

Common Tern

Sterna hirundo

Category A

Formerly bred but now just a passage migrant.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds across much of Europe and central Asia north to 69°N south to Iran and China, also in coastal West Africa and in North America (chiefly Canada, locally south along the coast to Venezuela). The majority winter on the western seaboard of Africa, with a minority appearing to winter off Portugal and southern Spain.



Common Tern at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)

Kent status (KOS 2021; Henderson & Hodge 1998):

In Kent it is a summer visitor and coastal passage migrant, sometimes occurring in large numbers. A census in 2018 was the first fully coordinated survey of Common Terns in Kent for many years and returned a total of about 260 pairs across ten sites, which was a significant on the estimated 450-550 pairs present during the second county atlas (1988-1994).

The Common 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 would have been very likely to have been recorded at the coast and so within the modern boundary. Furthermore, Ticehurst (1909) considered it to be "a regular visitor to the coasts of Kent in spring and autumn".

Roger Norman found it be present in some numbers locally in the 1950s. At Hythe Ranges a pair even nested unsuccessfully in the Little Tern colony in 1956 and birds were also seen within the colony on the 4th June 1960 and the 28th June 1964 (three), whilst on the 20th June 1968 "13 birds flew across the colony a number of times during two hours observation" (Norman 2006).

At nearby Nickolls Quarry there were only two spring records in the 1950s, four from the 19th to 27th May 1951 and one on the 20th April 1958, but large numbers could be found resting on the "airfield" in early August. Around 200 were present between the 2nd and 4th August 1951 and on the 4th August 1952, whilst at least 50 were seen there on the 19th August 1953. The latest date of observation was the 18th September 1957 (Norman 2007).



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Overall distribution

Figure 1 shows the distribution of all records of Common Tern by tetrad, with records in 13 tetrads (42%).

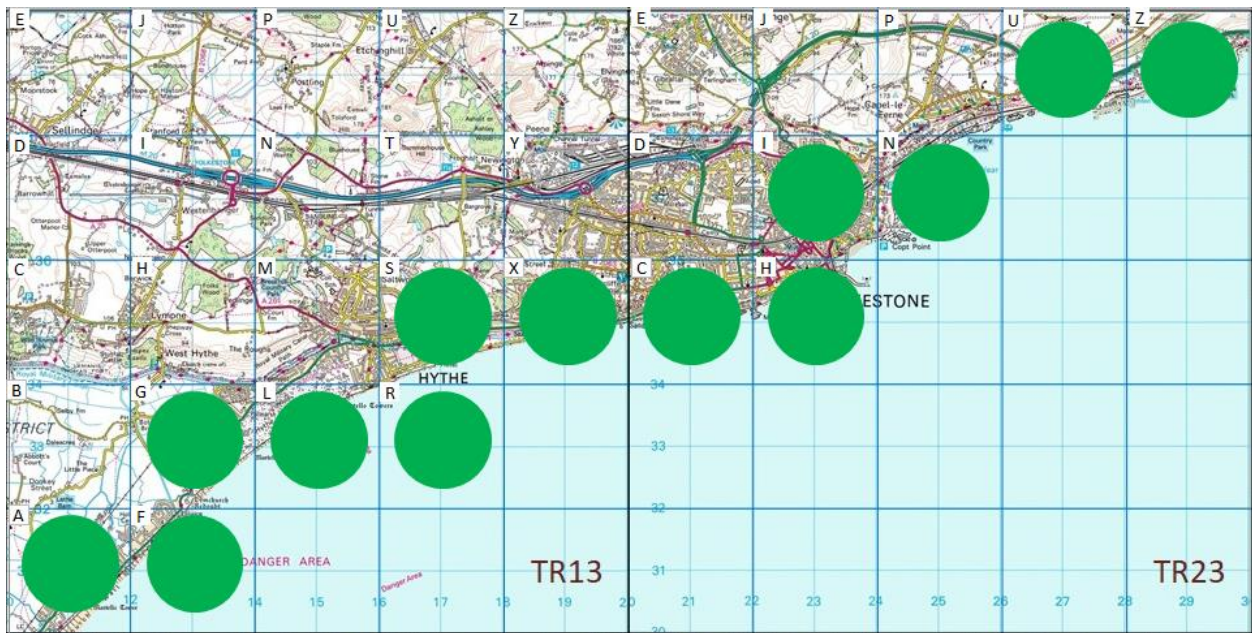


Figure 1: Distribution of all Common Tern records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

When Roger Norman resumed coverage of Nickolls Quarry in the early 1990s he found that a pair bred, or attempted to breed, in each year between 1992 and 1998, utilising a small island in the lake. They managed to rear one or two chicks in some years, despite the attentions of Carrion Crows and disturbance from Cormorants and Canada Geese. The last successful breeding occurred in 1997, when two juveniles fledged, and the pair failed in 1998. Birds were present intermittently in each summer between 1999 and 2002 but there were no further indications of nesting.



