

# Little Gull

*Hydrocoloeus minutus*

Category A

Winter visitor and passage migrant.

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

Breeds mainly from Finland and the Baltic States eastwards across various sites in northern Asia, also in the Great Lakes region of North America. Winters along the western seaboard of Europe, in the Mediterranean Basin, around the Black and Caspian Seas, and on the eastern coast of North America. Has bred sporadically in western Europe, including Britain on occasion.

*Kent status (KOS 2021):*

It is a passage migrant in Kent, which is most numerous in autumn, and also a regular winter visitor. It is rare inland.



Little Gull at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)

The Little Gull 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. It would seem likely to have been recorded from the coast but Ticehurst (1909) considered it to be a "moderately rare visitor" to the county and listed all occurrences known to him, which did not include any local records.

Harrison (1953) stated that "this species is now recognised as a tolerably regular and almost an annual passage migrant, numerous in the autumn but irregular in the spring", with a few winter occurrences, and was "to be met with in all the coasts of Kent". The first fully documented sighting however involved four seen by Roger Norman at Nickolls Quarry on the 29<sup>th</sup> March 1953 (one of which remained until the 3<sup>rd</sup> April), with further singles there on the 5<sup>th</sup> November and 24<sup>th</sup> December 1957 (Norman 2007), whilst he also saw one close inshore off Fisherman's Beach, Hythe on the unusual date of 6<sup>th</sup> June 1960 (Norman 2006).

David Musson recorded singles off Folkestone on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> April, and 9<sup>th</sup> August 1961, whilst Kent Bird Reports note that one was seen regularly off Folkestone between the 26<sup>th</sup> July and 10<sup>th</sup> August 1966, with further singles there on the 18<sup>th</sup> August and 26<sup>th</sup> September 1967. The final sighting from this period involved four seen by T. Grant off Folkestone on the 8<sup>th</sup> September 1968 and there were no further records until 1980, which certainly must be attributable to a lack of coverage as it has been noted annually since.



Little Gull at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)

## Overall distribution

Figure 1 shows the distribution of all records of Little Gull by tetrad, with records in 14 tetrads (45%).



Figure 1: Distribution of all Little Gull records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad



Little Gull at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)

The earliest “autumn” migrant was seen at Copt Point on the 21<sup>st</sup> July 1997 and one there on the 27<sup>th</sup> July 1980 was the only sighting in that month (apart from the 1966 individual mentioned above). August records are more frequent and counts have included five at Copt Point on the 17<sup>th</sup> August 1980 and three flying west past Mill Point on the 31<sup>st</sup> August 1988. Numbers may increase during September, when eight flew west past Copt Point on the 9<sup>th</sup> September 1998, nine flew west there on the 26<sup>th</sup> September 1981, 13 flew west past Seabrook on the 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2007 and 15 flew west past Mill Point the following day.



Little Gulls at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)

Autumn passage tends to peak in October or November, when counts in excess of 15 have been noted on several occasions:

18 west past Copt Point on the 30<sup>th</sup> October 1988  
87 west past Mill Point on the 8<sup>th</sup> November 1989  
17 west past Copt Point on the 21<sup>st</sup> October 1998  
25 west past Copt Point on the 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1998  
16 west past Copt Point on the 5<sup>th</sup> November 2000  
19 west past Copt Point on the 25<sup>th</sup> November 2000  
28 west past Copt Point on the 4<sup>th</sup> October 2004  
64 east past Mill Point on the 24<sup>th</sup> October 2005  
16 (3e, 13w) past Princes Parade on the 21<sup>st</sup> November 2022



Little Gull at Battery Point (Ian Roberts)

It is typically scarce in winter, although small influxes have occurred in some years. In December 2000, eight flew west past Copt Point on the 5<sup>th</sup>, seven flew west there on the 12<sup>th</sup> and nine were seen in fields adjacent to Botolph's Bridge Road on the 14<sup>th</sup>, with four remaining there to the 16<sup>th</sup>. In January 2003, nine flew west past Mill Point and 20 were seen off Copt Point on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 20 flew west past Mill Point the following day, whilst in January 2016 eight



flew west past Hythe on the 5<sup>th</sup>, 13 flew west past Seabrook on the 10<sup>th</sup> and seven flew west past Mill Point the next day. In late November/early December 2022 up to seven were present at Nickolls Quarry, with at least three in the Botolph's Bridge area, up to five between Hythe and Battery Point and singles at the Willop Outfall and Folkestone Harbour, whilst one was found dead at Samphire Hoe.

Spring passage may be noted between March and mid-May, when double-figure movements have been noted as follows:

17 east past Mill Point on the 1<sup>st</sup> May 1990  
17 east past Copt Point on the 25<sup>th</sup> Apr 1999  
10 east past Copt Point on the 21<sup>st</sup> Apr 2003  
19 east past Copt Point on the 26<sup>th</sup> April 2003  
16 east past Samphire Hoe on the 21<sup>st</sup> April 2007  
10 east past Samphire Hoe on the 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2008  
11 east past Samphire Hoe on the 24<sup>th</sup> April 2008  
21 east past Samphire Hoe on the 9<sup>th</sup> March 2013

Stragglers may occasionally be seen in late May but June records are rare and have involved one off Fisherman's Beach, Hythe on the 6<sup>th</sup> June 1960 (as mentioned above), one off Folkestone Pier on the 16<sup>th</sup> June 2016 and a first-summer bird that was seen off Princes Parade on several occasions between the 26<sup>th</sup> May and 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2017.

Annual variability in numbers is high, with a peak of 138 bird/days in 2022 but with just a single sighting in 2015.



Little Gull at the Hotel Imperial Golf Course (Nigel Webster)

## References

Harrison, J. M. 1953. *The Birds of Kent*. Witherby, London.

Kent Ornithological Society (KOS). 1953-2021. *Kent Bird Reports*. Kent Ornithological Society.

Knight, V. & Tolputt, F. 1871. List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood. *Fourth Annual Report of the Folkestone Natural History Society*. Available at: [www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/46103](http://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/46103)

Norman, R. K. 2006. Some observations of birds on Hythe Ranges since 1950. <https://folkestonebirds.com/where-to-watch> (see "Further Information" section).

Norman, R. K. 2007. The Birds of Palmarsh Gravel Pit. <https://folkestonebirds.com/where-to-watch> (see "Further Information" section).

Snow, D. & Perrins, C.M. 1998. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Oxford University Press.

Ticehurst, N. F. 1909. *A History of the Birds of Kent*. Witherby, London.

### ***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.



Little Gull at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)