

Night Heron

Nycticorax nycticorax

Category A

Very rare vagrant

3 records

Night Herons are present on five continents, but within Europe are concentrated in warmer temperate zones with the largest numbers breeding in France (c.4,300 pairs), Italy (c.17,000 pairs) and Hungary (c.4,400 pairs), and further east into Russia (c.12,500 pairs) and the former Soviet states.

The species is migratory and dispersive. In July/August juveniles disperse in all directions, mostly north and west of colonies. This dispersal merges into autumn migration which in Europe lasts through September and October, with some lingering into December in North Africa. The overwhelming majority of European birds winter in tropical Africa (Snow & Perrins, 1998).



Night Heron at West Hythe (Brian Harper)

There had been 612 British records to the end of 2001 when it was removed from the list of species which the committee considered (BBRC, 2020) due to the increasing frequency with which it was occurring. There had been a steady increase from 2.2 per year in the 1950s, to 3.3 in the 1960s, 6.1 in the 1970s, 14 in the 1980s and 18 in the 1990s, including a remarkable influx of 61 in 1990 (the mean excluding the influx was 14). The annual average since has remained fairly stable with 12 in the 2000s and 14 in the 2010s (to 2017, White & Kehoe, 2019).

There was a similar increase in Kent, with only 6 records before 1960, then 5 in the 1960s, 6 in the 1970s, 10 in the 1980s and 13 in the 1990s, but there were only 4 in the 2000s and 9 since 2010 (KOS, 2020).

Three of the most recent ten county records have occurred in the Folkestone and Hythe area. These records by year are shown in figure 1.

