

Shag

Phalacrocorax aristotelis

Category A

Passage migrant and winter visitor, with occasional summer records.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds along rocky coasts of the North Atlantic from Morocco north to Iceland and east to Finland, also along the North Sea coastline from Yorkshire northwards, and around the Mediterranean and Black Sea coasts. It is partially dispersive, with some moving to winter along coasts of the southern North Sea and English Channel, where it retains its preference for rocky areas. Many adults and more southerly populations are mainly resident. It is essentially a marine species and it is rare inland.



Shag at Folkestone Harbour (Brian Harper)

Britain and Ireland supports around 40-45% of the world's population of breeding Shags, with nests around much of the coasts and the most significant absence being the coastline from Yorkshire south to Kent and thence west to the Isle of Wight. Assessment of population trends is difficult, but it is clear that there have been significant fluctuations, the reasons for which are speculative, and may be linked to increased frequency of prolonged winter gales and/or shortages of their favoured sand eel prey. A 21% increase between 1969-70 and 1985-88 was followed by a 27% decline to 1998-2002, and a further fall of 26% to 2011 (Balmer *et al.* 2013).

Kent status (KOS 2021):

In Kent it is a passage migrant and winter visitor in small numbers, with occasional inland records.

The Shag was not included in Knight and Tolputt's "List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood" (1871) and Ticehurst (1909) regarded the Shag as an irregular wanderer to Kent in the winter months, mainly off the south and east coasts, and to the estuaries of the Thames and Medway. He pointed out that, by records alone, it would appear to be a rarity, but thought that this impression was probably more apparent than real, as they tend to keep more to the open sea and are rarely shot.

Harrison (1953) found that its incidence on the south coast of the county had increased, and that it had extended the time of its visitations to include both the autumn and the spring, even including a report of nesting between Dover and St. Margaret's Bay in 1928 and 1929, although there has been no evidence of breeding in the county since.



Shag at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)



Shag at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)

Harrison did not however cite any local records, so the first documented occurrence relates to a note in the Kent Bird Report for 1959 regarding one at Folkestone "in winter", whilst the report for 1961 included a record of three at Folkestone on the 7th January 1961.

Taylor *et al.* (1981) regarded it as a regular visitor to the county between September and March, that was usually less numerous in April and August, and particularly scarce in July and July, regarding a flock of five seen off Abbotscliffe by John Hollyer on the 9th June 1962 as “exceptional”.

There were irregular reports in the 1960s and 1970s, including a flock of eight seen at Folkestone by T. Grant on the 16th November 1966, three at Folkestone on the 4th March 1967 and two there on the 27th January 1968, with other records referring to single birds recorded between the 14th September and 28th March. Several sightings were logged in 1980 and 1981, including two that lingered at Copt Point between the 7th and 25th January 1981, and an immature seen there on the 13th June 1981, whilst it has been recorded annually since 1983.

Overall distribution

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



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

June or July records have remained scarce but have been noted in 11 years. When the age has been noted, all were immature birds, suggesting that these are non-breeding birds that have not returned to the natal grounds.

- One off Folkestone Warren on the 28th July 1984
- One off Mill Point on four dates between the 7th June and 27th July 1988
- One off Copt Point on the 31st July 1997
- One off Copt Point on the 6th June and 13th July 2001
- One at Samphire Hoe on the 22nd June 2010
- Two off Copt Point on the 3rd June 2012
- Up to two off Samphire Hoe between the 1st June and 7th July 2013, with five there on the 12th July
- One off Samphire Hoe on several dates between the 3rd June and 29th July 2014
- One off Samphire Hoe on 9th June 2016
- One off Samphire Hoe on 10th July 2016
- One off Samphire Hoe on 16th July 2019

There are a few records from early August but it more frequently encountered from mid to late month, with a peak count of three flying west past Samphire Hoe on the 26th and 30th August 2020. It is regularly recorded from September through to March, with a peak count in the autumn months of six seen between Sandgate and Mill Point on the 21st September 2022, whilst four have been noted on several occasions: at Samphire Hoe on the 10th September 2019 and 26th September 2008, flying west past Mill Point on the 5th October 1988, at Samphire Hoe on the 11th October 2016, flying west past Copt Point on the 10th November 1998, at Copt Point on the 26th November 1984 and at Sandgate on the 26th November 2018.

