

# Storm Petrel

*Hydrobates pelagicus*

Category A

Very rare vagrant

8 records

Breeds on islands and coasts around the western Atlantic coast, with much smaller numbers in the Mediterranean. In Britain restricted to western coasts, and essentially absent from the English Channel and North Sea. After breeding disperses out to sea, with most migrating south to winter off Africa. A rare visitor to Kent with 80 records up to 2005, before there was an unprecedented westerly passage through the English Channel, following a severe storm, in May 2006. Apart from this influx spring and summer records are very rare, with the vast majority having occurred between late September and early January.

The species was included in Knight and Tolputt's "List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood" published in the Folkestone Natural History Society's annual report for 1871. This list covered an area of six mile radius of Folkestone town hall. Whilst this range extends further inland than the current Folkestone and Hythe area, it is very likely that the record would have been from the coast, and so would most probably have been within the modern boundary. Ticehurst in his *A History of the Birds of Kent* (1909) stated that "Folkestone Museum has on taken in the vicinity of the town", but the exact date is not known and might well relate to the same occurrence.

The first modern record relates to one found at Folkestone on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1987, with another seen off Copt Point in October 2000, a remarkable series of sightings in 2006, and one in 2013 as demonstrated by figure 1.

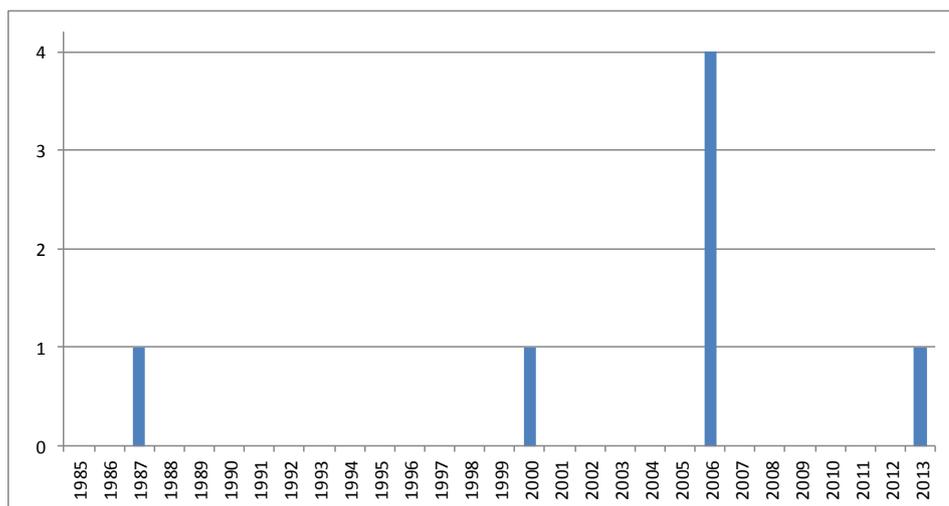


Figure 1: Storm Petrel records since 1985 at Folkestone and Hythe

The records by week are given in figure 2, which shows the single January and two October records, together with the influx in mid to late May 2006 (weeks 20 and 21). The first area record mentioned by Harrison is undated.

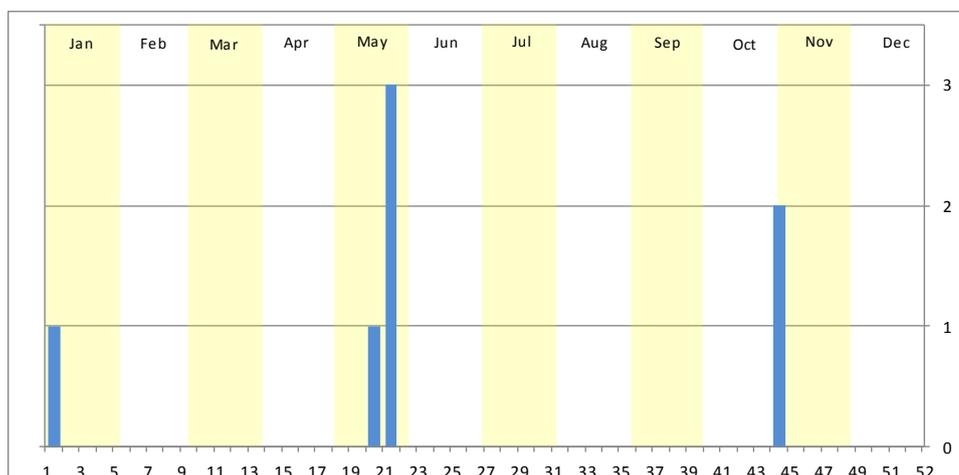


Figure 2: Storm Petrel records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

