

European Bee-eater

Merops apiaster

Category A

Very rare vagrant

12 records

Breeds mostly in Mediterranean and Central Europe, winters almost entirely in Africa in two distinct segments in west Africa and Senegal to Ghana and eastern and southern Africa mainly south of the equator and Congo basin forests. Its stronghold is the Iberian peninsula with 33,000 - 40,000 pairs, although there are at least 10,000 pairs in each of Russia, Ukraine, Romania and Turkey. In France there are an estimated 3,500 - 5,000 pairs, with a few pairs recently breeding as far north as Ambleteuse - about 5 miles south of Cap Gris-Nez.

It is of annual occurrence in Britain, and was removed from BBRC description list in the 1990s. There are Kent records in most years, with 79 recorded up to 2009, and it appears to be increasing in numbers, with 70% of records occurring in the last two decades. It is predominately a spring rarity, with May and June contributing 73% of sightings. Around 20% of Kent records have related to sightings of multiple birds, including flocks of 10 and c.12.

The first European Bee-eater to be recorded in the Folkestone and Hythe area was in 1999 and there have been a further eleven records, as demonstrated by figure 1. This increasing frequency of appearance is in line with the county trend.



European Bee-eaters near the Willop Basin (Paul Apps)

The first year to produce more than one record was 2004 and the same year saw the first multiple sighting, with a flock of five birds. 2013 was the third year that has produced two sightings and one of these involved the largest flock recorded to date (equalling the second largest flock recorded in the county).

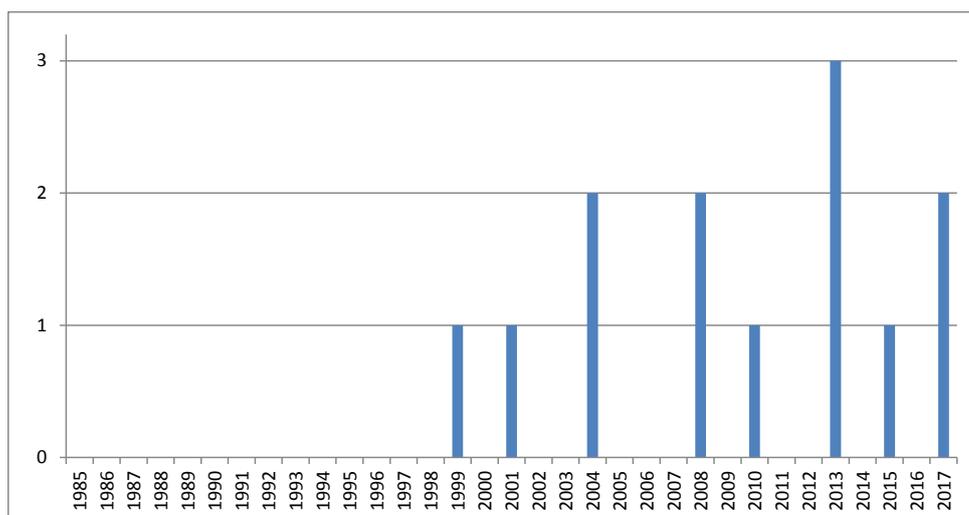


Figure 1: European Bee-eater records at Folkestone and Hythe

All records to date have occurred in spring, between 14th May (week 20) and 26th June (week 26), with a distinct peak in week 20 (between the 14th to 18th May), as demonstrated by figure 2.

