

Great Skua

Stercorarius skua

Category A

Passage migrant.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

It breeds in Scotland, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Norway, Russia and islands in the Arctic Ocean. It is migratory and pelagic outside of the breeding season and during years of immaturity. The total marine range extends from Greenland and the Norwegian Sea south to at least Brazil and the outer Gulf of Guinea. It has spread and increased in population particularly since the mid-twentieth century.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

In Kent it is a regular passage migrant that is more common in autumn and overwinters in small numbers.



Great Skua at Mill Point (Ian Roberts)

The Great Skua 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 and whilst this range extends further inland than the current Folkestone and Hythe area, it is an almost exclusively coastal species so seems certain to have been recorded within the modern boundary.

However, Ticehurst (1909) considered it to be "of far less frequent occurrence on the coast of Kent" than either the Arctic or Pomarine Skua, with very few specimens having been obtained, and thought this was because "it frequents the fishing grounds further out to sea, where gulls congregate, and there is greater scope for the exercise of its predatory habits".

The first fully documented record involved one seen by Roger Norman as it flew west past Hythe Ranges on the 28th August 1957 (Norman 2006) and this was soon followed by two seen by Dave Musson off Hythe on the 26th August 1960 but there were no further sightings until 1984, when Rob Lee saw two off Copt Point on the 21st September and one there on the 17th November.

Taylor *et al.* (1981) noted that "the occurrences of this species have increased considerably since the early 1960s, perhaps more closely linked to the expansion of the breeding population than to the increase in sea-watching", so its early scarcity would appear to be genuine but the lack of records between 1960 and 1984 is likely to reflect a lack of local coverage, especially as it has been logged almost annually since 1987.



Great Skua at Samphire Hoe (Ian Roberts)



Great Skua at Samphire Hoe (Ian Roberts)

Overall distribution

Figure 1 shows the distribution of all records of Great Skua by tetrad, with records in 11 tetrads (35%).