The first two area records are just given as “Folkestone” and all subsequent records have been from Copt Point, with the exception of one at Mill Point at the beginning of the 2006 influx and one seen from a boat four miles offshore.

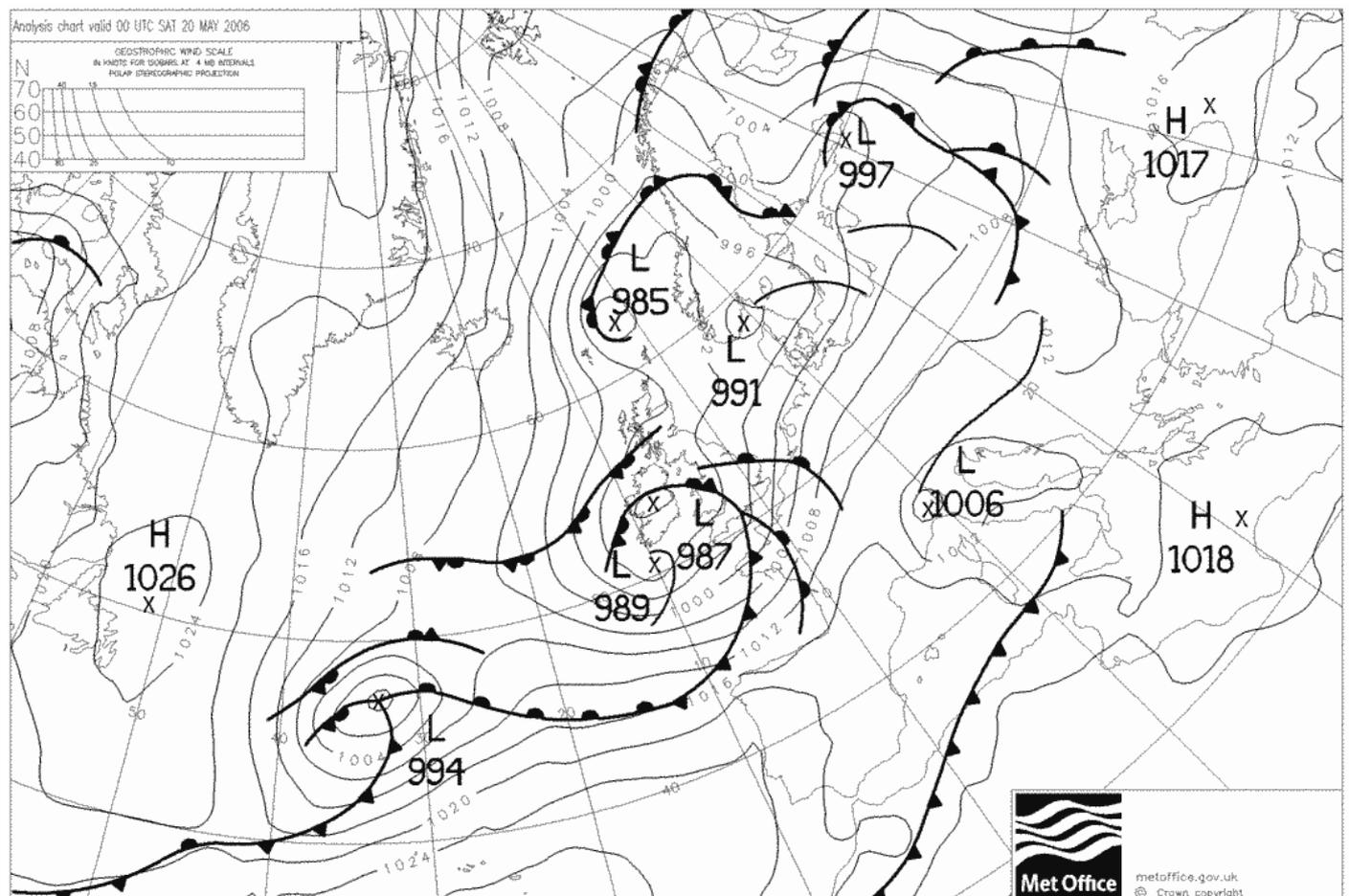
The full list of dated records is as follows:

