

# Oystercatcher

*Haematopus ostralegus*

Category A

Breeding species, passage migrant and winter visitor.

*World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):*

A widespread breeding species primarily around the coasts of northern Europe and discontinuously across Asia to China. Expanded its range in north-west Europe, including spreading inland, during the twentieth century. Mainly migratory, wintering along western and southern coasts of Europe and north Africa.

*Kent status (KOS 2021):*

In Kent it is an increasing coastal breeding species and also a passage migrant and winter visitor but is uncommon inland.

The Oystercatcher 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) wrote that "along the whole coastline of Kent where suitable this species occurs as a regular visitor on migration in autumn". He found it to be "distinctly less common" in spring and lamented its loss as a breeding species from the Romney Marsh due to persecution, whilst only being able to cite one instance of nesting in north Kent.

Harrison (1953) recorded breeding in the Sandwich Bay area from the late 1920s and on the north Kent marshes and in the Midrips area again during the 1940s. Taylor *et al.* (1981) noted that since then it had "become considerably more common, as both a breeding bird and winter visitor". Today it nests in a range of habitats including salt marsh, sandy and shingle beaches, coastal grazing marshes and sea walls, islands in estuaries and mineral workings, and arable farming. There are particular concentrations to be found in the Medway estuary, the Swale and Thames, and the Dungeness peninsula.

The first fully documented records local records date from the 1950s, when Roger Norman noted "occasional records of three to six birds on the shore at Hythe Ranges in winter and autumn months", with a spring sighting of eight there on the 25<sup>th</sup> March 1958 (Norman 2006), however the only record from this period at Nickolls Quarry area involved one on the 29<sup>th</sup> April 1958 (Norman 2007).



Oystercatcher at the Willop Outfall (Brian Harper)



Oystercatcher at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)



Oystercatcher at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)

Dave Weaver recorded three displaying birds at Nickolls Quarry on the 9<sup>th</sup> May 1980 and stated that “pairs” were present on the 1<sup>st</sup> April 1981 and 21<sup>st</sup> March 1982 but noted no further evidence of potential breeding. Roger Norman noted singles there in June 1991, July 1992 and April and July 1993 and considered that two that were present from the 25<sup>th</sup> February to 29<sup>th</sup> March 1994 “were possibly a pair investigating potential breeding sites”. In 1995 two were seen intermittently between mid-March and mid-May, whilst in 1996 a pair were present from early March and a nest was found in early June. Roger considered it possible that breeding had occurred undetected for some years prior to 1996 in “parts of the site then inaccessible”.

### Breeding atlas distribution

Figure 1 shows the breeding distribution by tetrad based on the results of the 2007-13 BTO/KOS atlas fieldwork.



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

Breeding was confirmed in one tetrad, with probable breeding in two more. The table below shows how this compares to previous atlases (Taylor *et al.* 1981; Henderson & Hodge 1998). The confirmed and probable breeding categories have been combined to account for differing definitions of these in the first atlas.

Breeding atlases	1967 - 1973		1988 - 1994		2007 - 2013	
Possible	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
Probable/Confirmed	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	3	(10%)
Total	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	3	(10%)
Change			0	(--%)	+3	(--%)

The table below shows the changes in tetrad occupancy across the three atlas periods.

Trends	First to second atlas (1967-73 to 1988-94)	Second to third atlas (1988-94 to 2007-13)	First to third atlas (1967-73 to 2007-13)
Local	--%	--%	--%
Kent	+124%	+12%	+150%

The confirmed breeding relates to Nickolls Quarry, where at least one pair has continued to nest from 1996 until the present day, favouring the small island in the main lake, whilst two pairs bred in each year between 2002 and 2007. Breeding birds have arrived as early as mid-January but more usually appear in early to mid-February and the earliest date when small chicks were found was the 16<sup>th</sup> May (in 2002) (Norman 2007).

During the atlas period a pair were present at the Willop Basin in April 2009 and May 2010, with one in June 2011, whilst more recently a pair summered there in 2014 and 2015 and breeding was suspected.



A pair were also noted in several years at Hythe Ranges but had perhaps wandered from Nickolls Quarry, indeed one seen carrying food there on the 14<sup>th</sup> June 2014 flew off in the direction of the quarry.

*Clements et al.* (2015) remarked that, since the second county atlas, a “few new nest sites have been occupied such as the coast between Dymchurch and Hythe”.

### **Overall distribution**

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of Oystercatcher by tetrad, with records in 15 tetrads (48%).