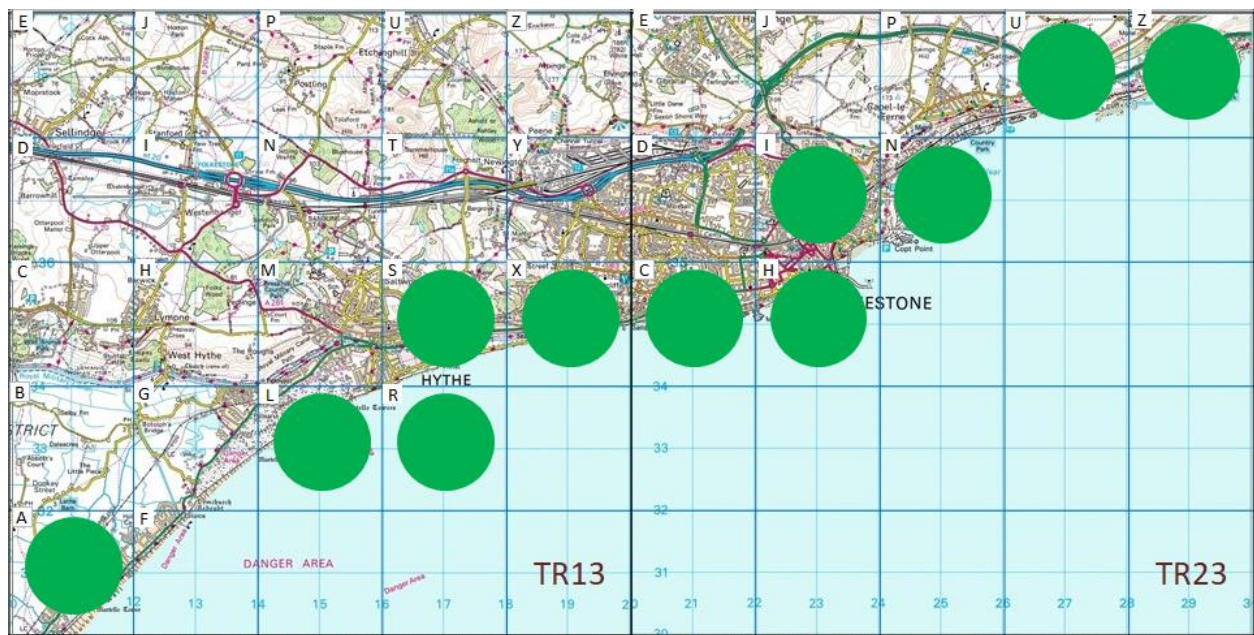


Figure 1: Distribution of all Great Skua records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Taylor *et al.* stated that a small spring passage may be noted off Dungeness, giving the extreme dates of the 5th April and 31st May, and citing a peak during the last three weeks of April. Elsewhere it was considered to be very rare in spring, with just six records (none of which were local) during their review period (1952-1976). The first local spring record involved one seen by Ian Roberts as it flew east past Mill Point on the 4th May 1990 and two flew east there on the 24th April 1991, whilst one flew east past Copt Point on the 29th April 1995 and there have been annual sightings since 1998 as figure 2 demonstrates.

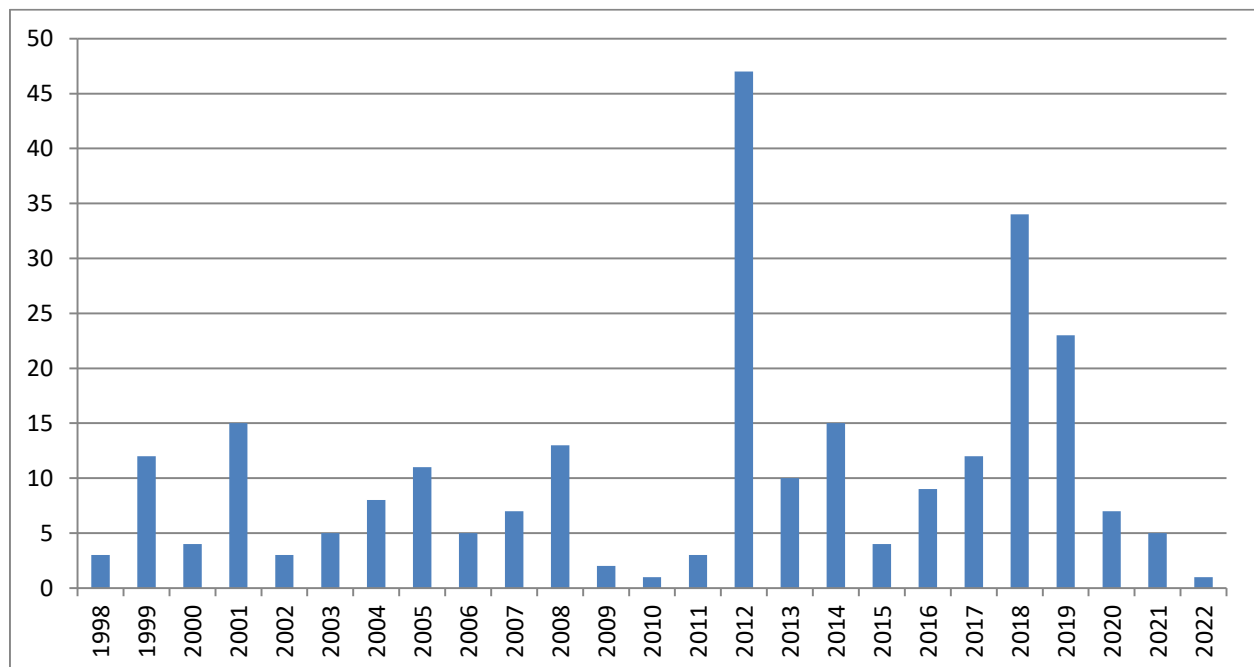


Figure 2: Spring passage totals of Great Skua at Folkestone and Hythe

Annual variability has been considerable, but the average per annum has increased from seven in the 2000s to over 16 in the 2010s, with particularly strong passages in 2012, 2018 and 2019, when the six largest day counts were logged:

