

Squacco Heron

Ardeola ralloides

Category A

Very rare vagrant

1 record

A localised but not uncommon breeding species in Europe, mostly found in the south and south-east, with the majority wintering south of the Sahara.

There is a distinct spring bias to British records, with a peak in May and June, suggesting birds overshooting the breeding grounds. There had been 153 British records to the end of 2012. Just nine of those were in Kent, but five have occurred in the last decade, suggesting that it is now occurring with greater frequency.

The only area record is as follows:

2007 Nickoll's Quarry, first-summer, 2nd June (I. A. Roberts)

An account of the first area record is given below.

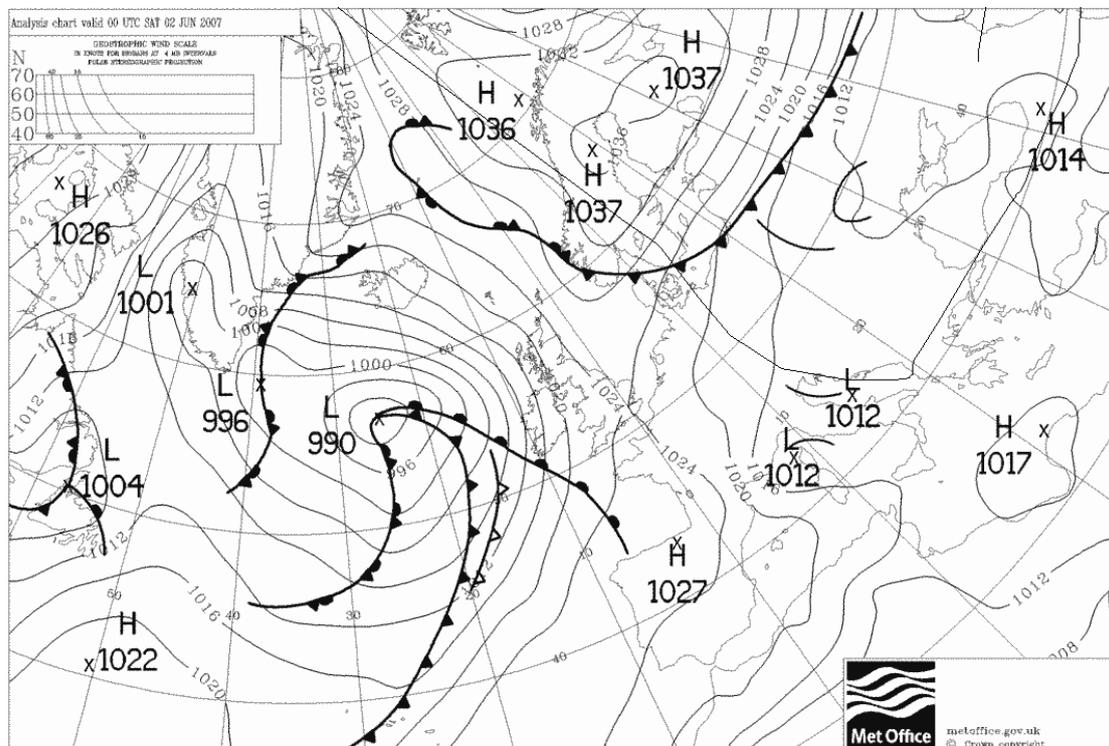
Squacco Heron at Nickoll's Quarry

2nd June 2007

(Ian A Roberts)

Weather conditions:

The influence of high pressure stretched north into England from southern Spain, as demonstrated by the synoptic chart below, and produced very pleasant conditions in Kent which were ideal for a late overshoot.



Circumstances of the find:

On the 2nd June I undertook my monthly Folkestone and Hythe bird count. In the evening I visited Nickoll's Quarry and did my usual circuit around the pit. At about 20:10, when I reached the furthest (western) end of the pit, I had seen very little.

The extreme western end is the best for waders, having a little shallow edge and being mostly undisturbed. That said, the water levels had remained fairly high and the shallower areas had become quite vegetated, and the area had only produced a handful of Common Sandpipers in May. So I was expecting nothing and a quick scan seemed to confirm that this was what I was going to get.

I decided to walk right up to the edge in case something was hiding and was pleased I did. As I approached a brilliant flash of white appeared from nowhere on the far bank. Though I had scanned that area I hadn't noticed anything, and assume it was lurking amongst the vegetation. I raised my binoculars and was amazed to see a small heron with bright white wings. My first thought was an egret, though clearly not a Little as it wasn't completely white, so a Cattle, but it clearly wasn't one of them either as the head and back were too dark – this was all going through my mind in a blur as I tried to make sense of what I was seeing – then the penny dropped: a Squacco Heron! The combination of buffish-brown head and body contrasting with white wings and tail could belong to nothing else.

It was the first for the Folkestone and Hythe area and only the 6th for the county (I didn't know that precisely, but I knew there hadn't been many). The full enormity of the sighting was dawning on me as the bird was getting increasingly distant! At first I was expecting it to drop into another part of the pit but it kept on going, and going. The Royal Military Canal runs along the northern side of the pit, c.2 miles distant, and it was heading that way, and I fully expected it to pitch down there somewhere. But still it kept on going, getting ever smaller as it headed strongly east or north-east over Hythe town. I watched it for at least 5 maybe 10 minutes until it was no more than a dot. Even at very long range the white wings were obvious and it would have been identifiable.

The final total for the day was a fairly ordinary 75, but one extraordinary species will live long in the memory!

Description of the bird:

Size, shape, jizz: a small, compact, quite stocky-looking heron.

Head and upperparts: crown and mantle looked buffish-brown, and appeared streaked. The wings were a bright, startling white and were the first thing I noticed of the bird (it must have just took flight). The wings formed a very obvious contrast with the head and back and this was visible even at long range as it flew into the distance. The tail was also white and the brownish of the back cut off fairly squarely across the rump, more or less level with the trailing edge of the wings.

Underparts: The face and breast also appeared to be a streaked buffish-brown, possibly a shade paler than the back, but it was mainly seen obliquely as it headed away and these areas were not seen for long. The belly was not noted.

Bare parts: the bill appeared to have a greyish base and a darker tip. The fairly short projection of trailing legs was yellowy.

Voice: It was not heard to call.

Age: It was certainly not as bright as the adult present at the same time in London and looked similar to the bird present at Oare Marshes (Kent) the following day (which was aged as a first-summer).

Comments on the record:

The bird looked to be in similar plumage to the one seen at Oare Marshes the following day and was presumed to be the same individual by the rarities committees. 2007 also produced a second individual in Kent, an adult at Dungeness on the 9th June.

This was the sixth record for the county, and was been accepted by the local and national rarities committees, appearing in the BBRC report for that year (*British Birds* 101: 527). There had been c.140 previous British records.