Common Tern at Nickolls Quarry (Ian Roberts)



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Small numbers may be seen offshore in summer, presumably foraging birds from nearby colonies, with only single figure counts in June, except for in 1988, when 14 flew east past Mill Point on the 16th June, with 41 flying east there the following day and 18 flying east there on the 27th June. Roger also noted that “in autumn, in some years, as in 1950s there were sudden arrivals of post-breeding birds” at Nickolls Quarry from mid or late July and usually peaking in the first half of August:

- 1991: peak of 12 on the 11th August
- 1992: peak of 74 on the 7th August
- 1993: peak of 9 on the 20th July
- 1994: peak of 52 on the 4th August
- 1995: peak of 37 on the 22nd July

1996: no counts of note
 1997: peak of 13 on the 14th August
 1998: peak of 8 on the 17th August
 1999: peak of 6 on the 18th July
 2000: peak of 6 on the 13th August
 2001: peak of 10 on the 2nd August
 2002: peak of 54 on the 4th August



Common Tern at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)



Common Tern at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)

Only ones and twos were noted in 2003 and 2004, with the exception of three on the 22nd July 2004, and there were no July or August records at the site thereafter. Large numbers have been seen roosting on the beach at Hythe Ranges on occasion, with peak counts there of around 350 on the 8th August 2002 and 150 on the 14th August 2011. Offshore there is a typically down-channel passage in autumn, when counts of 150 or more have been noted as follows:

160 west past Mill Point on the 27th August 1988
 840 west past Mill Point on the 31st August 1988
 400 west past Mill Point on the 1st September 1988
 200 west past Mill Point on the 3rd September 1988
 240 west past Mill Point on the 4th September 1988
 500 west past Copt Point on the 6th September 1992
 150 west past Copt Point on the 24th August 1996
 412 west past Copt Point on the 30th August 1997
 152 west past Copt Point on the 31st August 1997
 247 west past Copt Point on the 8th September 1998
 261 west past Copt Point on the 9th September 1998
 170 west past Copt Point on the 10th September 1998
 200 west past Copt Point on the 20th September 2000
 550 west past Copt Point on the 22nd September 2000
 1,030 west past Copt Point/Samphire Hoe on the 3rd August 2008
 185 east past Copt Point on the 16th August 2011

Due to the difficulty in separating Common and Arctic Terns at distance a number of these movements were logged as Common/Arctic Terns.

There have been three records at Nickolls Quarry in September: six on the 7th September 1992, two on the 12th September 1992 and one on the 5th September 1995, whilst a notably late bird was seen there on the 27th October 2019. The last coastal sighting is usually in the first half of October and there have been just three records after mid-October: one at Copt Point on the 17th to 18th October 1987, one at Sandgate on the 19th October 2022 and one at Samphire Hoe on the 30th October 2007. A Common or Arctic Tern was also seen off Hythe Ranges on the 18th October 1957.

Taylor *et al* (1981) listed four winter records in Kent in their review period (1952-1976) that "referred to either Common or Arctic Terns" including one seen by B. Hawkes off Sandgate on the 28th December 1974.

The earliest spring arrival was seen off Seabrook on the 29th March 2020, whilst the only other record in that month involved four off the same site on the 30th March 2018. It remains scarce in the first week of April, so a count of 22 flying east past Samphire Hoe on the 1st April 2016 was exceptional, whilst one flying east there on the 2nd April 2016, six flying east past east Copt Point on the 3rd April 2005, one flying east past Copt Point on the 4th April 2001, five flying east past Mill Point on the 4th April 2014 and 13 flying east past Copt Point on the 6th April 2009 complete the records in that week. The mean arrival date over the most recent decade has been the 10th April.



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Spring passage usually peaks between mid-April and mid-May, when movements in excess of 300 have been noted as follows:

388 east past Mill Point on the 10th May 1989
340 east past Copt Point on the 10th May 1993
489 east past Copt Point on the 24th Apr 1994
340 east past Folkestone on the 10th May 1994
858 east past Folkestone on the 29th Apr 1995
447 east past Copt Point on the 12th May 1996
1124 east past Copt Point on the 7th May 1999
409 east past Copt Point on the 11th May 2001
533 east past Copt Point on the 13th May 2001
1042 east past Copt Point on the 26th Apr 2003
779 east past Copt Point on the 9th May 2004
378 east past Copt Point on the 10th May 2004
1980 east past Samphire Hoe on the 3rd May 2005
330 east past Samphire Hoe on the 2nd May 2008
832 east past Samphire Hoe on the 5th May 2013
470 east past Mill Point on the 15th Apr 2016
683 east past Samphire Hoe on the 7th May 2017
527 east past Samphire Hoe on the 11th May 2018

Again, due to the difficulty in separating Common and Arctic Terns at distance a number of these movements were logged as Common/Arctic Terns.

Apart from the sightings at Nickolls Quarry, records away from the coast are unusual. Neil Frampton noted that “occasional birds were seen in late summer fishing along the canal” between Hythe and the Aldergate Bridge, whilst stating that six together along the canal cutting near Botolph's Bridge on the 14th August 1984 were unusual. There have been further records along the canal on the 24th May 1991 (two), 4th July 1992 and 11th July 1992.



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References

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Acknowledgements

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