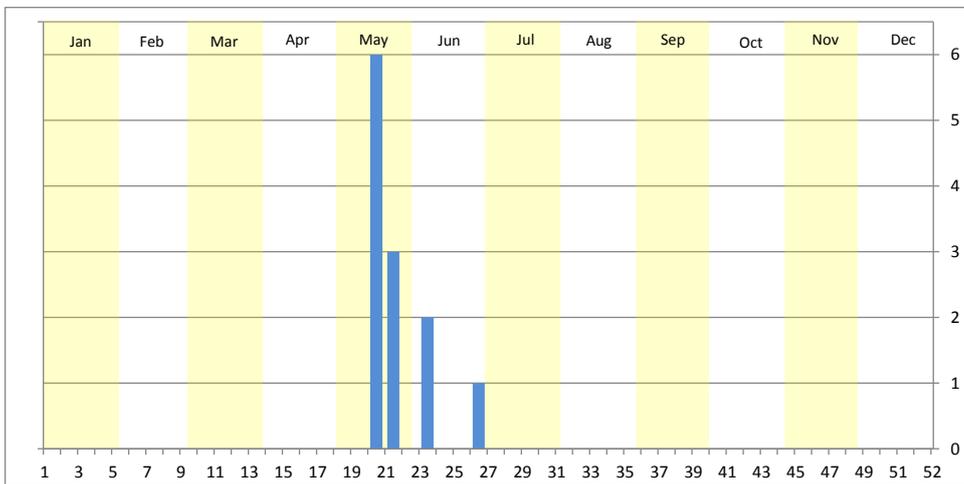


Figure 2: European Bee-eater records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

The majority of records are from the cliffs, between Capel-le-Ferne and Samphire Hoe, as demonstrated by figure 3, apart from one slightly inland at Church Hougham and the most recent records at Hythe, Newingreen, Nickoll's Quarry, Saltwood and the Willop Basin.

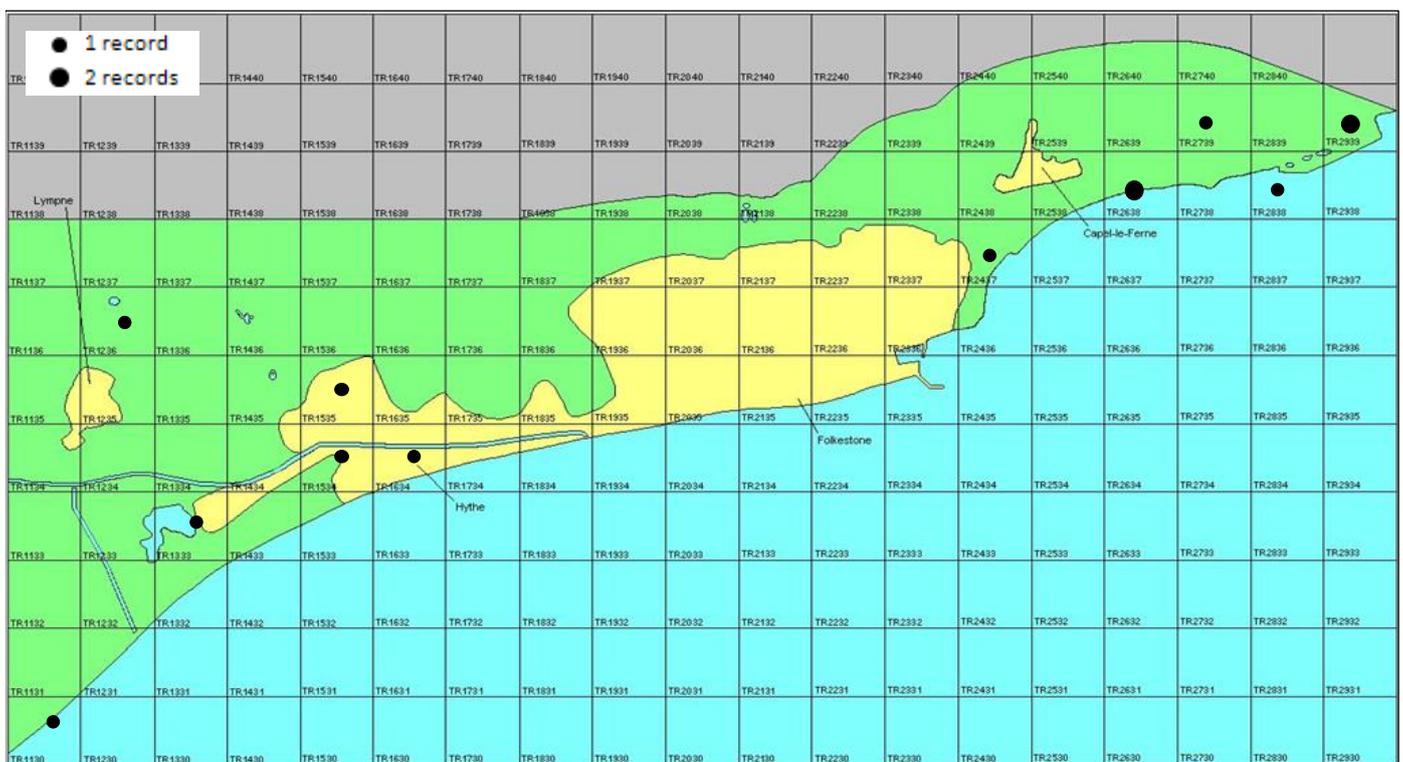


Figure 3: Occurrence of European Bee-eater at Folkestone and Hythe by 1km square

The full list of records is as follows:

