

# Storm Petrel

*Hydrobates pelagicus*

Category A

Very rare vagrant.

8 records

Breeds on islands and coasts around the western Atlantic coast, with much smaller numbers in the Mediterranean. In Britain restricted to western coasts, and essentially absent from the English Channel and North Sea. After breeding disperses out to sea, with most migrating south to winter off Africa (Snow & Perrins, 1998).

It is a rare passage vagrant to Kent. There had been around 80 records in the county up to 2005, before there was an unprecedented westerly passage through the English Channel, following a severe storm, in May 2006, which included a series of local sightings. Just three singles followed (singles at Dungeness and Reculver in 2008 and one locally in 2013) before another severe storm system in early June 2017 produced a further influx into the county, with at least 77 recorded, although none were noted locally. Apart from these influxes influx spring and summer records are very rare, with the vast majority having occurred between late September and early January.

The species was included in Knight and Tolputt's "List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood" published in the Folkestone Natural History Society's annual report for 1871. This list covered an area of six mile radius of Folkestone town hall. Whilst this range extends further inland than the current Folkestone and Hythe area, it is very likely that the record would have been from the coast, and so would most probably have been within the modern boundary. Ticehurst (1909) stated that "Folkestone Museum has on taken in the vicinity of the town", but the exact date is not known and might well relate to the same occurrence.

The first documented record relates to one found at Folkestone on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1987, which appears in the Kent Bird Report for that year, whilst another was noted on the 31<sup>st</sup> October 2000 which Dale Gibson and Ian Roberts watched flying west past Copt Point.

A remarkable series of sightings in 2006 is described in detail below and the final local record involved one seen from a survey vessel when four miles south of Folkestone on the 31<sup>st</sup> October 2013.

The records by year are shown in figure 1.

