

Caspian Gull

Larus cachinnans

Category A

Very rare vagrant

9 records

Breeds on sandy dunes, islands, steppe lakes and along rivers, mainly in Russia (c.30,000 pairs), but has spread recently into Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland and even southern Germany. The main winter areas are the Black and Caspian seas and the Gulf States though, following breeding, many move west and north-west to reach northern and western Europe (Olsen & Larsson, 2005).



Caspian Gull at Hythe (Ian Roberts)

A bird seen at Hythe in 2011 bore a yellow colour-ring. Although the ring unfortunately could not be read it is presumed to have originated from Poland.

Probably winters regularly in Britain, with most Kent records from regularly-checked roosts, especially Dungeness.

As figure 1 demonstrates, Caspian Gull was first recorded in the Folkestone and Hythe area in 2006, when there were three records, but there were no further sightings until 2011. However since then it has occurred in five of the last six years and will probably prove to be a regular visitor in time.

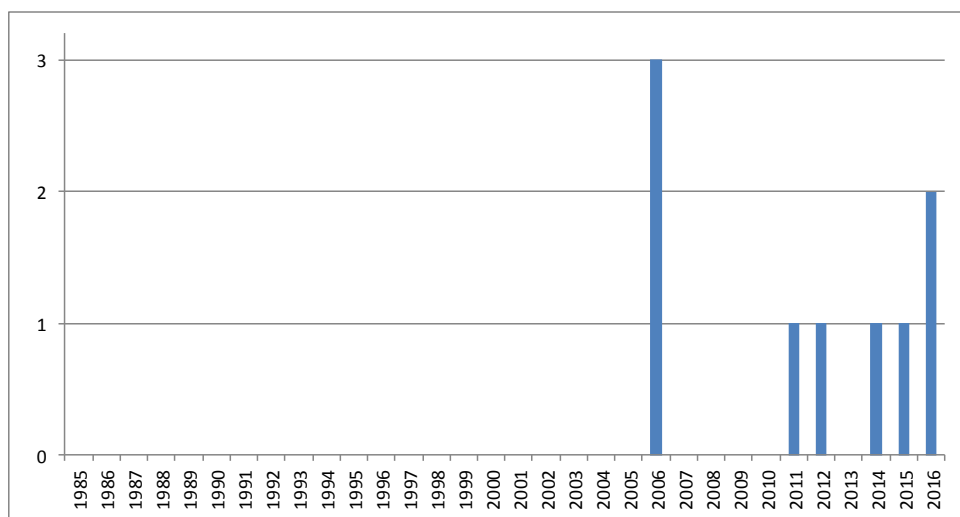


Figure 1: Caspian Gull records at Folkestone and Hythe

All records to date have been in the winter period, as shown in figure 2. Eight have been found in November / December, with the other in February.