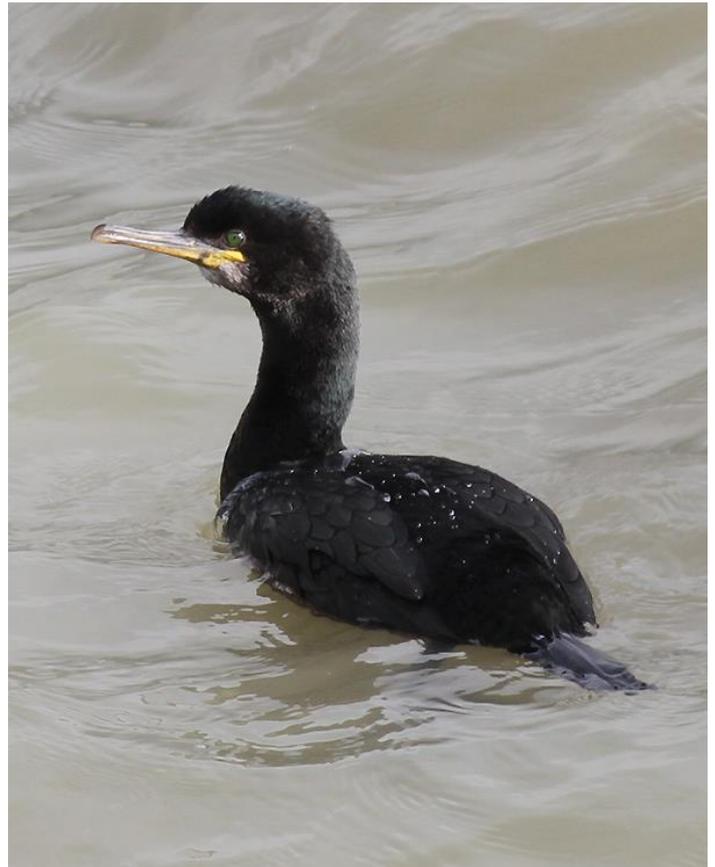
The peak numbers typically occur between December and March, when counts of up to five have been noted on many dates. Larger counts have occurred as follows:

- 10 at Folkestone Harbour on the 24th December 1989
- 9 at Copt Point on the 3rd February 2004, with ten there the next day, increasing to 15 on the 7th February
- 6 at Folkestone Harbour on the 17th March 2013
- 6 at Samphire Hoe on the 20th March 2018
- 6 at Sandgate on the 10th January 2019
- 8 flying west at Samphire Hoe on the 9th January 2021

Up to four have remained into April in some years, with counts of five off Folkestone Warren on the 16th April 2002 and off Samphire Hoe on the 20th April 2021. Smaller numbers may persist into May, with a peak count of four off Samphire Hoe on the 13th May 2014.



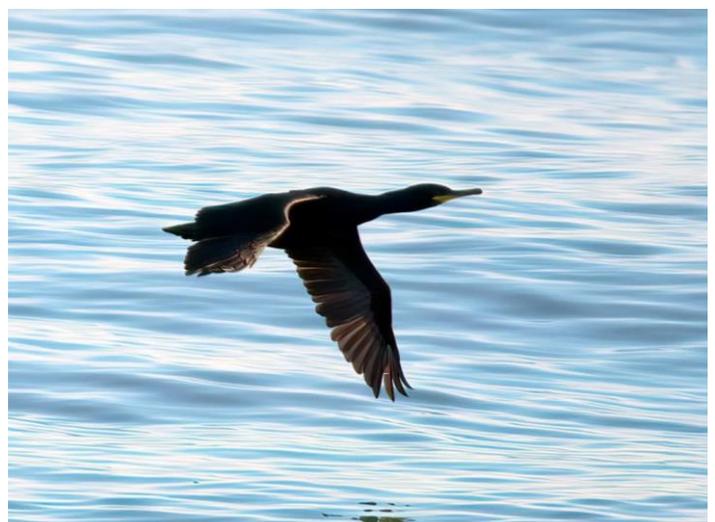
Shag at Battery Point (Brian Harper)



Shag at Folkestone Harbour (Brian Harper)



Shag at Folkestone Harbour (Brian Harper)



Shag at Folkestone Harbour (Elliot Ranford)

It is very rare away from the coast, with just three records: one seen on the lake at Radnor Park by F Johnson between the 26th and 31st March 1988, one seen at Nickolls Quarry by Roger Norman on the 9th December 1999 and one seen on the canal at Seabrook by Ian Roberts on the 14th March 2021.