- 1987 Folkestone, one, 1<sup>st</sup> January (per Kent Bird Report)
- 2000 Copt Point, one flew west, 31<sup>st</sup> October (D. A. Gibson, I. A. Roberts)
- 2006 Mill Point, one flew west, 20<sup>th</sup> May (I. A. Roberts)
- 2006 Copt Point, one flew west, 21<sup>st</sup> May (D. A. Gibson)
- 2006 Copt Point, one flew west, 22<sup>nd</sup> May (I. A. Roberts)
- 2006 Copt Point, 11 flew west, 24<sup>th</sup> May (I. A. Roberts, D. A. Gibson)
- 2013 Folkestone, one seen from RV Endeavour four miles south of Folkestone, 31<sup>st</sup> October (per Rare Bird Alert)

An account of the 2006 influx is given below:

### Storm Petrel influx at Folkestone and Hythe in May 2006 by Ian Roberts

In May 2006 a series of depressions carried many thousands of Storm Petrels from the Western Approaches and the Bay of Biscay into the English Channel. The chart below shows the position on the 20<sup>th</sup> May when the first individual was sighted.



#### Saturday, 20<sup>th</sup> May

Large numbers of Storm Petrels were being reported off various headlands to the west of Kent, notably Portland Bill. Though there had not yet been any sightings in Kent I was hopeful that the extreme weather conditions might produce one locally.

A morning seawatch off Copt Point was interesting, producing an Arctic Skua and four Manx Shearwaters, and the wind increased to WSW force 8 in the afternoon, accompanied by rain showers, so I was keen to give it another go. Personal circumstances meant that I only had about a one hour window in the afternoon so I headed to Mill Point, which is my nearest rather than my preferred seawatching point, in order to make best use of my limited time. Conditions really were challenging and the site offers little shelter so I began watching from the car window at around 16:20.

After only about ten minutes I picked up a petrel in the bay. It was not particularly close but I could see enough to be sure it was a Storm Petrel and it lingered for quite some time, being still present when I had to leave, though appeared to be drifting west. Later that day another was seen off Bockhill.

#### **Sunday, 21<sup>st</sup> May**

The wind backed to the SSE and Dale Gibson recorded one flying west off Copt Point at 12:00, whilst another two were seen at Bockhill and Dungeness recorded their first, though in the end amassed a total of 43 individuals.

#### **Monday, 22<sup>nd</sup> May**

Monday saw the wind veering to the S or SSW and I recorded another single bird passing Copt Point in the early morning, whilst at Dungeness a further 19 were logged.

#### **Tuesday, 23<sup>rd</sup> May**

With the wind dropping slightly the sea was not watched, however numbers at Dungeness increased to a staggering 80 birds.

#### **Wednesday, 24<sup>th</sup> May**

The wind remained in the SW but freshened and I recorded an unprecedented total of ten Storm Petrels passing west off Copt Point in the 90 minutes from 06:40. Dale Gibson added another in the afternoon. All day coverage at Dungeness revealed an astonishing 133 moving west.

#### **Thursday, 25<sup>th</sup> May**

The wind remained in the west thereafter and numbers in Kent decreased, with no further records from Folkestone and Hythe. The last county records were on the 28<sup>th</sup>, after which the wind backed to the NW.

#### **Summary**

In total some 14 Storm Petrels were recorded at Folkestone and Hythe in May 2006, whilst the county total was around 459, with the vast majority (411) off Dungeness.