

# Alpine Swift

*Tachymarptis melba*

Category A

Very rare vagrant.

12 records

A widespread breeder across southern Europe north to the Alps and patchily eastwards to central Asia, south to India, also in eastern and southern Africa. West Palearctic populations probably winter all across the northern tropics of Africa (Snow & Perrins, 1998).

It is a scarce migrant to Britain, mainly in spring, with most records on the east and south coasts and with a recent average of 15 per annum. There had been a total of 766 British records to the end of 2018, with just over 10% (79) in Kent (BBRC, 2020, White & Kehoe, 2019, KOS, 2019). It was removed from the list of species which BBRC assessed as national rarities at the end of 2005.



Alpine Swift at Folkestone (Ian Roberts)

Harrison (1953) recounts the first area and sixth county record, which was a most remarkable occurrence: on the 16<sup>th</sup> May 1916 at Hythe “three were seen fluttering against windows during the day by Miss Barclay, and six found in Mr Hake's room in the same house that night”. These are treated as different flocks in the national statistics, which record a total of nine birds. Further details are provided below within the account of the first area record.

The first modern (or category A) record occurred 72 years to the day when Ian Roberts saw one at Mill Point, Folkestone in 1988. This was quickly followed by another record at the same site the following year. After a short gap there was a series of seven records in five years from 1992, five of which were at Capel-le-Ferne. Since then however there have only two further records. Both the Mill Point and Capel-le-Ferne records hint at the possibility of birds returning in consecutive years. Figure 1 shows the modern Folkestone and Hythe records by year.

