

# Red-breasted Merganser

*Mergus serrator*

Category A

Winter visitor and passage migrant.

Breeds across northern Europe, Asia and North America. Movements of British breeders are not fully known, but are thought to winter around the coast not far from the breeding areas. Those breeding in Finland, Poland, Baltic States, north-west Russia, and some from areas to the south, migrate to winter in the Baltic and further west to the Netherlands and Britain (Snow & Perrins, 1998).

The species 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 mile radius from Folkestone town hall. Whilst this range extends further inland than the current Folkestone and Hythe area, it is almost certain that the record would have been from the coast and so within the modern boundary.



Red-breasted Merganser at Seabrook (Brian Harper)

Harrison (1953) considered it to be "prevalent off the whole of the Kentish coast from late October up to about the first ten days of April" and cited one local record in particular: "some idea of the winter prevalence of this bird off east Kent is given by the information sent to me by Mr. E. D. Elcombe (*in litt.*), who counted 158 inshore off Sandgate on the 29<sup>th</sup> February 1940, adding that he lost count after that, but believed that there must have been over two hundred of them in one flock, with other smaller flocks nearby. On 1<sup>st</sup> March the numbers had diminished to 35 there".

Taylor *et al* (1981) considered this record to be "exceptional" and were able to provide no comparable count in their review period (1952-76), although numbers did reach 180 in the Thames in the 1950s. The authors provided evidence of a 56% decrease in the population wintering in the three main estuaries in the north of the county. Balmer *et al* (2013) reported a 28% contraction in breeding range since the 1968-72 atlas and also mentioned that a long-term decline in wintering population had been documented through the BTO Wetland Bird Surveys.

There were few local reports between the 1950s and 1970s which was probably a reflection of limited coverage, however Roger Norman saw two drakes at Nickolls Quarry on the 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1958 and there were five on the Royal Military Canal at Hythe between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> February 1978, whilst Dave Weaver saw a pair at Nickolls Quarry on the 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1979 and two 'redheads' there on the 10<sup>th</sup> March 1979. Records away from the coast continue to be unusual today.

There have records in all but one year since 1981 and it has proved to a regular, though uncommon, winter visitor and passage migrant. The first autumn migrants typically occur in October and the few earlier records are worthy of note. In 1981 one lingered off Copt Point between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> July, whilst in 1987 one remained offshore from Abbotscliffe between the 24<sup>th</sup> July and 3<sup>rd</sup> August. Five flew west past Copt Point on the 26<sup>th</sup> August 2003, one flew west there on the 30<sup>th</sup> August 1997, a pair flew west past Mill Point on the 1<sup>st</sup> September 1988 and one flew east past Copt Point on the 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2002.

October and November records are frequent and double-figure counts have been noted on several occasions:

- 16 west past Copt Point on the 10<sup>th</sup> November 1996
- 16 west past Copt Point on the 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1998
- 12 west past Copt Point on the 6<sup>th</sup> November 2000
- 10 west past Mill Point on the 8<sup>th</sup> November 2010
- 15 east past Samphire Hoe on the 6<sup>th</sup> November 2011 (when 14 were also seen off the Willop Outfall)
- 13 west past Samphire Hoe on the 11<sup>th</sup> November 2013

Autumn records have been exclusively coastal. Winter sightings occur in most years, with never more than five recorded (apart from the record cited by Harrison), and inland records are scarce, with up to three (a drake and two ducks) that frequented Nickolls Quarry between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> February 1996 being of particular note.



Red-breasted Merganser on the sea off Battery Point (Brian Harper)

Spring passage can occur between early March and late May, with a mean total over the last 20 years of 37. The peak year during this period was 2005, producing a total of 77 birds, and the peak counts were as follows:

- 23 east past Mill Point on the 24<sup>th</sup> April 1991
- 17 east past Abbotscliffe on the 7<sup>th</sup> April 1992
- 22 east past Folkestone on the 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1995
- 14 east past Mill Point on the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2004
- 26 east past Mill Point on the 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2004
- 18 east past Mill Point on the 20<sup>th</sup> March 05
- 17 east past Samphire Hoe on the 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2005
- 14 east past Folkestone Pier and Samphire Hoe on the 9<sup>th</sup> Apr 2013
- 14 east past Mill Point on the 4<sup>th</sup> April 2014

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



Figure 1: Distribution of all Red-breasted Merganser records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

## References

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Red-breasted Merganser at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)

## Acknowledgements

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Red-breasted Merganser on the Royal Military Canal at Seabrook (Brian Harper)