

Lesser Black-backed Gull

Larus fuscus

Category A

Breeding species, winter visitor and passage migrant.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds mainly along coasts from Portugal northwards to Iceland, around Britain, Ireland and the North Sea, eastwards through Fenno-Scandia and Russia to c.120°E in Siberia. Basically migratory, with eastern populations in particular undertaking extensive movements. The total winter range extends from Britain, the Mediterranean, Black and Caspian Seas to the Arabian Sea and West and East Africa. It underwent a significant spread in range during the twentieth century, colonising France, the Low Countries, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Iceland and Greenland.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

In Kent it is an increasing coastal and inland breeding species, also a widespread but declining passage migrant and winter visitor.

The Lesser Black-backed 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 however it would have been very likely to have been recorded at the coast and so within the modern boundary. Ticehurst (1909) confirmed that "this bird wanders very little from tidal water and is far less frequently met with on the ploughed fields and meadows than the grey-backed species", adding that immature birds were "numerous amongst the flocks of mixed gulls of the larger species that frequent all parts of the Kent coast throughout the year", but that "adult birds are less common and are mostly seen on passage", never being very numerous on the south coast. He was able to document the first confirmed breeding in the county, when a pair nested at Dungeness in 1908, which he considered "remarkable when we consider that the nearest known breeding grounds ... area at the Farne Islands ... on the one side and ... Devon and Cornwall on the other".

Harrison (1953) provided details of subsequent breeding at Dungeness between 1931 and 1947, with the colony reaching a peak of 26 pairs in 1938, and also noted the first nesting on the chalk cliffs at Dover, where there were two pairs in 1950. Taylor *et al* (1981) reported that breeding occurred intermittently on the Dover cliffs throughout their review period (1952 to 1976), with a peak of up to four pairs present, whilst the Kent Bird Report for 1967 mentions that it was "reported as breeding on the cliffs east of Folkestone Warren" (with no further details).



Lesser Black-backed Gull at Botolph's Bridge
(Brian Harper)



Lesser Black-backed Gull at Pennypot (Ian Roberts)



Lesser Black-backed Gulls at Pennypot (Ian Roberts)

The Kent Bird Report for 1991 recorded the first roof-nesting in the county (with one or two pairs in Thanet) but it seems likely that breeding in the county was under-recorded as the national survey in 1994 revealed 40-60 pairs in Kent, whilst it was noted in four tetrads locally during the second county atlas (1988-1994), with probable or confirmed breeding in TR23 H and TR23 J and possible breeding in TR13 X and TR13 Z.

Henderson & Hodge (1998) described how it continued to spread in Kent, occupying new sites in the Medway towns in 1997, and noted that it had increased nationally at a rate of 13% per annum since 1976, with similar increases evident since the 1940s in France and the Netherlands. They thought it likely that “we can anticipate a continuing increase in range and abundance for this species in the foreseeable future”.

Breeding atlas distribution

Figure 1 shows the breeding distribution by tetrad based on the results of the 2007-13 BTO/KOS atlas fieldwork.



Figure 1: Breeding distribution of Lesser Black-backed Gull at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was confirmed in one tetrad, with probable breeding in five more and possible breeding in one other. The table below shows how this compares to previous atlases (Taylor *et al.* 1981; Henderson & Hodge 1998). The confirmed and probable breeding categories have been combined to account for differing definitions of these in the first atlas.

Breeding atlases	1967 - 1973		1988 - 1994		2007 - 2013	
Possible	0	(0%)	2	(6%)	1	(3%)
Probable/Confirmed	0	(0%)	2	(6%)	6	(19%)
Total	0	(0%)	4	(13%)	7	(23%)
Change			+4	(--%)	+3	(+75%)

The table below shows the changes in tetrad occupancy across the three atlas periods.

Trends	First to second atlas (1967-73 to 1988-94)	Second to third atlas (1988-94 to 2007-13)	First to third atlas (1967-73 to 2007-13)
Local	--%	+75%	--%
Kent	--%	+356%	--%

Up to two, occasionally three, pairs were known have nested in most years since the second atlas, generally in Folkestone or Hythe, although two pairs bred on the ground at Samphire Hoe in 1997, before it opened to the public later that year and a pair bred on one of the buildings there in 2017 and 2018.

