

Eider

Somateria mollissima

Category A

Passage migrant and winter visitor, formerly summered.

Breeds on coasts and islands in northern Europe, north-east Asia, northern North America, and Greenland (Snow & Perrins, 1998). Northern populations move south in winter but some southern populations are resident or partially dispersive. In Kent it is a declining winter visitor, passage migrant and non-breeding summer visitor, and very scarce inland (KOS, 2020).

Ticehurst (1909) stated that it had always been only a very rare occasional visitor to the estuaries and seacoast of Kent, and no more than seven or eight examples had ever been obtained.



Eider at Dymchurch Redoubt (Brian Harper)

The first local record was a drake seen by Miss A. V. Stone in January 1928 and was still only about the 12th occurrence in the county at the time. It was sufficiently noteworthy to merit inclusion in a note to *British Birds*: "It may be of interest to record my observation of an Eider on the 3rd January, 1928, off the coast of Kent, at Hythe. I had seen many Eiders, previously, off Bamburgh, Northumberland, and also a flock off the S.W. coast of Scotland, when watching with the Duchess of Bedford, on one occasion. Consequently, the moment that I observed a duck with much white plumage, and with the long, dark, narrow face-marking which gives an expression all its own to the Eider, I felt sure of its identity. I confirmed it by noting the exact area of the white on the cheeks, neck and upper back; the dark wing, cut by a conspicuous band of white; dark tail; and (when it raised itself in the water to shake) the dark lower breast" (Stone, 1928).

The same observer also noted the second local record, in 1937, which again appeared in *British Birds*: "On 20th January, and again on 2nd February, 1937, I saw a female Common Eider on the sea off Hythe. On both days it swam in close to one of the breakwaters and appeared to be pecking off and eating the barnacles that encrust it" (Stone, 1937).

Harrison (1953) recorded an increase in the county during the 1940s and further local records followed in the 1950s. On the 13th January 1951 Roger Norman noted one offshore from Hythe Ranges and an immature male at Nickolls Quarry (which is still the only record away from the coast). Taylor *et al* (1981) stated that it had been reported regularly in Kent since 1952, all the year round, with records reaching a peak in 1958-69. In 1958 Roger Norman recorded four off Hythe Ranges on the 4th August 1958, whilst in the 1960s David Musson saw two at Hythe on the 24th March 1961 and 17 flying east past Folkestone on the 6th April 1961.

It was thereafter noted on a more frequent basis, with counts including 19 off Hythe during cold weather on the 28th February 1963, 10 off Folkestone from the 25th July to the 10th August 1966 (the first summer record) and 15 off Sandgate in April 1972.

Summering flocks were fairly frequently noted between 1980 and 2003, and counts included 34 off Copt Point in June 1983 and off Mill Point June 1993, 30 off Copt Point in July 1996, 28 off Hythe Ranges in July and August 1998 and 28 there in July 1999. A flock of ten were present off Copt Point in June and July 2003 but there have been summer records in only three years since (2006, 2014 and 2107), with a peak count of three off the Willop Outfall on the 23rd to 24th August 2014.

In the years when summering birds are not present the first autumn records do not occur until October, or more typically November, and it has not been of annual occurrence recently, with records in 80% of the autumn periods (October/November) since 2000. Double figure counts in the season have involved 30 flying west past Mill Point on the 29th October 1989, 14 west past Copt Point on the 2nd November 1998, 10 east there on the 17th November 2001 and 10 east past Samphire Hoe 19th October 2005.

Small numbers were regular in winter until 2003, with double figure counts in just four winters (excluding the early record cited above), and a maximum of 17 off the Dymchurch Redoubt on the 4th January 1998. It has become more erratic in occurrence since, with records in 65% of winters since 2000, and almost all records refer to one or two birds, although four were present off Battery Point/Sandgate between the 19th December 2009 and 1st February 2010 and four flew east past Samphire Hoe on the 1st December 2017.



Eiders at Sandgate (Ian Roberts)

A light spring passage is noted in most years, typically between mid-March and mid-May. The peak passage year was 1992 when a total of 147 were logged, including the two highest day counts of 70 east past Copt Point on the 2nd April and 50 east there on the 22nd April. Other notable counts have included 43 east past Copt Point on the 23rd April 1995, 34 east past there on the 17th March 2002 and 38 east past Mill Point on the 16th April 2004. As with the summering and wintering numbers, spring passage has also involved fewer since about 2003. The only double figure count in the last decade was of 12 flying east past Mill Point on the 29th March 2014 and the annual mean total was around 8.

Non-breeding distribution

Figure 1 shows the distribution of all records of Eider by tetrad, with records in 12 tetrads (39%).

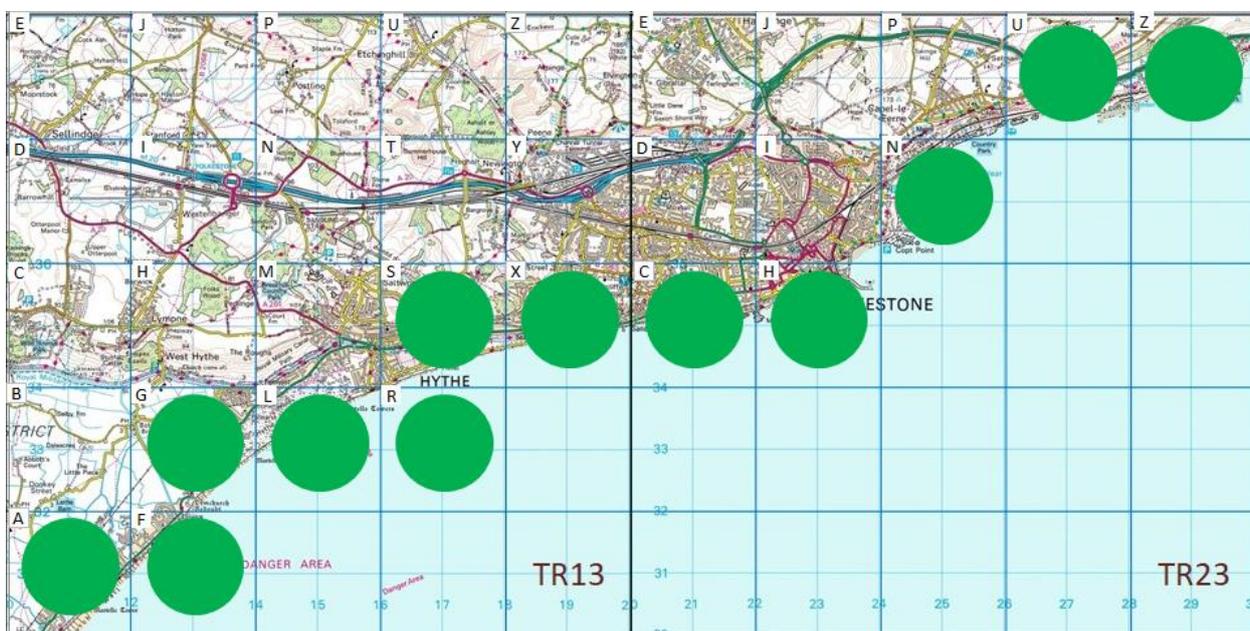


Figure 1: Distribution of all Eider records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

There have been records from all coastal tetrads. The only (slightly) inland record, as mentioned above, involved one at Nickolls Quarry in January 1951.



Eider at the Dymchurch Redoubt (Brian Harper)



Eider at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)



Eiders at Mill Point (Ian Roberts)

References

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Acknowledgements

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