

# Bufflehead

*Bucephala albeola*

Category D

Very rare vagrant or escapee.

1 record,  
1 birds

*World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998, Holt et al. 2021):*

Breeds in forested regions of North America from central Alaska throughout western and central Canada to Hudson Bay, south to Montana and California. Winters along both the Atlantic and Pacific seaboard south to northern Mexico, with small numbers inland. It is a very rare vagrant mainly to western Europe, although some records may relate to escapees from captivity.



Bufflehead at Nickolls Quarry (Ian Roberts)

*Kent status (KOS 2022):*

There have been no accepted records in the county.

British (BBRC) records to end 2021: 19

Kent (KOS) records to end 2021: 0

The earliest accepted record of Bufflehead in Britain relates to a female shot on the Isles of Scilly in January 1920. There had been 15 more historical records of the species, but these were removed from the British list following a review by Knox (2001), mostly due to being “clouded by fraud or by lack of detail”. However, two more recent sightings were deemed to be acceptable: a male in Buckinghamshire in late February to early March 1961 and a male on South Uist in the Outer Hebrides in March 1980.

Knox noted that the number of Buffleheads kept in captivity had increased dramatically since 1980, both in Britain and on the Continent (following a survey in 1991, it was estimated that over 900 were held in captivity in the Netherlands). He concluded that “the likelihood of a Bufflehead seen at liberty in Britain being of captive origin has become very high indeed”.

Nevertheless, a further 16 records have been accepted onto the British list in the 27 years from 1994 (BBRC no date). As Holt *et al.* (2021) noted, “there are three distinct regional clusters of Bufflehead records: Scotland (31% of records), south-west England (19%) and the Midlands (19%)”, whilst “of all accepted records, ten come from the period March to June, with five in October to November and one in February”.

The only local record involved an adult female found by Ian Roberts at Nickolls Quarry on the 19<sup>th</sup> April 2020 which had moved on by the following day.

In May 2021 the BBRC reviewed its criteria for the acceptance of rare wildfowl and concluded that a bird’s legs have to be seen to be free of rings for it to be accepted as a wild bird (French 2021). As the legs of the Nickolls Quarry bird had not been clearly visible during its short stay, so it was not possible to ascertain the presence or absence of rings, so it was not accepted onto category A of the British List, instead being published in appendix 2 of the BBRC report for 2020 as a “record where identification accepted, but origin is uncertain or known not to be wild” (Holt *et al.*).

Locally it has placed onto category D of the list as a “species that would otherwise appear in Category A except that there is reasonable doubt that they have ever occurred in a natural state”. These species are not included in the species totals.

Holt *et al.* commented that “with the bar for future acceptance now raised ... it will be interesting to see if the statistics for accepted birds shift away from Midland reservoirs in favour of more western locations”, however the next acceptable record occurred at Lea Marston Lakes in Warwickshire in January 2021, later being seen in Northumberland.

Escaped Buffleheads have been known to have occurred in Britain, including a recent example of an adult female that was present in the Midlands from June 2017 until to the 14<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

The records by year are shown in figure 1.