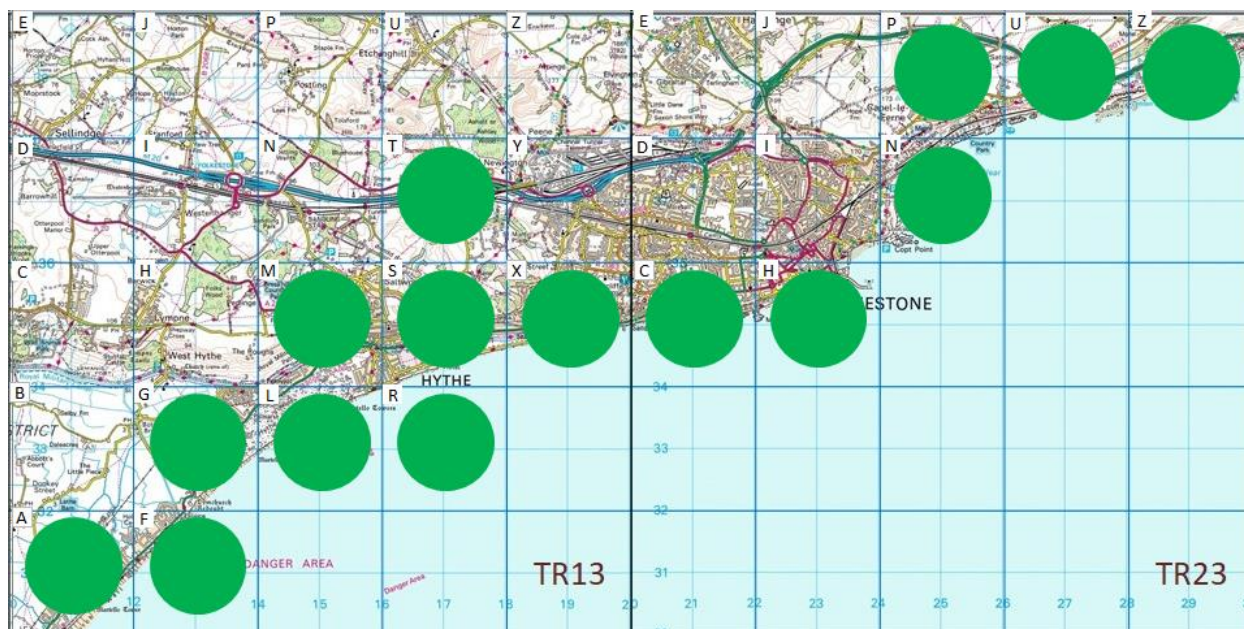


Figure 2: Distribution of all Oystercatcher records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Regular sightings of the breeding birds at Nickolls Quarry tend to cease in late July or August, whilst in 2000 there was an unusual event involving between 20 and 25 birds commuting between there and the shore at Hythe Ranges between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> August. The same year produced a flock of 22 flying west past Samphire Hoe on the 17<sup>th</sup> July, 18 at Nickolls Quarry on the 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 15 there on the 2<sup>nd</sup> October and 15 at Hythe Ranges on the 4<sup>th</sup> November.

The only other double-figure counts in autumn have involved 17 at Hythe Ranges on the 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2001 and 13 at the Willop Outfall on the 18<sup>th</sup> October 2020.

Small numbers are regularly seen in winter between Dymchurch and Hythe Ranges, with larger counts of 15 in January 1998, 20 in February 2000, 15 in January 2001, 14 in December 2016 and a peak of 36 in January 2017.

Spring passage may occur between mid-March and mid-May, with a peak generally towards the end of this period.

Counts have included:

- 23 east past Mill Point on the 5<sup>th</sup> May 1990
- 26 east past Hythe Ranges on the 28<sup>th</sup> April 1991
- 27 east past Mill Point on the 25<sup>th</sup> April 1990
- 29 east past Hythe Ranges on the 28<sup>th</sup> April 2018
- 31 east past Copt Point on the 10<sup>th</sup> May 1993
- 38 east past Copt Point on the 11<sup>th</sup> May 2001
- 44 east past Mill Point on the 8<sup>th</sup> May 1988

Inland sightings are rare and the sole record from TR13 T involved one seen flying west over Beachborough Lakes on the 11<sup>th</sup> August 2016.



Oystercatchers at Dymchurch Redoubt (Brian Harper)



Oystercatcher at Dymchurch Redoubt (Brian Harper)

One of the pair that attempted to breed at Nickolls Quarry in 2004 was found to have become caught up in discarded fishing line and drowned. It had been ringed as a nestling at Felixstowe in June 1998.



Oystercatcher at the Willop Outfall (Brian Harper)



Oystercatcher at the Willop Outfall (Brian Harper)



## References

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Oystercatchers at nest site at Nickolls Quarry (Ian Roberts)



## ***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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Oystercatcher with chicks at Nickolls Quarry (Ian Roberts)