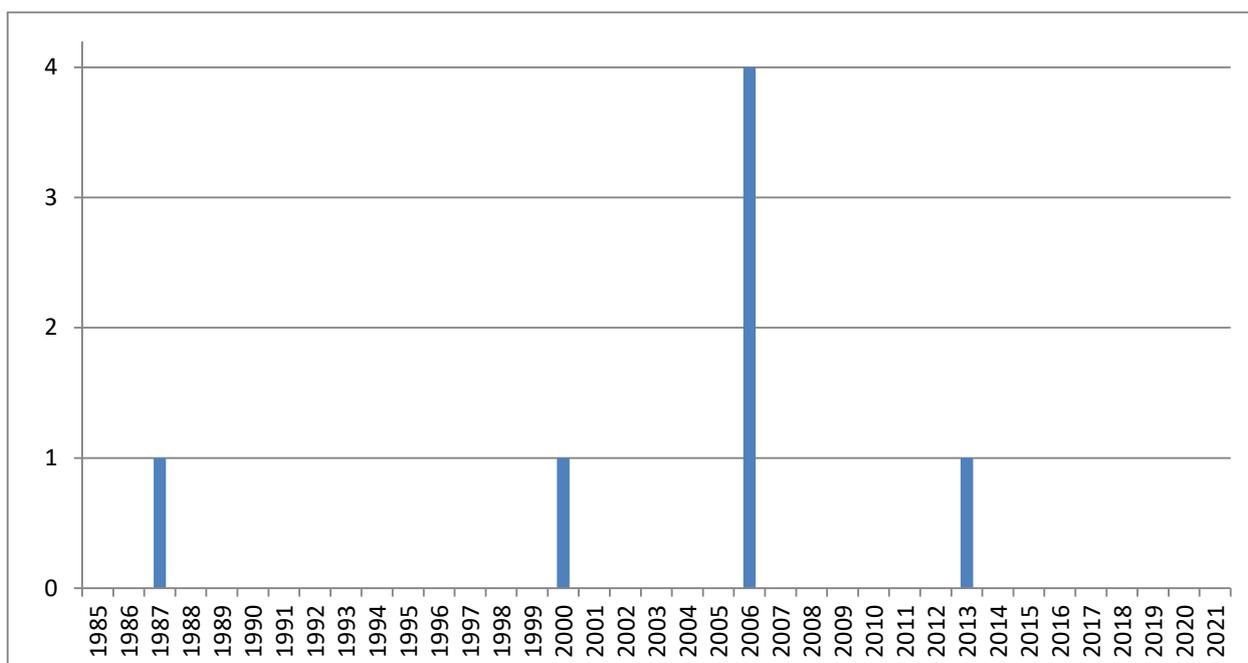


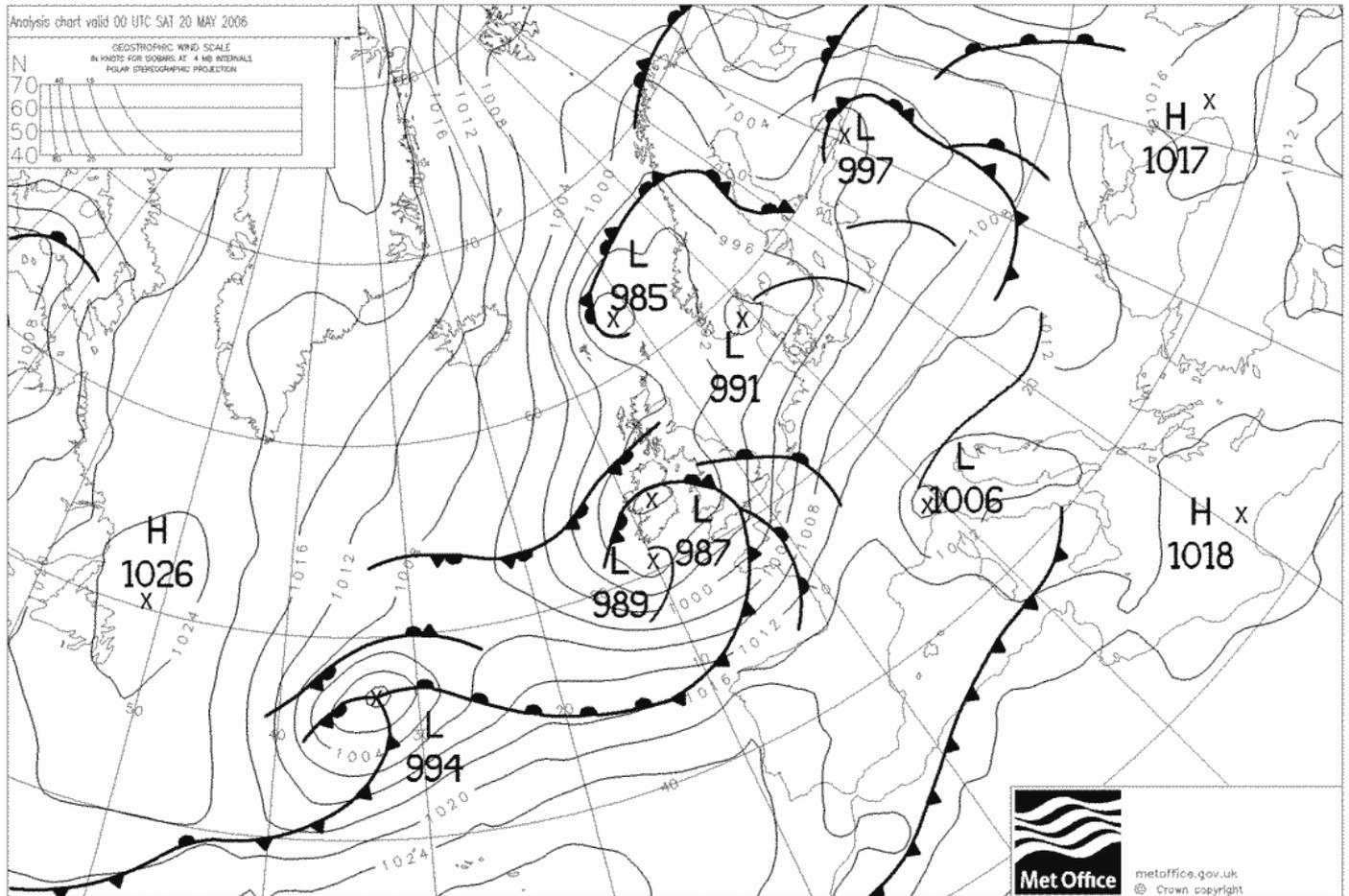
Figure 1: Storm Petrel records at Folkestone and Hythe since 1985



## Storm Petrel influx at Folkestone and Hythe in May 2006

by Ian Roberts

In May 2006 a series of depressions carried many thousands of Storm Petrels from the Western Approaches and the Bay of Biscay into the English Channel. The chart below shows the position on the 20<sup>th</sup> May when the first individual was sighted.



### Saturday, 20<sup>th</sup> May

Large numbers of Storm Petrels were being reported off various headlands to the west of Kent, notably Portland Bill. Though there had not yet been any sightings in Kent I was hopeful that the extreme weather conditions might produce one locally.

A morning seawatch off Copt Point was interesting, producing an Arctic Skua and four Manx Shearwaters, and the wind increased to WSW force 8 in the afternoon, accompanied by rain showers, so I was keen to give it another go. Personal circumstances meant that I only had about a one hour window in the afternoon so I headed to Mill Point, which is my nearest rather than my preferred seawatching point, in order to make best use of my limited time. Conditions really were challenging and the site offers little shelter so I began watching from the car window at around 16:20.

After only about ten minutes I picked up a petrel in the bay. It was not particularly close but I could see enough to be sure it was a Storm Petrel and it lingered for quite some time, being still present when I had to leave, though appeared to be drifting west. Later that day another was seen off Bockhill.

### Sunday, 21<sup>st</sup> May

The wind backed to the SSE and Dale Gibson recorded one flying west off Copt Point at 12:00, whilst another two were seen at Bockhill and Dungeness recorded their first, though in the end amassed a total of 43 individuals.

### **Monday, 22<sup>nd</sup> May**

Monday saw the wind veering to the S or SSW and I recorded another single bird passing Copt Point in the early morning, whilst at Dungeness a further 19 were logged.

### **Tuesday, 23<sup>rd</sup> May**

With the wind dropping slightly the sea was not watched, however numbers at Dungeness increased to a staggering 80 birds.

### **Wednesday, 24<sup>th</sup> May**

The wind remained in the SW but freshened and I recorded an unprecedented total of ten Storm Petrels passing west off Copt Point in the 90 minutes from 06:40. Dale Gibson added another in the afternoon. All day coverage at Dungeness revealed an astonishing 133 moving west.

### **Thursday, 25<sup>th</sup> May**

The wind remained in the west thereafter and numbers in Kent decreased, with no further local records. The last county records were on the 28<sup>th</sup>, after which the wind backed to the NW.

### **Summary**

In total some 14 Storm Petrels were recorded at Folkestone and Hythe in May 2006, whilst the county total was around 459, with the vast majority (411) off Dungeness.

### **References**

Kent Bird Reports. Kent Ornithological Society

Knight, V. & Tolputt, F., 1871. List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood, *Folkestone Natural History Society Annual Report*, 1871

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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**

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