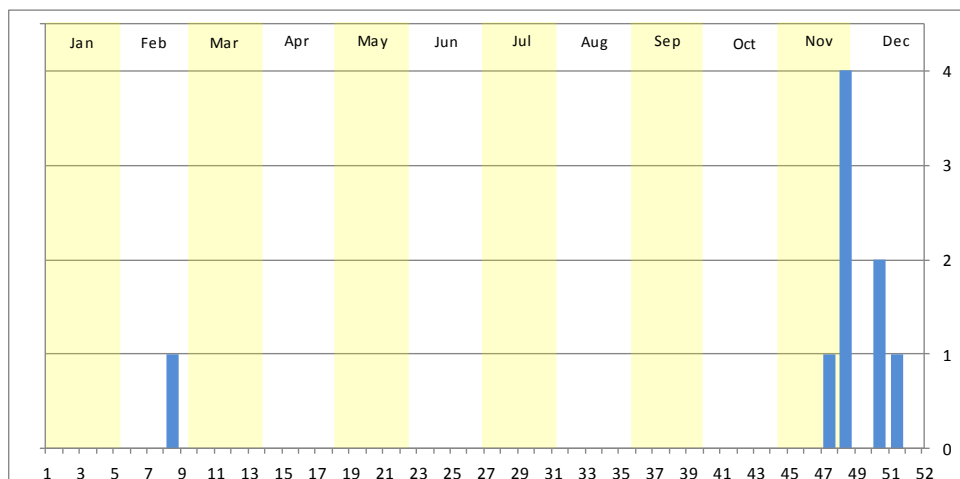


Figure 2: Caspian Gull records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Figure 3 shows the distribution of records to date. Six have been found in the Folkestone Harbour area, with the other at Hythe.

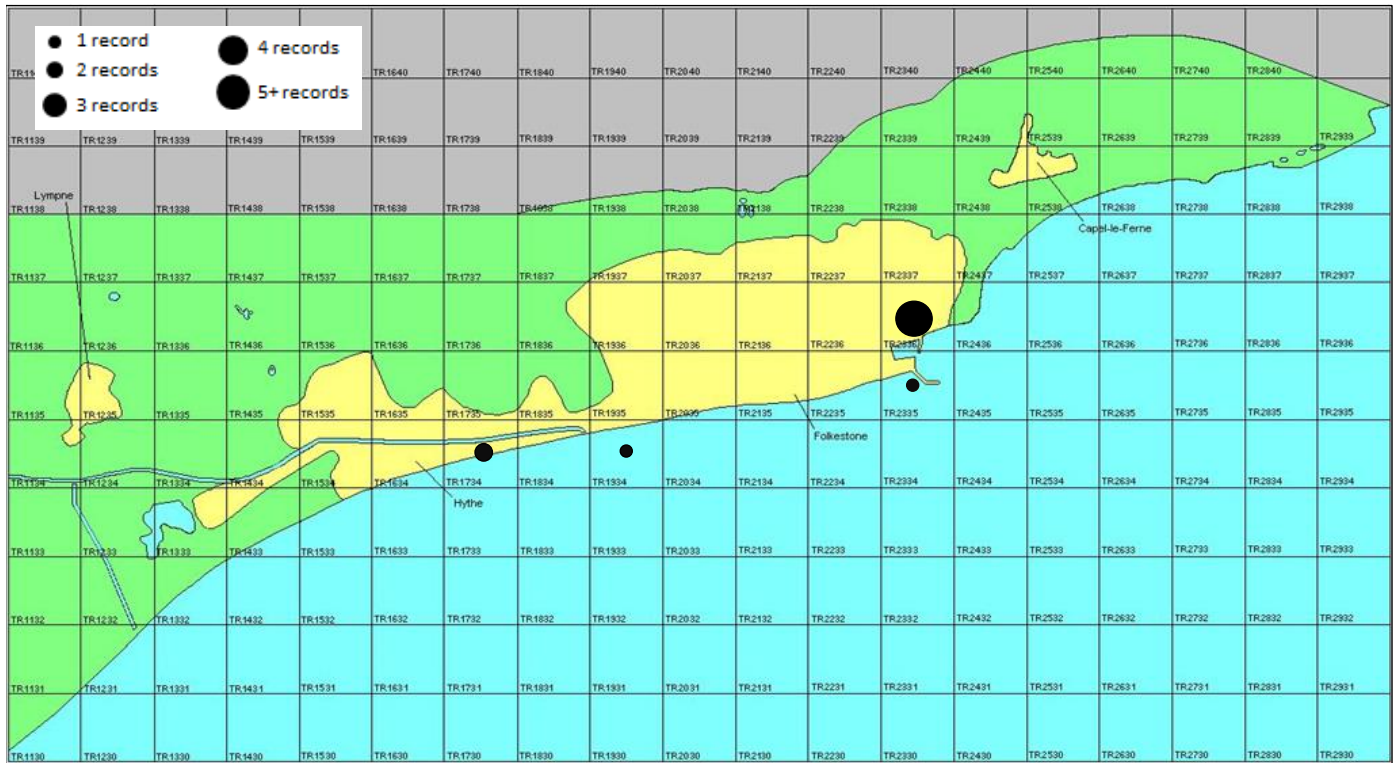


Figure 4: Occurrence of Caspian Gull at Folkestone and Hythe by 1km square

The distribution of winter records recorded in the BTO/KOS Atlas (2007 – 2012) is shown in figure 4.