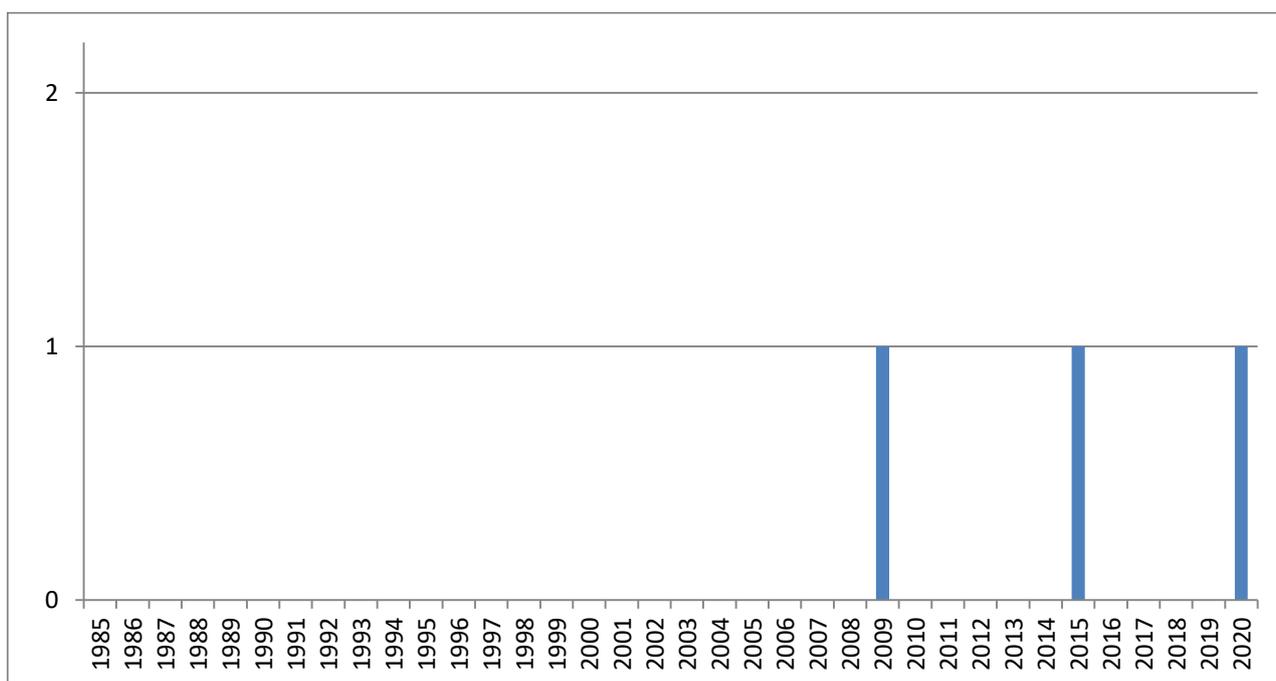


Figure 1: Night Heron records at Folkestone and Hythe

Whilst there have only been three area records two were rather mobile and were noted in multiple tetrads.

Two of the area records have occurred in the winter period which is relatively unusual. The arrival dates of Kent records are shown in figure 4 (excluding one in 1890 with an arrival date of 'winter'), with the local records highlighted in red. There have been seven arrivals between October and January however this includes four of the most recent 16.

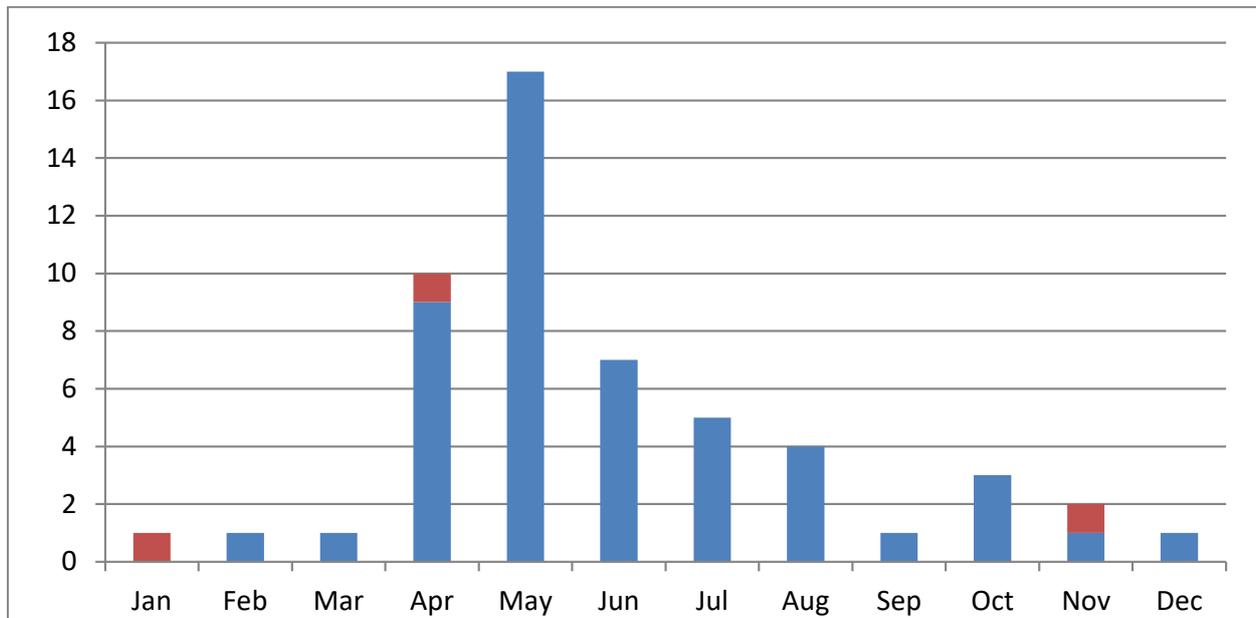


Figure 4: Night Heron records in Kent by month (with Folkestone and Hythe records highlighted)

The 2015 bird at Nickolls Quarry might have been previously seen in Essex in late December 2014, and later seen in Sussex in late January 2015.

