

# Gull-billed Tern

*Gelochelidon nilotica*

Category A

Very rare vagrant.

1 record

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

A small population breeds in northern Germany and Denmark, and it is widespread though localised in Spain. To the east it breeds discontinuously from Turkey and south-west Russia, through Kazakhstan, Mongolia and north-west China. The European population winters in coastal western Africa, south to the Gulf of Guinea. Asian populations winter in the Persian Gulf to the Indian subcontinent and south-east Asia. Also occurs in the Americas.

*Kent status (KOS 2021):*

Rare vagrant.

British (BBRC) records to end 2020: 383

Kent (KOS) records to end 2020: 56

It is a rare but regular vagrant to Britain, currently averaging about three or four records per annum (BBRC no date; Holt *et al.* 2021). The total of 56 recorded in Kent included 33 in the 1950s/1960s, with several multiple occurrences, but there have only been eight sightings, all of single birds, since 1980. Kent records have fallen between late April and early October, with a peak in August. There had not been a July record in Kent prior to 1971, but five of the last 13 have occurred in that month (BBRC no date; KOS no date).

The only local record involved one seen off Copt Point by Dale Gibson on the 11<sup>th</sup> July 1997.

The record by year is shown in figure 1.

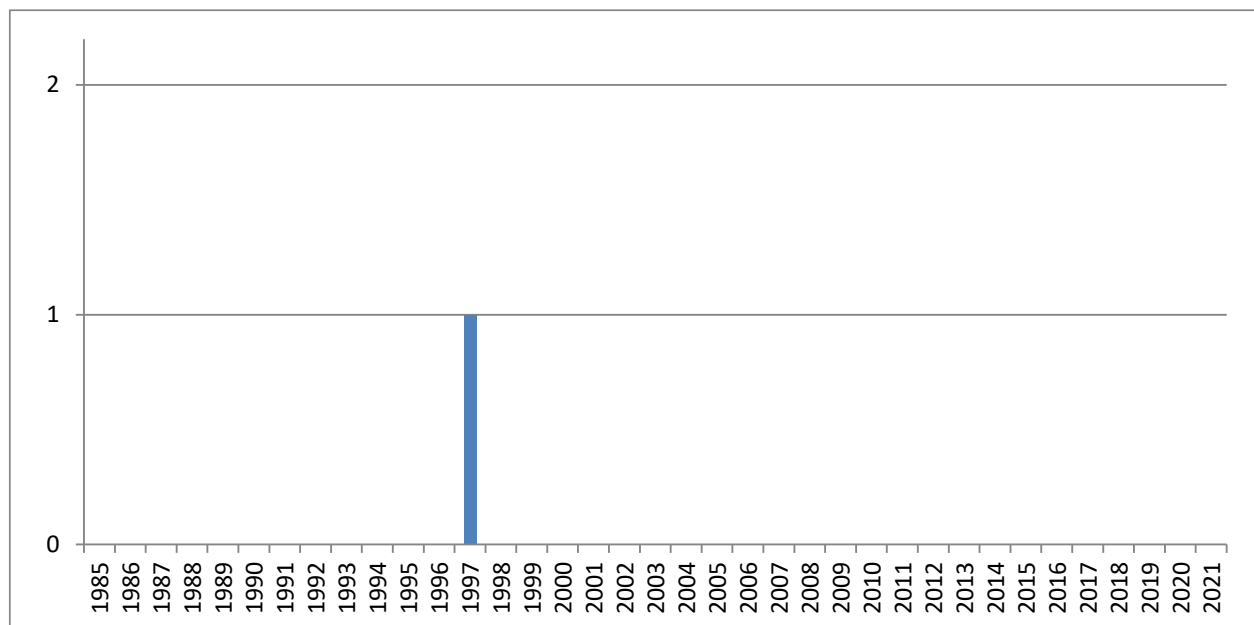


Figure 1: Gull-billed Tern records at Folkestone and Hythe

The record by week is given in figure 2.