Clements *et al* (2015) reported that the third atlas showed a significant expansion in range in the county, with colonisation or expansion within most of the major towns and an increase in occupied tetrads of over 350%. This has been attributed to safe nesting and roosting sites on urban roofs, along with adaptation to inland food supplies.



Lesser Black-backed Gulls at Samphire Hoe (Ian Roberts)



Lesser Black-backed Gull at Hythe (Brian Harper)

The Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) coordinated a census of gulls nesting in non-natural sites in Britain during the 2019 breeding season, the first to be undertaken nationally since 1994 (for details of survey methods etc. refer to Roberts, 2021). This survey found a total of eight apparently occupied Lesser Black-backed Gulls nests (AON), with one additional apparently occupied territory (AOT), giving an overall total of between 8 and 9 breeding pairs, with five in TR13 and 3 to 4 in TR23. This was higher than had previously been recorded but is thought likely to be due, at least in part, to complete coverage of the area, as well as underlying population growth.

The numbers of nests and territories by 2km tetrad are summarised in the tables below. The detailed results by 1km monads with maps of the nest locations can be found [here](#). Individual adults (apparently not directly associated with nests or territories) were also present during the survey in TR13 A, TR13 F, TR13 L and TR13 M, which may possibly portend a spread into these more westerly tetrads.

Tetrad	AON	AOT
TR13 S	1	1
TR13 Y	4	4
TR23 I	2	3
TR23 Z	1	1
Total	8	9



Lesser Black-backed Gulls at Hythe Ranges (Ian Roberts)



Lesser Black-backed Gull at Hythe (Nigel Webster)

As Worsfold observed, in the towns gulls show a preference for old, high, well-built structures with stout chimney stacks, particularly properties built before 1920. Flat roof sections where extensions had been added are also popular. Additionally, the birds may build on pitched roofs, when nests are often wedged between chimney pots, dormer windows or roof tiles. In some areas more modern and single storey buildings may also be used to a lesser extent. Large commercial or industrial buildings with shallow, pitched roofs, or flat roofs with large vents are used extensively roof-nesting gulls and, as Raven & Coulson stated, here colonies could be much denser.

The gull colonies (primarily Herring Gulls but with a few Lesser Black-backed Gulls) on buildings within the Channel Tunnel Terminal site complex (in TR13 Y) and at the Park Farm Industrial Estate in Folkestone (TR23 D/TR23 I) have been continued to be surveyed since the 2019 census and the population has generally increased here, as the table below demonstrates:

Year	Channel Tunnel (in TR13 Y)	Park Farm West (in TR13 D)	Park Farm East (in TR23 I)	3 colonies total	Variance	Var%
	AON/AOT	AON/AOT	AON/AOT	AON/AOT		
2019	4	0	1	5		
2020	3	0	4	7	+2	+40%
2021	3	1	5	9	+2	+29%
2022	3	2	3	8	-1	-11%

Overall distribution

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of Lesser Black-backed Gull by tetrad, with records in 27 tetrads (87%).