- 1999** Abbotscliffe, one flew west, 16th May (D. A. Gibson, I. A. Roberts, J. A. Gibson)
- 2001** Capel-le-Ferne Gun Site, one, 25th May (I. A. Roberts, D. A. Gibson *et al*)
- 2004** Samphire Hoe, five flew east, 16th May (C. S. Johnson). This flock had originally been seen at Dungeness, and were later tracked over St. Margaret's, Bockhill, and Kingsdown, to Sandwich Bay
- 2004** Abbotscliffe, one flew east, 18th May (I. A. Roberts)
- 2008** Church Hougham, one, 14th May (M. Kennett)
- 2008** Samphire Hoe, one, 3rd June (P. Holt)
- 2010** Samphire Hoe, two flew west, 8th June (P. Holt, D. E. Smith)
- 2013** Saltwood, ten, then flew east, 14th May (G. Cooke)
- 2013** Hythe, one, 24th May (S. McMinn)
- 2013** Nickoll's Quarry, one flew north-west, 24th May (I. A. Roberts), presumed same as above

2015 Newingreen, one on wires, 26th June (P. Coleman)

2017 Hythe, at least one heard calling, 14th May (I. A. Roberts)

2017 Near Willop Basin, six, then flew east, 26th May (P. Apps)

Almost all records relate to individuals flying over but the 2001 bird was flushed from a cliff-top bush before it spent some time perching on wires and lingered in total for almost an hour.



European Bee-eater near the Willop Basin (Paul Apps)

An account of the first area record is given below:

European Bee-eater at Abbotscliffe

16th May 1999

(Dale A Gibson, Jamie A Gibson, Ian A Roberts)

Weather conditions:

A dry day with a cool northeasterly wind (force 4-5), 3-7/8 cloud cover and good visibility.

Circumstances of the find:

At about 09:50 Dale, Jamie and I were at Abbotscliffe, and with the area done we had settled down to watch any visual migration, which up to then had involved just a trickle of Swallows and House Martins. Dale was sheltering from the cool northeasterly breeze just below the cliff-top, I was doing likewise behind my car and Jamie was catching up on some sleep in his, when I heard what sounded like a Bee-eater.

I didn't believe for a moment that it would be and was looking around for a Starling or something else giving an odd call when it called again, closer and clearer and very much like a Bee-eater. At this point Dale appeared from below the cliff-top looking very agitated and shouting something that involved the words "Bee-eater" and I bellowed something of a similar nature into Jamie's ear.

Mercifully all three of us were onto the bird quickly as it emerged from behind the cliff, really quite close (probably about 100 yards range) and with the sea as a backdrop to its stunning colours. We got scopes on it and had superb views as it slowly headed west and steadily gained height over Folkestone Warren, pausing in flight occasionally to hawk insects. We eventually lost it to view high and distant and beyond the Gun Site at Capel-le-Ferne.

Description of the bird:

Size, shape, jizz: unmistakable shape with a long, tapering body, long, broad, triangular wings and long extending tail streamers and very distinctive flight, undulating and gliding, with series of rapid, deep, elastic wing-beats.

Head and upperparts: the upperparts were colourful and fairly complex with yellow, russet-brown, blue and green areas, being difficult to describe accurately when only seen for a few minutes. It appeared that the crown, upper back and inner wings were russet-brown, with the scapulars and perhaps the lower back being a bright yellow. The outer parts of the wings and tail were blue or green, with a darker trailing edge to the wings.

Underparts: the underparts were simpler, with a bright yellow throat neatly separated from the blue underside by a black collar. The underwings were a peachy brown, with a broad dark trailing edge.

Bare parts: the bill and eye looked dark.

Call: a loud, liquid and very distinctive 'prrup'.

Comments on the record:

The record was accepted by the KOS rarities committee and appears in the Kent Bird Report for that year.