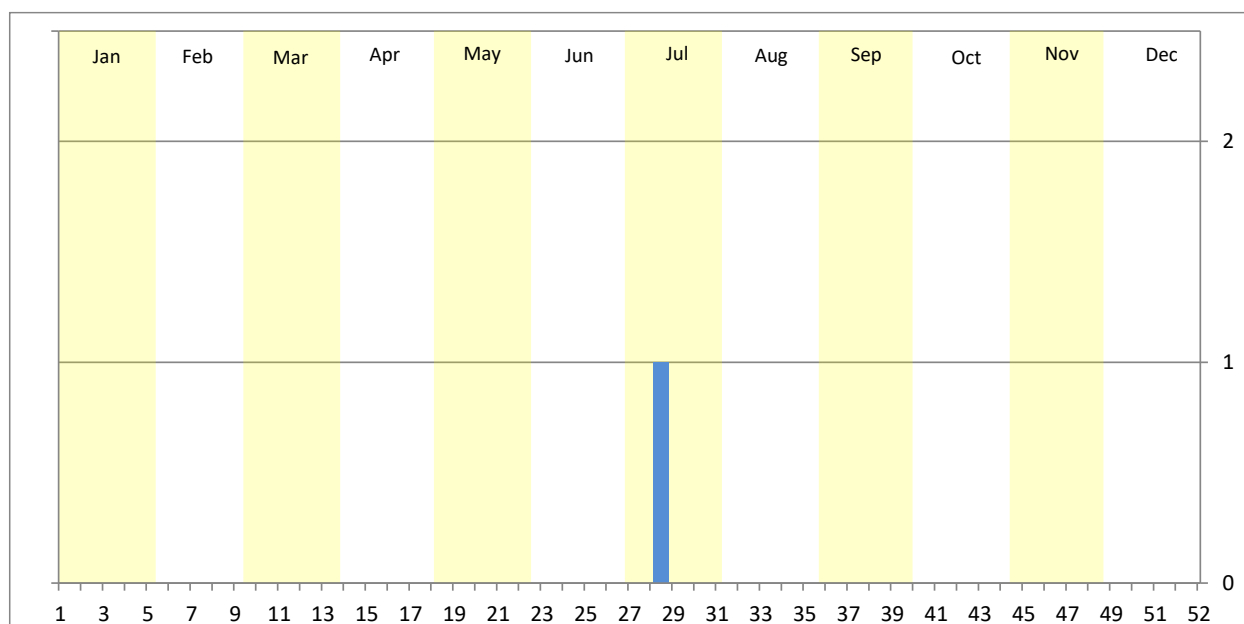


Figure 2: Gull-billed Tern records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Figure 3 shows the location of the record by tetrad.



Figure 3: Distribution of all Gull-billed Tern records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Confirmation of the only area record is as follows:

**1997** Copt Point, 11<sup>th</sup> July (D. A. Gibson).

An account of the first area record is given below.

## **Gull-billed Tern at Copt Point**

**11<sup>th</sup> July 1997**

By Dale Gibson

### **Weather conditions:**

A sunny, mild day with good visibility to about 1 to 1.5 miles, but with haze further out and high mist overhead. There was a light to moderate (force 3-4) north-easterly wind.

### **Circumstances of the find:**

I was on the rocks at Copt Point scanning the sea, when from behind the pier I noticed five terns coming towards the point. I got my telescope (Kowa 30x) on to them, and could see that they were Sandwich Terns, however the last bird looked different. It had a short, stubby, all-black bill, more rounded wing-tips, broader wings and a more stocky body.

As they passed by feeding, I saw a dark smudge on the underside of the primaries, darker than that shown by the Sandwich Terns, and a greyer wash to the upperparts. It came within 100-150 metres, and I had views at this range in good light for 30-40 seconds, then a few minutes in poorer light as it flew towards the sun. The combination of structure and plumage left no doubt that it was an adult Gull-billed Tern.

As it was flying away, it was still easily picked out from the other terns, even when silhouetted, as the more languid gull-like flight was obvious.

### **Description of the bird:**

Size, shape, jizz: The shape and flight were very different from Sandwich Tern, and made it easy to pick out. The wings were broader, with more rounded wing-tips, and the body was more stocky. The flight was more languid, and more like that of a small gull.

Head and upperparts: Crown black. Mantle grey, perhaps a shade darker than Sandwich Tern. Rump grey, unlike Sandwich. Tail and wings darker grey, with darker tips to the outer primaries.

Underparts: Whitish body, with grey underwings and a darker smudge on the tips of the underside of the primaries, which was more prominent (extended further along the trailing edge) than on Sandwich Tern.

Bare parts: The bill was shorter and stubbier than that of Sandwich Tern, and was all-black, lacking the yellow tip.

### **References**

British Birds Rarities Committee (BBRC). Statistics. [www.bbrc.org.uk/main-information/statistics](http://www.bbrc.org.uk/main-information/statistics) (accessed 2021).

Holt, C., French, P. & the Rarities Committee 2021. Report on rare birds in Great Britain in 2020. *British Birds* 114: 570-628.

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Kent Ornithological Society (KOS). The Kent List. <https://kentos.org.uk/index.php/recording/the-kent-list> (accessed 2021).

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### ***Acknowledgements***

The tetrad map images were produced from the Ordnance Survey [Get-a-map service](#) and are reproduced with kind permission of [Ordnance Survey](#).