Shag at Saphire Hoe (Mike Linklater)



Shag on canal at Seabrook (Ian Roberts)

There have been four recoveries locally of birds that had been ringed as nestlings on the eastern coast of England or Scotland:

- Ringed Isle of May on 6th August 1968, recovered Folkestone on 28th March 1969: 620km SSE, 234 days
- Ringed Farne Islands on 23rd July 1985, recovered Folkestone on 19th March 1988: 540km SSE, 970 days
- Ringed Helmsdale on 21st June 1987, recovered Folkestone on 27th March 1988: 844km SSE, 280 days
- Ringed Isle of May on 4th July 2002, recovered Saphire Hoe on 17th November 2002: 619km SSE, 136 days

Figure 2 shows the ringing sites for these birds:

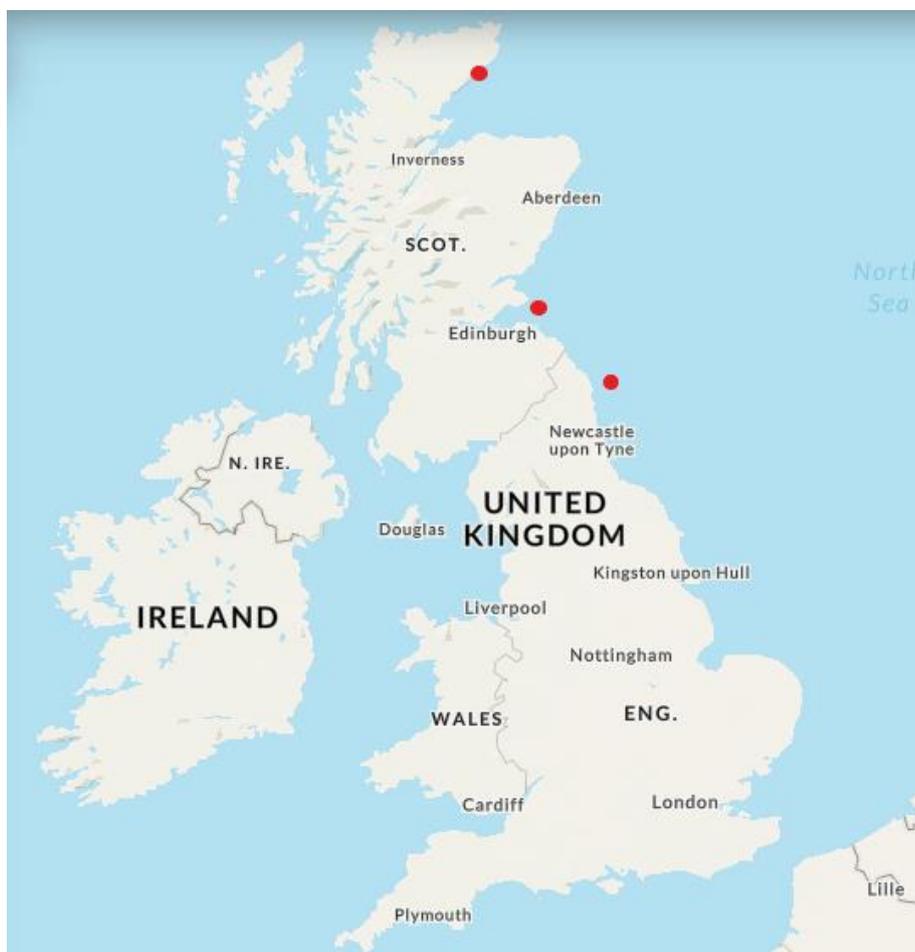


Figure 2: Map showing ringing sites of Shags recovered at Folkestone and Hythe

Harrison, Taylor *et al.* and Kent Bird Reports (KOS, to 2021) provide details of a further 26 birds that have been recovered in Kent, 20 of which were ringed in Scotland (all on the Isle of May, apart from singles on two other islands in the Firth of Forth: the Bass Rock and Craigleith), five on the Farne Islands, off Northumberland, and one on Herm in the Channel Islands.

It would appear that north-eastern England and south-eastern Scotland are the source of the majority of birds that occur locally, which is supported by Wernham *et al.* (2002).



Shag at Folkestone Harbour (Elliot Ranford)

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Acknowledgements

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