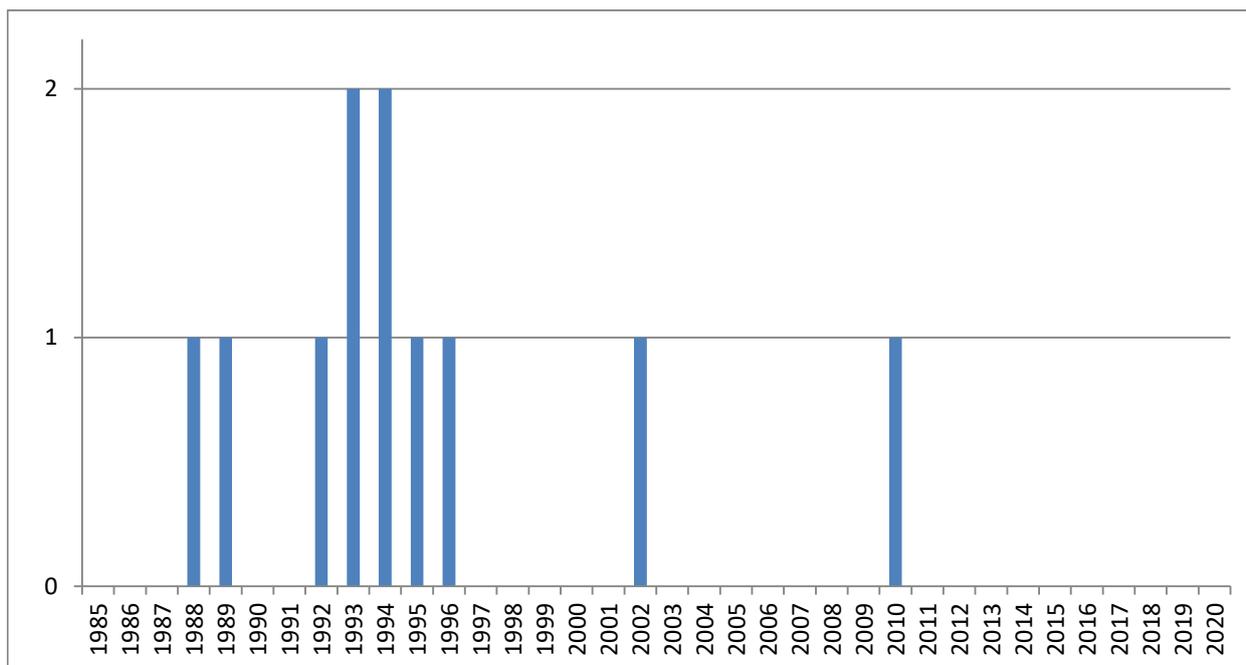


Figure 1: Alpine Swift records at Folkestone and Hythe since 1985

All but one record to date has occurred in spring or early summer, with eight occurring between 5<sup>th</sup> April (week 14) and 22<sup>nd</sup> May (week 21) and a further three between 29<sup>th</sup> June (week 26) and 12<sup>th</sup> July (week 28). The peak period for occurrence is 16<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> May (weeks 20/21), with four. The sole autumn record was on 20<sup>th</sup> September (week 38). Figure 2 shows all the Folkestone and Hythe records by week.

Most records involve birds seen on a single day, but three lingered overnight, and one of these stayed for three days, and was seen roosting underneath the eaves of a building in The Durlocks, Folkestone.

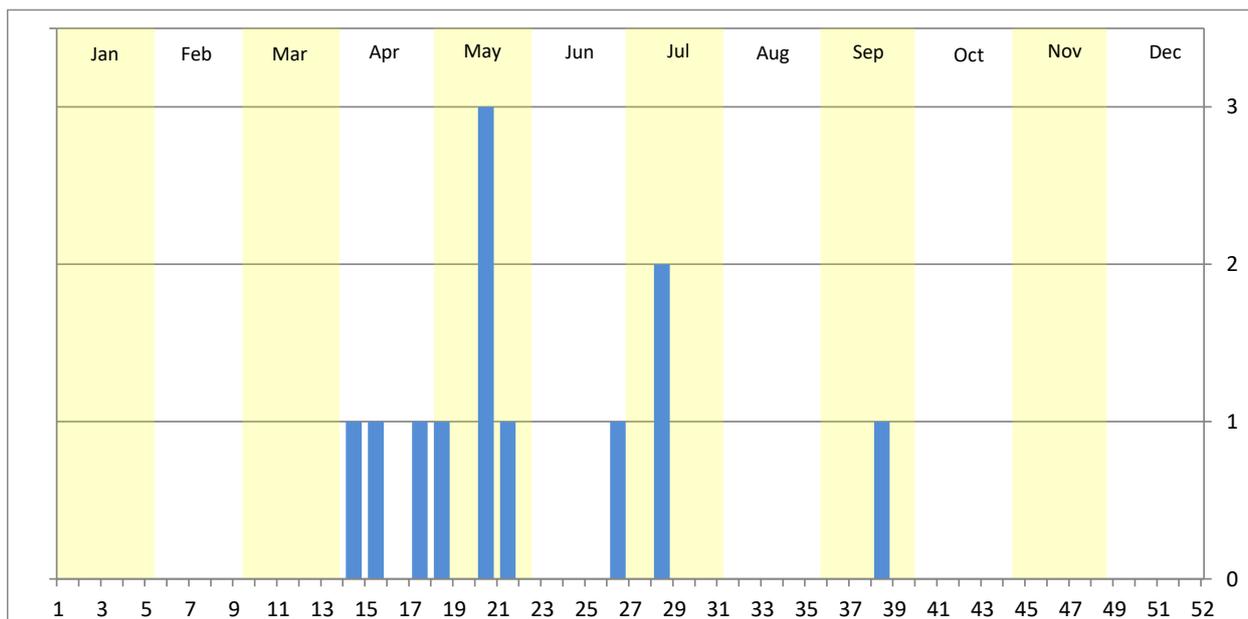


Figure 2: Alpine Swift records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Figure 3 shows the distribution of records by tetrad.