13 east past Copt Point on the 18th Apr 2012
 14 east past Copt Point on the 25th Apr 2012
 9 east past Samphire Hoe on the 17th Apr 2018
 8 east past Samphire Hoe on the 21st Apr 2018
 8 east past Samphire Hoe on the 2nd May 2018
 13 east past Mill Point on the 25th Apr 2019

Spring passage may persist into the third week of May, with the latest passing Mill Point on the 20th May 2006. There are two isolated records in June: singles off Copt Point on the 6th June 1992 and on the 8th June 2012.

July records are also scarce, with two off Copt Point on the 8th July 2001, one there on the 9th July 2006, one off Hythe on the 15th July and two off Copt Point on the 23rd July 1998, whilst a protracted autumn passage may be noted between August and late November, with annual totals provided in figure 3.

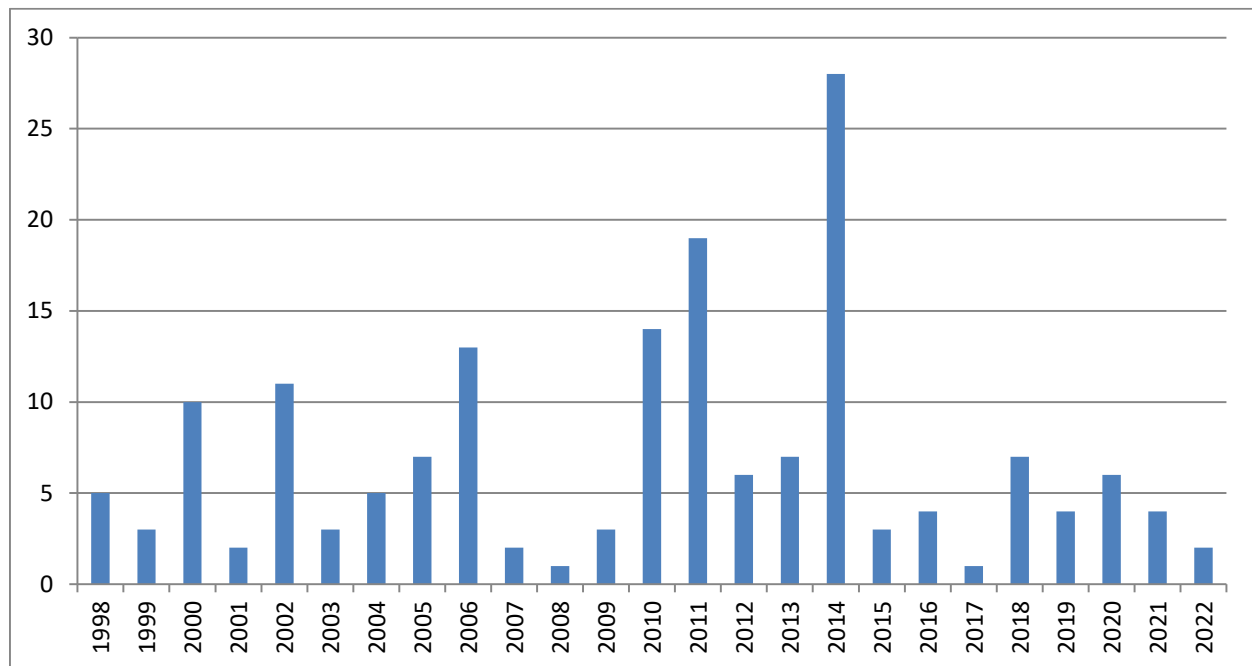


Figure 3: Autumn passage totals of Great Skua at Folkestone and Hythe



Great Skua at Mill Point (Ian Roberts)

The annual increase has been less pronounced in autumn, with an average per annum of 6 in the 2000s and 8.5 in the 2010s, with the largest totals in 2010, 2011 and 2014, when the four largest day counts were noted:

9 east past Mill Point on the 8th November 2010

15 (10 east, 5 west) past Samphire Hoe on the 9th October 2011

11 (9 west, 2 east) past Hythe on the 8th October 2014

9 (5 east, 4 west) past Hythe on the 13th October 2014

Taylor *et al.* were only able to list 13 winter records in their 25 year review period and records in this season (December to March) are mainly a recent phenomenon locally, as figure 4 demonstrates.