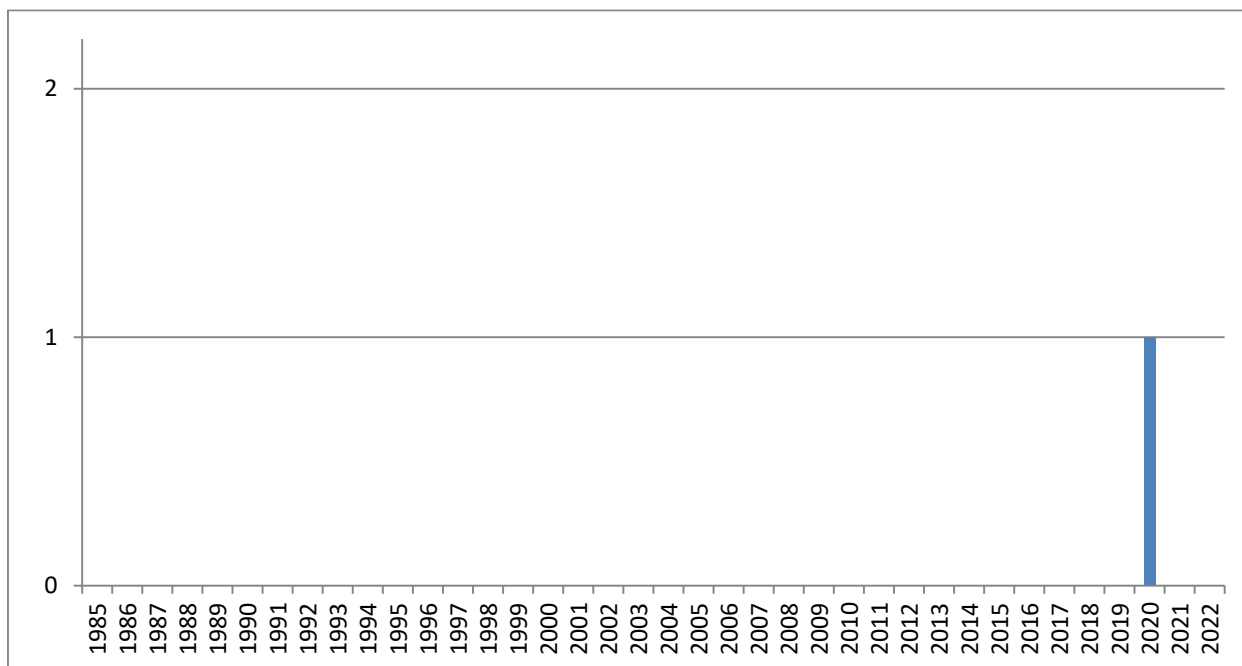


Figure 1: Bufflehead records at Folkestone and Hythe

The records by week are given in figure 2.

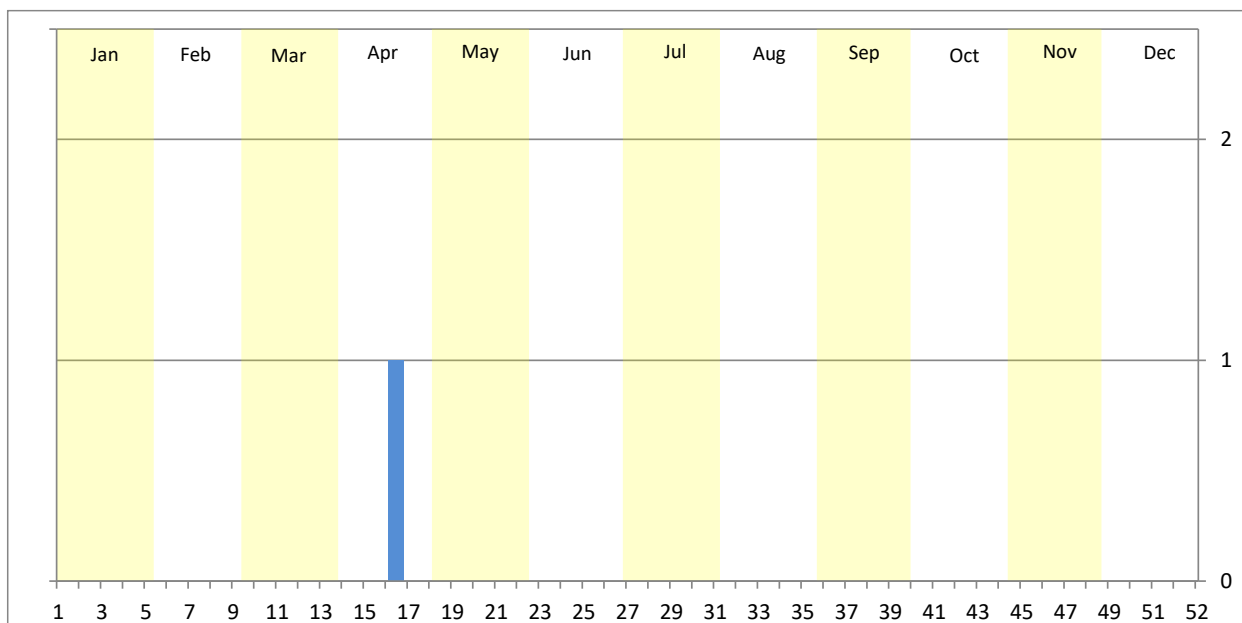


Figure 2: Bufflehead records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Figure 3 shows the location of records by tetrad.