The full list of records is as follows:

2008 West Hythe, adult, 22nd November to 24th January 2009, photographed (I. A. Roberts *et al*)

2015 Nickolls Quarry, juvenile, early January to 23rd January, photographed (I. A. Roberts *et al*)

2020 Princes Parade, adult, 3rd to 4th June, photographed (M. Whybrow, I. A. Roberts, B. Harper *et al*)

An account of the first area record is given below.

Night Heron at West Hythe

22nd November 2008 to 24th January 2009

(Ian A Roberts *et al*)

Circumstances of the find:

On the evening of Saturday 22nd November 2008 I received a call informing me that an adult Night Heron had been reported at West Hythe that afternoon. Precisely 4 weeks earlier I had received a call from the same person about a Green Heron at exactly the same site, identified by the same angler, and this too was just after it had got dark. Needless to say there was a real sense of *déjà vu*!

I was on site (again) before light and a small heron became visible as dawn broke. As the gloom slowly lifted it eventually became possible to be sure it was a Night Heron. A couple of other observers arrived shortly after this and we enjoyed good views over the next hour or two. The bird was mobile and quite wary, at one point flying c.2 miles to the south, but eventually returning. The bird remained in this area for most of the day, though continued to be mobile and readily flushing, however most observers finally caught up with it, including the locals Dale Gibson and Brian Harper (Brian even managing to get some photos – see below). A passing dog-walker informed us that the bird had been present the previous morning, and this appears to be the first report of it.

I went on holiday for a week that evening, so did not look for it again in that time, and received no reports from anyone else while I was away, so when I returned I assumed it had moved on. However on the 9th December Neil Frampton saw it (there seems a very strong likelihood that it was the same bird) again at the dam. It was then seen regularly in this area into 2009, though at times it ranged quite widely to the west and the south.

The last report of the bird was of it flying off to the south when flushed on the 24th January. It had done this before and returned, but this time it was not seen again.

Description of the bird:

Size, shape, jizz: A small, stocky compact heron.

Head and upperparts: Black cap and mantle. White supercilia over the eye meeting across the bill. Grey wings and tail.

Underparts: White.

Bare parts: Bill greyish-horn upper, paler lower mandible. Red eye. Yellowish-orange legs.

Age/sex: Adult.

Origin:

Whenever a bird is found at an unusual time of year, in fairly unfavourable weather conditions and proceeds to stay a relatively long time, there is bound to be discussions about its origin, especially when the species is known in captivity. An objective summary of the facts are presented below:

Behaviour: birds of a captive origin are generally thought to be less wary than wild individuals, however this is not categorically true as some wild birds can be closely approached, and some captive birds remain difficult to get near. This bird was quite wary when it first arrived: on the 23rd November it would not allow close approach and I managed to flush the bird twice despite not getting that near to it.

When flushed it would fly a reasonable distance before landing, at one point being lost to view in the distance, though it did later return. In the afternoon of the same day it was reported as wary and mobile by those trying to catch up with it. It was certainly not as confiding as the definitely wild Green Heron which frequented the same stretch of canal a month earlier. However it did seem to become more used to people during its stay and it let me approach much closer in January than it had originally.

Condition of bird: signs of captivity can include excessive feather wear, abnormal moult and damage to feet. When the bird was re-found and more widely seen in December there was some discussion about the fairly heavy feather wear on the primaries of both wings. Apparently the European race at least should complete a post-nuptial moult in August-October, so would be expected to appear reasonable fresh in November. Some primary tips were broken and the extent of the wear can be seen in the photos below.

However when I and others saw it in November no one mentioned feather wear, which is strange as the thought of captive origin was on my mind as I was careful to check for rings – my notes say un-ringed and wary, but no mention of if it had feather wear or not. This makes me think that the feather wear could not have been as obvious, if indeed it was present, and perhaps the bird was becoming worn during its stay, not unusual for a bird that spends a lot of time in reeds. When I saw it on 1st January (for the first time since November) I was struck by how muddy and bedraggled it looked, though when I saw later in the month it looked cleaner though still worn of course.