Figure 3: Distribution of all Alpine Swift records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

All modern records have been either been in the Cheriton/Folkestone area or at Capel-le-Ferne. The historic record lacks sufficient detail to be mapped to the tetrad level but the occurrence at “a lofty house overlooking the town and Channel” was presuming in TR13 M or TR13 S, perhaps on one of the roads on the escarpment above Hythe.

The full list of records is as follows:

- 1916** Hythe, nine, 16<sup>th</sup> May (M. Barclay, O. B. Hake)
- 1988** Mill Point, 16<sup>th</sup> May (I. A. Roberts)
- 1989** Mill Point, 22<sup>nd</sup> May (I. A. Roberts)
- 1992** Capel-le-Ferne Café and Abbotscliffe, 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> May (I. A. Roberts, J. P. Siddle), earlier seen at Dungeness and later seen at Dover
- 1993** Capel-le-Ferne Café, one flew east, 29<sup>th</sup> June (D. A. Gibson)

- 1993 Cheriton, one flew west, 20<sup>th</sup> September (D. A. Gibson)  
 1994 Capel-le-Ferne, 23<sup>rd</sup> April (D. A. Gibson)  
 1994 Capel-le-Ferne, 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> May, photographed (D. A. Gibson, B. Cox, J. A. Flynn)  
 1995 Capel-le-Ferne Gun Site, 10<sup>th</sup> July (D. A. Gibson, I. A. Roberts)  
 1996 East Cliff Gardens, Folkestone, 12<sup>th</sup> July (D. Featherbe)  
 2002 Capel-le-Ferne Café, one flew east, 10<sup>th</sup> April (I. A. Roberts)  
 2010 The Durlocks, Folkestone, 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> April, photographed (M. Kennett, I. A. Roberts *et al*)

An account of the first area record is given below:

**9 Alpine Swifts at Hythe**  
**16<sup>th</sup> May 1916**

(M. Barclay, O. B. Hake), per H. M. Wallis (1926)

132                      BRITISH BIRDS.                      [VOL. XIX.]

ALPINE SWIFTS IN KENT.

WHEN in Norfolk recently I came upon the record of an incursion of Alpine Swifts (*Apus m. melba*) during May, 1916. Miss Margaret Barclay, of Hanworth Hall, Norfolk (eldest daughter of Col. H. A. Barclay, himself an ornithologist, and herself, of recent years, a keen watcher of birds), was during the war nursing at Hythe and lodged in a lofty house, the end of a row, overlooking the town and Channel. Among other lodgers was a Mr. O. B. Hake.

One evening in May, 1916, Miss Barclay on reaching her room heard a sound of scraping and fluttering against the glass of her open window, and found three very large brown Swifts with white undersides flattened against the lowest pane of glass. She gave them their liberty, noticing their "hugeness," their white undersides, how bulky they seemed in the hand, and when they flew their wide spread of wing.

Her fellow-lodger, Mr. Hake, found six of the same sort of bird in his room the same night. At my request the lady has written to Mr. Hake, who endorses her story, adding very little except that he remembers their size and brown backs and white underparts. He is not an ornithologist.

I may say that in the hall at Hanworth is a well-stuffed Alpine Swift (history unknown).

Miss Barclay was unaware of the value of her record at the time, nor knew that there was such a bird, having taken no especial notice of birds until after the war.

On her return home from nursing she recognised that the birds which had invaded her room at Hythe (Kent) were exactly like her father's Alpine Swift, having been *brown* above, not sooty, and *white* beneath. Also that their size, bulk and spread of wing exceeded any Swifts she had seen then, or since.

H. M. WALLIS.

The record was recently reviewed by Phil Chantler (1990) following his research into records at Kingsdown in the previous year (1915) which led to their rejection. The Hythe record however stood up to scrutiny and remains acceptable. Phil commented that:

"In *Birds of Kent* (1953), Harrison considered the Hythe record and the Kingsdown records as 'remarkable in that they refer to the species in numbers'. He could equally have considered them remarkable for the behaviour exhibited in both cases. The Kingsdown birds settled in a stubble field, whilst the Hythe birds entered a building and landed against the windows. In the former case, the highly improbable behaviour deems the record unacceptable; in the latter case, the remarkable but entirely plausible behaviour deems the record worthy of great interest and closer scrutiny.