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

Confirmation of the only area record is as follows:

**2020** Nickolls Quarry, adult female, 19<sup>th</sup> April, photographed (I. A. Roberts, B. Harper, R. K. Norman)



Bufflehead at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)

An account of the first area record is given below.

**Bufflehead at Nickolls Quarry**  
**19<sup>th</sup> April 2020**

By Ian Roberts

**Weather conditions:**

Clear and sunny with a cool northerly breeze.

**Circumstances of the find:**

At the time of finding we were living in extraordinary times. Due to a national lockdown that was attempting to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 coronavirus it was only possible to leave one's house to shop for food and medicine and to undertake a daily exercise walk. I was fortunate during this period that I could visit a number of birdwatching sites within my local area as part of a daily walk, including Nickolls Quarry.

On the morning of the 19<sup>th</sup> April 2020 I decided to visit Nickolls Quarry. I had just about finished my circuit of the site and was scanning the main lake for hirundines. I picked out a single Sand Martin among about 18 Swallows but there was no sign of a Red-rumped Swallow that I had been hoping for. Just as I was about to leave I noticed a small duck towards the back of the lake, silhouetted in the glare of the sun off the water. It looked to be roughly Teal-sized and I almost dismissed it as such as there had been a drake Teal on site a few days previously. However, there was something odd about it, the head shape in particular did not look right.

I decided to walk round to the opposite side of the lake to get a view in better light, which meant losing sight of the bird for a while. When I arrived at the footpath on the eastern side I could not find it at first but then noticed it had moved closer to where I had previously been watching. With the sun at a better angle it appeared to be mostly dark with a prominent white patch on the head and looked exactly like a female Bufflehead, although this was surely impossible?! It was the only duck on a lake where any species is notable, excepting Mallard but even these have become quite scarce recently.

Immediately I rang Brian Harper as he lives nearby and I was certain he would be on his own exercise walk on a Sunday morning. He confirmed that was the case and he was already nearby. About 15 minutes later he called me back to say he was watching it from the opposite side of the lake (with a considerable degree of social distancing), where I had first noticed it. It was now in better light for him though and he reassured me that I had not taken leave of my senses; it was indeed Kent's first Bufflehead.

I continued to watch from the eastern path and the bird gradually got a little closer, presumably moving away from the new arrival on the western bank. I had taken up a position in the shade of a couple of poplar trees hoping to be inconspicuous and it did approach close enough for me to manage a couple of record shots, though it kept its distance and seemed to be rather wary. It wing-flapped a couple of times and the wings appeared to be in good condition, however it never approached close enough for the legs to be visible.

When I arrived home I rang Roger Norman who has been watching the site since the late 1940s, on the off chance that he might not have already been out or would be able to visit the following day. He had been busy in the morning and was due a walk so visited in the late afternoon when the bird was still present, however when I returned the following morning it could not be located and had presumably departed overnight.

I also contacted the county recorder to seek advice on what to do about the news, although I was already anticipating the response having seen how information on recent sightings elsewhere had been managed. It was confirmed that unfortunately the news could not be broadcast more widely due to concerns around encouraging unnecessary travel, in line with KOS and government policy, until it was certain that it had moved on.



**Description of the bird:**

Size and shape: A very small, teal-sized duck with a proportionately larger head.

Head: Dark, grey-brown head with a narrow white oblong patch extending backward from behind the eye.

Upperparts: Dark, grey-brown back and wings. When wing-flapping exposed a small white rectangle formed by the inner secondaries on otherwise dark wings.

Underparts: Slightly paler grey flanks.



Bufflehead at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)



Bufflehead at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)



Bufflehead at Nickolls Quarry (Ian Roberts)

## **References**

- British Birds Rarities Committee (BBRC). Statistics. [www.bbrc.org.uk/main-information/statistics](http://www.bbrc.org.uk/main-information/statistics) (accessed 2023).
- French, P. 2021. Rarities Committee news. *British Birds* 114: 292.
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- Rare Bird Alert (RBA) Previous Records. [www.rarebirdalert.co.uk/RealData/recordshome.asp](http://www.rarebirdalert.co.uk/RealData/recordshome.asp) (accessed 2021).

## **Acknowledgements**

The tetrad map images were produced from the Ordnance Survey [Get-a-map service](http://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/get-a-map) and are reproduced with kind permission of [Ordnance Survey](http://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk).