

White-tailed Eagle

Haliaeetus albicilla

Category A, C3

Very rare vagrant

4 records

Breeds along the Atlantic coast of Norway and around the Baltic coast of Sweden, Finland and Germany. Most adult pairs are resident but juveniles and immatures wander extensively in winter, mainly south to south-west, with some regular wintering areas in north-eastern France and the Netherlands. Following an earlier decline, recent increases have been reported from northern Europe (Snow & Perrins, 1998). At the same time a reintroduction programme has had considerable success in northern and western Scotland, increasing to over 100 breeding pairs in 2017 (Holling *et al*).



White-tailed Eagle at Hythe (Ian Roberts)

A subsequent reintroduction programme began on the Isle of Wight (where the species last bred in 1780) in August 2019 (Dennis, 2020a).

It was a scarce winter visitor to Kent in the nineteenth century, when Ticehurst (1909) was able to locate records of about 30 birds and Harrison (1953) added a further two (in 1920 and 1932). There were no further records in the county until an immature bird was seen flying west over Shorncliffe Road in Folkestone by Hugh Coleman on the 15th November and was then located on the Isle of Sheppey the next day, and remained in the North Kent area over the winter before it was sadly found dead having been poisoned.

After singles at St. Margaret's Bay in October 1990 and Graveney Marshes in October 1998, an immature was found in a field by the railway crossing over Botolph's Bridge road by Philip Sharp on the afternoon of the 14th February 2012 before it flew west. It was relocated on Walland Marsh two days later, where it was photographed, then it made a reappearance in the local area on the 19th February: after first being seen heading south over Hawkinge it was later watched flying south-west over Saltwood by Paul Howe.

The next county record was again found locally, when an immature was seen on the cliff face at Abbotscliffe by Joseph Bove on the early afternoon of the 14th January 2018 before it took flight and was not seen subsequently.

After another at St. Margaret's Bay in March 2019, there was an exceptional influx into Kent in 2020. After a winter report of one at Oare Marshes on the 15th February, there were five records in spring from the 25th March, when one flew over Sandwich Bay. On the 30th March an immature bird was first noted over Littlestone before heading northwards along the coast and seen (and photographed) passing over Hythe by Ian Roberts in the mid-afternoon of the 30th March, being seen at Sandwich Bay the following day.

Another was seen flying over Littlestone again on the 1st April but this time did not follow the coast, instead headed inland and is known from satellite-tracking data to have roosted overnight at Elhampark Wood, near Stelling Minnis. The next day it flew south-east to the coast and spent an hour on the shore between Samphire Hoe and Dover but is not thought to have entered local airspace. It was later seen at various sites in east Kent and eventually made its way westwards and then southwest, returning to the Isle of Wight on the 4th April (Dennis, 2020b). Two were then seen over Deal on the 3rd April and one flew over Thanet on the 15th April.

Only one of these birds was from the Isle of Wight reintroduction programme (all are fitted with satellite transmitters), the others were thought to be of continental origin, with unusually high numbers also being noted in northern France.

The species was formerly considered by the British Birds Rarity Committee but was removed from their list in 1998 when it became impossible to distinguish between birds from the continent and from the Scottish reintroduction programme (BBRC, 2020). The origin of birds recorded locally is difficult to determine, although the first record predated the reintroduction programme and the most recent was thought to have wandered from the near continent. The status has been shown as category A and C to allow for this uncertainty..

Confirmation of the four area records are provided in figure 1. With three records in the last nine years, further records seem to be a distinct possibility, particularly if the reintroduction on the Isle of Wight is successful, however these birds would be excluded from the statistics until such time as the population is considered to be self-sustaining.

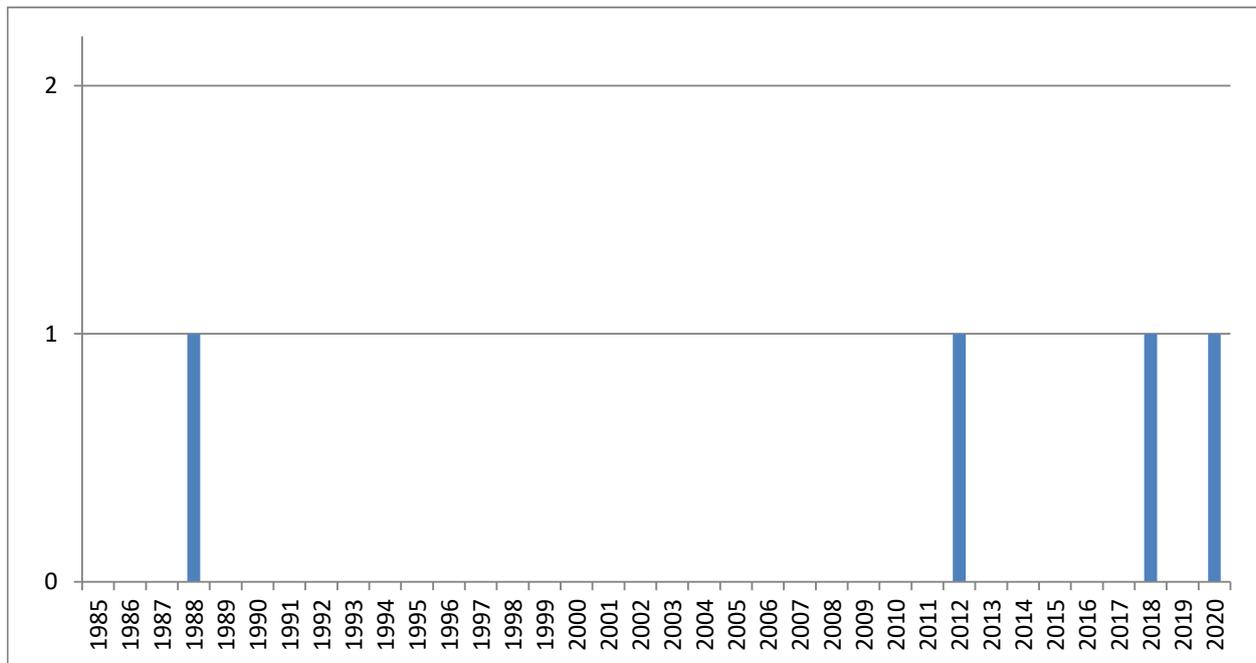


Figure 1: White-tailed Eagle records at Folkestone and Hythe

The records by week are given in figure 2.

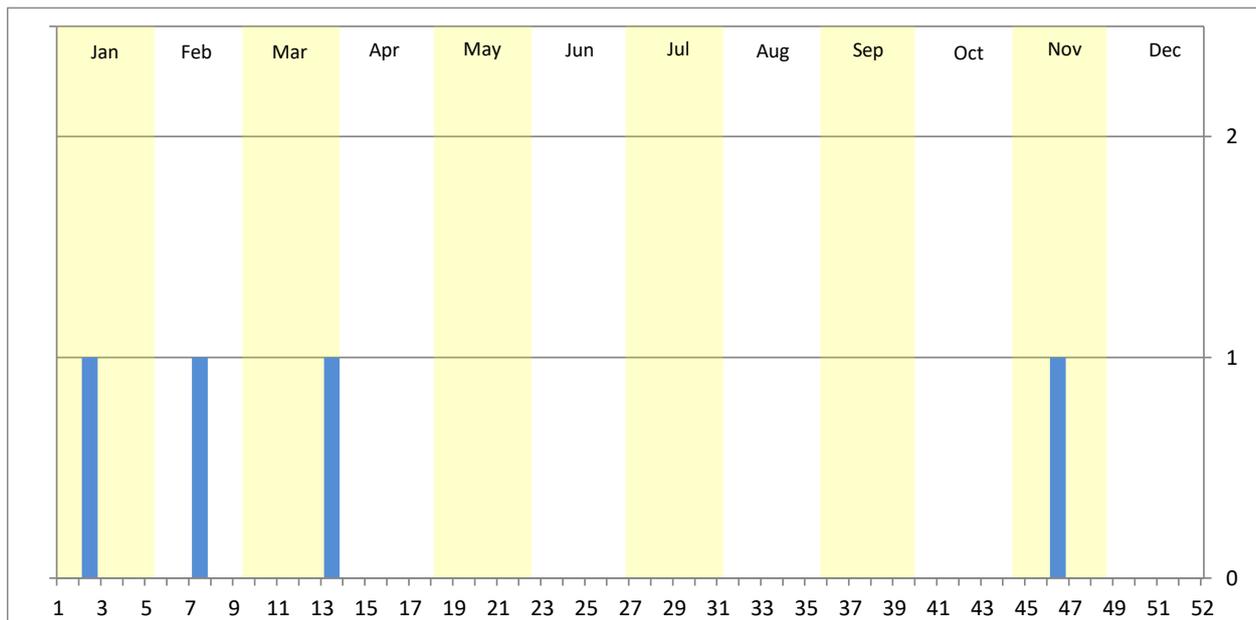


Figure 2: White-tailed Eagle records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

There has been one late autumn record (in November), two winter records (in January and February) and a spring migrant (in late March).

Figure 3 shows the distribution of records by tetrad. The 2012 individual was found in TR13 G but also seen to fly into TR13 B.



Figure 3: Distribution of all White-tailed Eagle records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad



White-tailed Eagle at Walland Marsh (Martin Casemore), having earlier been seen at Botolph's Bridge

The full list of records is as follows:

- 1988** Folkestone, immature flew west, 15th November (H. Coleman)
- 2012** Botolph's Bridge, immature seen in field before flying west, 14th February (P. Sharp), presumed same flew south-west over Saltwood, 19th February (P. Howe)
- 2018** Abbotscliffe, immature, 14th January (J. Bowe)
- 2020** Hythe, immature flew north, 30th March (I. A. Roberts)

References

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

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Acknowledgements

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White-tailed Eagle and Buzzard at Hythe (Ian Roberts)