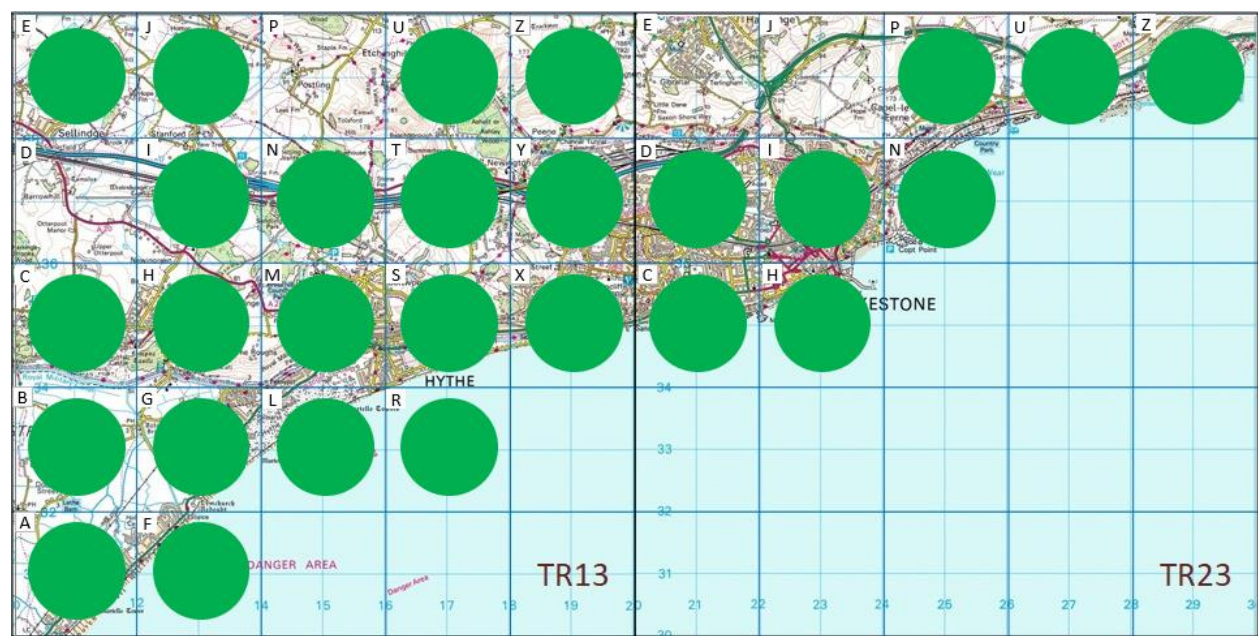


Figure 2: Distribution of all Lesser Black-backed Gull records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Taylor *et al* (1981) stated that in Kent “numbers are lowest during February” and this is also true locally, with no double-figure counts in that month, indeed the maximum count of nine at the Willop Basin was logged on the last day of February 2014 and no doubt included some early spring migrants.

Spring passage occurs during March and April, when counts of 20 or more have been noted on several occasions:

- 27 flying east past Copt Point on the 11th April 1995
- 35 flying east past Copt Point on the 12th April 1995
- 21 at Nickolls Quarry on the 18th March 2000
- 34 at Nickolls Quarry on the 15th April 2000
- 23 at Hythe and 50 flying east past Samphire Hoe on the 24th March 2006
- 20 flying east past Samphire Hoe on the 20th April 2008

Double figure counts of non-breeding birds in May or June have involved 14 at Nickolls Quarry on the 12th May 1993 and 12 at Copt Point on the 10th May 2002.



Lesser Black-backed Gull at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)

Autumn migration commences in July and counts of 20 or more may be noted from the fourth week of that month, with 20 flying west at Abbotscliffe on the 25th July 1993, 20 at Nickolls Quarry on the 25th July 1999 and 25 there on the 22nd July 2002.

Passage peaks between September and November, when counts of 70 or more have been logged as follows:

100+ at Nickolls Quarry on the 1st November 1995
70 at Capel Battery on the 6th September 1997
101 at Botolph's Bridge on the 14th August 1998
88 at Botolph's Bridge on the 6th September 1998, with 95 there the following day
97 at Abbotscliffe on the 17th September 1998
70 at Nickolls Quarry on the 20th October 1998
100 at Nickolls Quarry on the 1st November 1998
115 at Botolph's Bridge on the 7th August 2000
390 at Nickolls Quarry on the 31st August 2000
126 at Nickolls Quarry on the 31st October 2001
90 flying south-west at Nickolls Quarry on the 20th November 2003
85 at Sandgate on the 21st September (with 89 on the 26th September)
126 at Sandgate on the 1st October

Numbers decrease over the winter months, when the only counts in excess of 20 have comprised 30 at Nickolls Quarry on the 8th December 2000 and 63 at the Willop Basin on the 23rd December 2012.

There have been two ringing recoveries locally. One ringed as a chick on the 4th July 1995 at Rotterdam in the Netherlands was seen at Nickolls Quarry on the 25th August 2000 and one ringed as an adult at Pitsea in Essex on the 12th March 2016 was seen at Hythe on the 29th July 2016.

Raven & Coulson (1997) mentioned a mixed Herring x Lesser Black-backed Gull pairing at Folkestone in 1994.



Lesser Black-backed Gull at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)



Lesser Black-backed Gull at Seabrook (Ian Roberts)

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Acknowledgements

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