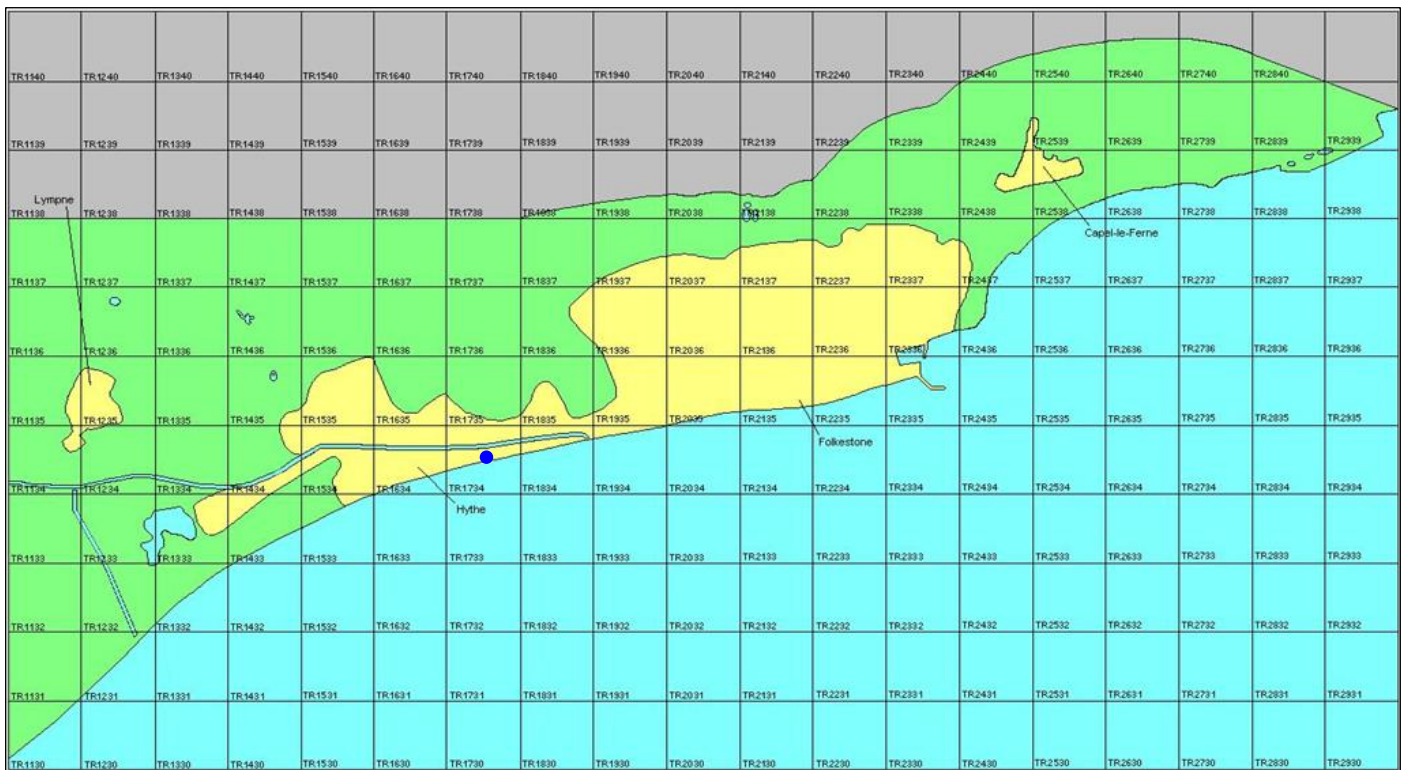


Figure4: Wintering distribution of Caspian Gull at Folkestone and Hythe (2007 – 2012 BTO/KOS Atlas)