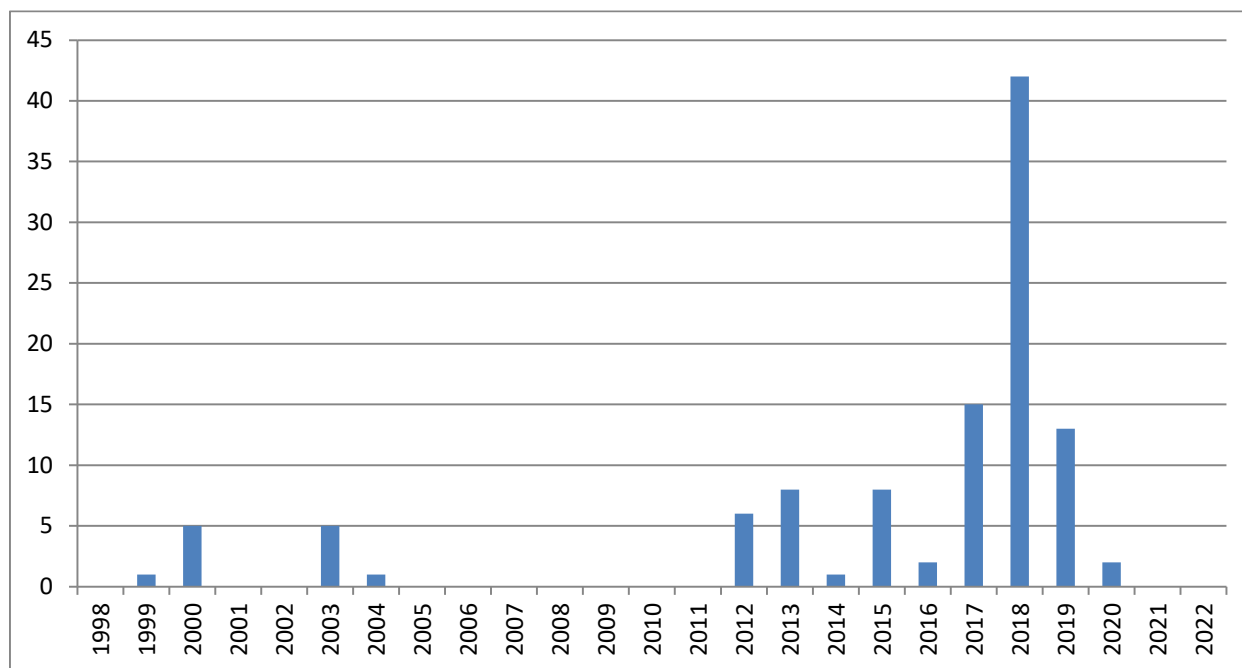


Figure 4: Winter bird/days totals of Great Skua at Folkestone and Hythe

The figure shows the bird/day totals and may contain some duplication as birds may linger in winter, but significant numbers were present in the 2017/2018 winter, with totals of six flying west past Mill Point on the 13th December 2017, seven flying east past Samphire Hoe on the 7th January 2018 and six flying east there the following day.

References

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Acknowledgements

The tetrad map images were produced from the Ordnance Survey [Get-a-map service](https://get-a-map.service) and are reproduced with kind permission of [Ordnance Survey](https://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk). I am indebted to Andrew Henderson and Tim Hodge for providing access to the Kent Ornithological Society archives.