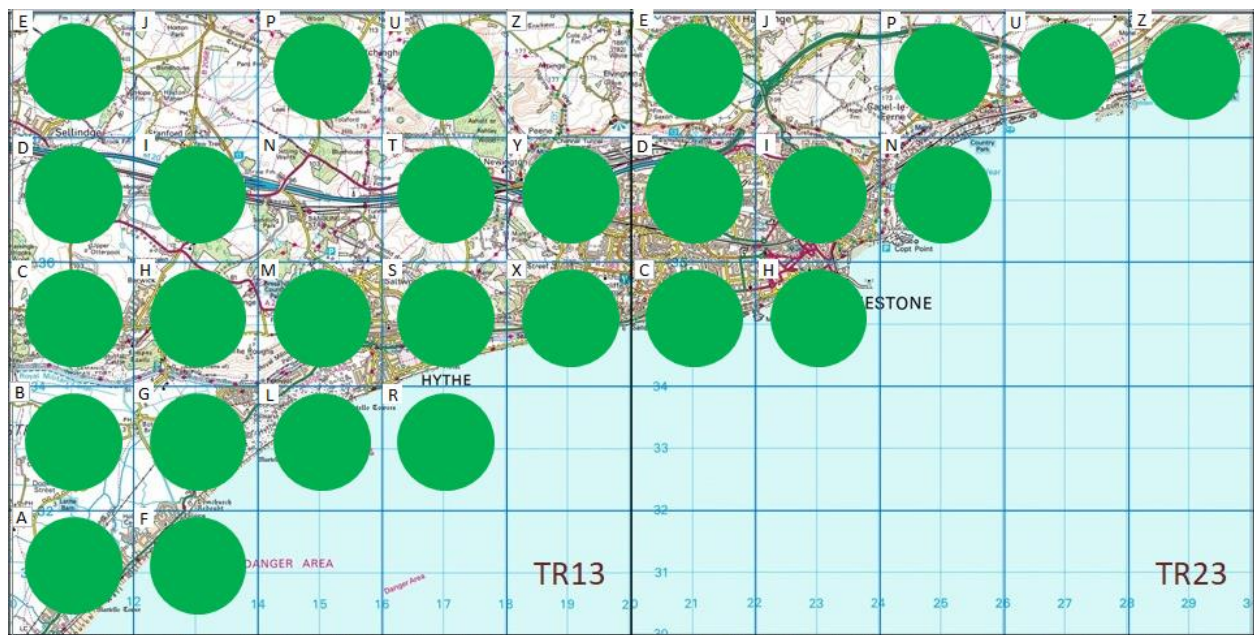


Figure 2: Distribution of all Little Egret records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad



Little Egret in a garden in Cheriton (Vincent Lloyd)



Little Egret at Saltwood Castle (Nigel Webster)



Little Egret at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)



Little Egret at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)

References

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Little Egret at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)



Little Egret at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)



Little Egret at Folkestone Harbour (David Featherbe)



Little Egret at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)

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.