Night Heron at West Hythe (Mike Gould)



Night Heron at West Hythe (Brian Harper)

Things were not looking good for it in mid-December when Ray O'Reilly stated that when he had seen the bird in November it appeared to be missing a toe. However that had not been noted by others and when Dylan Wrathall saw it well through a 'scope on 28th December he was "unable to see any evidence of damage to the nails on either foot".

The toes are visible in the flight shots above and when perched below (Photos - Brian Harper)



A couple of observers commented that it was immobile at times, “spending long periods hunched up with its eyes half closed” and that it could perhaps be ill, though others saw it catching plenty of fish and it successfully survived the severe frosts in early January.

There were certainly no signs of a ring, either above or below the knee.

Captive populations: there are no captive birds kept by the adjacent Port Lymyne zoo park other than Ostrich. The nearest captive birds are at Wildwood, near Herne Bay, where a couple of colour-ringed adult birds are kept in an enclosed area with Little Egrets, Spoonbill and various wildfowl.

The famous Edinburgh zoo collection has a few free-flying birds (much reduced from the 35 present in 1998) and Great Witchingham in Norfolk apparently has 5-10 birds, but neither population is particularly close to Hythe (Edinburgh being almost equidistant to the Camargue).

Race: probably prompted by it turning up at the same site as the Green Heron (and the occurrence of a presumed Great Egret with the Humber-side Green Heron) there was some discussion about the bird perhaps being of the American race, *hoactli*. This form has been predicted as a potential vagrant, and has been mooted in the UK on several occasions - based on the timing and location of records and the prevalent weather conditions (e.g. Scilly in October 1985, Mere Sands (Lancs) in Feb 2008), as well as 2 historic claims in Ayrshire, pre-1880, though it is not on the British list yet. It appears from current knowledge that this subspecies is not safely separated in the field, at least outside of the breeding season, and that biometrics are the safest means of identification. Some authors suggest that some adults can be identified to form by the facial pattern but the BBRC have recommended that any formal submission of this race should contain biometrics.

If it was of the European race (*nycticorax*) it could possibly have arrived from further east in the species range, perhaps with the notable arrival of eastern vagrants into Britain in early November 2008. Or of course it could have just been come from one of the more usual parts of their range.

Changing distributions: at the current time a number of species are occurring at times of the year which they didn't in the past. A good example are some other 'southern' herons, the egrets - just a few years ago winter records in Britain Cattle Egret were very few, but now there appears to be winter influxes of the species. Going back not much further in time Little Egret was scarce at all times of year, though with a spring bias, but is now resident. Great White Egrets also appear to have been increasing, having recently been dropped from the species which are considered by BBRC, and now also regularly occur in the winter months.

There was another mid-winter record of Night Heron in 2008/09, with one seen on the Isles of Scilly on 15th January 2009. Might there be further winter records to come?

Conclusion: As there does not appear to be strong case for it being an escape it is best treated as a wild bird.

Comments on the record:

The view on likely origin was shared by the KOS committee who accepted the record and it appears in the Kent Bird Report for 2008 (KOS).

References

BBRC statistics: <https://www.bbrc.org.uk/main-information/statistics> (accessed 2020)

Kent Bird Report, 2008. Kent Ornithological Society

KOS Kent list: <https://kentos.org.uk/kent-list/> (accessed 2020)

Snow, D. & Perrins, C.M., 1998. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Oxford University Press.

White, S. & Kehoe, C., 2019. Report on scarce migrant birds in Britain in 2017. *British Birds*: 112: 444-468.



Night Heron at Nickolls Quarry (Ian Roberts)

Acknowledgements

The tetrad map images were produced from the Ordnance Survey [Get-a-map service](#) and are reproduced with kind permission of [Ordnance Survey](#).