The Hythe record was sent to British Birds not by the finders of the Alpine Swifts but by H. M. Wallis. Wallis made efforts to authenticate Margaret Barclay's story, explaining that 'at my request the lady has written to Mr. Hake, who endorses her story, adding very little except that he remembers their size and brown backs and white underparts'. Wallis, our man on the ground at the time, was certainly willing to accept it after his investigation.

So, does the behaviour described call out for reassessment? Alpine Swifts may not be as dependent on human habitation as Common *A. apus*, Pallid *A. pallidus* or Little Swifts *A. affinis*, but they certainly can show close association with human habitation. In Croatia, in 2002, I watched Alpine Swifts sitting (indeed mating) alongside windows, and others entering eaves and gaps in walls in a busy street. During cold weather, Alpine Swifts will cluster on suitable structures, including those made by humans. Liley & Watson (*British Birds* 90: 148) recorded such a gathering in the city of Fès, Morocco. One of two Alpine Swifts at Reculver, Kent, in 1993, tried to enter a tower, hitting the window. One last example that shows that the behaviour observed by Barclay and Hake is not unprecedented among swifts comes, fittingly, from east Kent. It is related to us in the charming *British Birds in their Haunts* by Rev. C. A. Johns (1909), quoting Mr. F. Smith (*Zoologist* 1856, p. 5249). On a 'disagreeably cold' 8th July 1856, at Deal, Common Swifts arrived en masse; 'they flew unsteadily, fluttered against the walls of the houses, and some even flew into open windows'.

Different standards were applied before the days of BBRC and many 'old' records do not stand up well to close scrutiny. We must, however, be careful to wield the knife only in cases where there is overwhelming doubt. In this case, we have adequate descriptions, corroboration and plausible behaviour".



Alpine Swift roosting at Folkestone (Ian Roberts)



Alpine Swift at Folkestone (Ian Roberts)

An account of the first modern area record is given below:

**Alpine Swift at Mill Point  
16<sup>th</sup> May 1988**

(Ian A Roberts)

**Weather conditions:**

Light north-easterly wind (force 2-4), dry with about 50% cloud cover.

**Circumstances of the find:**

I had only adopted Mill Point as my local patch eleven days earlier (finding a Hoopoe on my first visit!) and was visiting whenever I could to add new species to the list. On the 16<sup>th</sup> May I paid an evening visit, arriving at around 19:00, but the first hour and a half was fairly quiet apart from a few Common Swifts coming in off and a trickle of terns going east.

Then, at just before 20:30, I picked up a large swift, almost falcon-like in appearance, out in the bay towards Sandgate. It was clearly an Alpine Swift (a species which I had seen very well at Broadstairs only 6 weeks ago), having brown upperparts, a white belly, dark breast and undertail coverts, and an indistinct pale throat.

It was in view for about 20 minutes before it was lost to sight over the cliff top with two Common Swifts. There seems a fair chance that it roosted locally but it could not be located the following morning.

#### **Description of the bird:**

Size, shape, jizz: A large swift, with an almost falcon-like appearance. Typical swift shape, with long wings and a notched tail. Wing-beats were slower than those of Common Swift and the bird clearly larger in direct comparison.

Head and upperparts: Brown upperparts.

Underparts: White belly. Dark breast and undertail coverts. Quite indistinct pale throat. Brown flanks merging into belly.

#### **Comments on the record:**

The record was accepted by the British Birds Rarities Committee and appears in their annual rarity report for 1988 (p. 30). There had been 31 previous records in Kent and 399 nationally.

#### **References**

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#### **Acknowledgements**

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Alpine Swift at Folkestone (Brian Harper)