The full list of records is as follows:

- 2006** Folkestone Harbour, first-winter, 19th February, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
2006 Folkestone Sands, adult, 24th November (I. A. Roberts)
2006 Folkestone Harbour, first-winter, 11th to 13th December, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
2011 Hythe Beach, first-winter, 14th December, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
2012 Folkestone Harbour, adult, probably female, 27th November, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
2014 Folkestone Harbour, first-winter, 1st December, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
2015 Hythe Imperial golf course, sub-adult, 30th November, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
2016 Sandgate, second-winter, 26th November, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
2016 Folkestone Harbour, first-winter, 19th December, photographed, video-recorded (I. A. Roberts)



First-winter Caspian Gull at Hythe (Ian Roberts)

An account of the first area record is given below:

Caspian Gull at Folkestone Harbour

19th February 2006

(Ian A Roberts)

Circumstances of the find:

At c.09:50 on 19th February I arrived at Folkestone Harbour, having already checked through the gulls at Sandgate and Mill Point. The tide was quite low and there were a good number of gulls roosting in the harbour. Due to overcast skies there was no glare from the sun, and viewing conditions were ideal.

I set up a scope and scanned through the flock. A very pale-headed bird became obvious fairly quickly, and I focused my attention on it. It was a long-billed, long-necked, slender bird, with a protruding breast and flat belly angled behind the legs. The legs were long, thin, and pale pink. The head and underparts were white except for streaking on the hind-neck, breast sides, and a little on the flanks. The dark lesser coverts formed a distinct contrast with the white underparts, the median and especially the greater coverts were plain brown with pale tips (apart from some new feathers), and the mantle had bars and diamond-shaped spots.

The tertials formed a dark block with pale tips (although worn) and the primaries looked long. So structurally and plumage-wise it appeared very good for Caspian Gull, and over the next 30 minutes or so I took detailed notes and some record shots.

Description of the bird:

Structure: The forehead was long and sloping, accentuating the long bill. The gull looked long-necked, slender, and long-winged, with a protruding breast and flat belly angled behind the legs.

Bill: The bill was long and thin, with the basal half parallel-sided, leading to a gently drooping tip: the upper mandible was gently decurved, and the lower mandible appeared to curve upwards slightly before curving down to the tip. There appeared to be some paleness on the upper and lower mandibles before a dark terminal band, although the cutting edges of both mandibles were dark throughout. There was a hint of a pale tip to the bill. The bill was a very distinctive feature, and quite unlike any that I have seen on a Herring.

Legs: Long, thin and pale pink, with more exposed tibia than Herring.

Head and underparts: The head was white with a little dark before the eye, and the white eyelids were noticeable. The underparts were plain and white, apart from some streaking on the hind-neck, breast-sides and a little on the flanks. There was a little mottling behind the legs, but the under-tail coverts looked pale.

Upperparts: The mantle was grey with bars and diamond-shaped spots. The lesser coverts were dark and formed a distinct contrast with the white underparts. There were some new feathers in the outer median and greater coverts, with the older feathers plain and brown, with paler tips especially on greater coverts. The tertials formed a dark block with pale tips (although worn) and the primaries were dark. The upper-part pattern matched closely the illustration in 'Gulls' (Olsen & Larsson, plate 42, p. 310, bird no.3).

Comments on the record:

Recent works, e.g. Olsen & Larsson, elevated Caspian Gull to full species status, and this treatment was adopted by the taxonomic sub-committee of British Ornithologist's Union Records Committee in 2007.



First-winter Caspian Gull at Folkestone Harbour (Ian Roberts)



Adult Caspian Gull at Folkestone Harbour (Ian Roberts)