

Black Tern

Chlidonias niger

Category A

Scarce passage migrant.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds across much of Europe, eastwards through Asia to 93°E, also in Canada and northern USA. It has undergone a contraction in range since the nineteenth century, having formerly bred in Britain for example. Its long-term decline has accelerated in recent decades, with the main cause being habitat loss due to wetland drainage.

Kent status (Ticehurst 1909; KOS 2021):

The Black Tern bred regularly in Kent until the 1840s, with the last recorded nesting in 1883. Today it is just a coastal passage migrant to the county, sometimes in large numbers, but less common on inland waters.

The Black Tern 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 is likely that it would have been seen at the coast and so most probably within the modern boundary.

The first fully documented record however came in 1961, when Roger Norman saw five flying down-channel past the Dymchurch Redoubt on the 14th September (Norman 2006). The next local sighting did not occur until 1980, when two were seen off Copt Point on the 20th June, with further records of three there on the 3rd August 1981 and one on the 8th August of the same year. Another three flew east past Hythe Ranges on the 4th August 1986.

It has been recorded almost annually since 1988, with a total of 64 records in 34 years.

Overall distribution

Figure 1 shows the distribution of all records of Black Tern by tetrad, with records in 9 tetrads (29%).



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

An exceptionally early individual at Nickolls Quarry on the 13th April 1996 was the second earliest county record at the time (Norman 2007), and April sightings are rare, with one flying east past Copt Point on the 24th April 1993, two flying east past Mill Point on the 25th April 2019, one flying east past Fisherman's Beach (Hythe) on the 29th April 2011 and two flying east past Copt Point on the 30th April 2000.

May records are more frequent, having occurred in 17 of the 34 years since 1988, but with an apparent decline, having been seen in only six of the last 20. Most sightings have involved between one and three birds, with larger movements as follows:

14 east past Mill Point on the 11th May 1988
7 east past Copt Point on the 10th May 1993
6 east past Copt Point on the 12th May 1996
6 east past Copt Point on the 3rd May 1997
4 east past Copt Point on the 8th May 1998

The only June record is detailed above, whilst there have been two in July, both at Nickolls Quarry, where a single bird was seen on the 14th July 2002 and three were present on the 24th July 2004.

Autumn sightings typically occur in August and September, with a similar frequency to spring sightings, having also occurred in 17 of the 34 years since 1988, and nine of the last 20. Counts in excess of four (aside from the first documented record, detailed above) have been noted as follows:

560 west past Copt Point on the 6th September 1992
7 west past Copt Point on the 7th September 1992
6 off past Copt Point on the 19th August 2004
12 west past Samphire Hoe on the 11th September 2005
5 west past Samphire Hoe on the 3rd August 2008
6 west past Seabrook on the 4th August 2017

The unprecedented movement on the 6th September 1992 was part of a much larger passage involving an exceptional total of 10,215 that passed Dungeness and was described in the Kent Bird Report for that year as "probably the major ornithological event of the year" (KOS 1993).

The only October record involved one flying west past Copt Point on the 2nd October 2006 and there was an exceptionally late sighting of one there on the 10th December 1996.

References

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Acknowledgements

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