

Forster's Tern

Sterna forsteri

Category A

Very rare vagrant

1 record

Breeds in North America, with two discrete populations, one in the prairies of Canada and the USA which migrate extensively overland towards the Pacific and Gulf of Mexico, and the other along the eastern and southern USA seaboard from Maryland to Texas, with migratory birds following the coasts south. Winters in the southern USA (north to California and Virginia), through Mexico south to Guatemala.

There had been 20 previous records in Britain to the end of 2015, most recently in 2003, but only one had occurred in Kent, at Margate in October 1986.



Forster's Tern at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)

Birds have been found in Britain between August and May, but must have been located in late autumn or winter.

The only area record is as follows:

2016 Princes Parade, first-winter, 26th November, photographed and video-recorded (I. A. Roberts, B. Harper, P. Smith *et al*)

An account of the first area record is given below:

Forster's Tern at Princes Parade

26th November 2012

(I. A. Roberts, B. Harper, P. Smith *et al*)

Weather conditions:

Overcast but dry, with a fairly light easterly breeze.

Circumstances of the find:

At about 10:15 on the 26th November 2012 I was driving back from Sandgate, where I had been photographing a Caspian Gull and a Yellow-legged Gull on the beach, heading west along Princes Parade when I noticed a tern flying towards me along the beach. I assumed it was going to be a late Sandwich Tern but as it flew past it looked too small for that species so I began to think about the other possibilities - there had been an exceptionally late Common Tern at Ramsgate recently and of course a Forster's Tern in Essex.

After a hasty three-point turn I caught up with it again, drove on a little ahead and jumped out with camera at the ready. As it approached I could clearly see the distinctive 'bandit mask' characteristic of Forster's Tern! I was very relieved to be able to secure some record shots in case it quickly disappeared but fortunately it turned back towards Hythe and appeared to be feeding happily along the strand. I put the news out and kept the bird in view as I waited for people to arrive. A couple of times it strayed as far as Hythe and was nearly lost to view but thankfully it doubled back and then landed on the beach right in front of me, which is where it was when Brian Harper and Phil Smith arrived. They were the first of many who were able to enjoy excellent views of the bird as it spent the four hours or so feeding along the beach and roosting on the shingle. Some excellent photographs were obtained as were a couple of clips of video footage (which can be found under the 'Sound & video recordings' section of the website).

At around 14:30 it headed off eastwards towards Folkestone and there have been no further sightings to date.

Description of the bird:

Head: The bill was completely black and rather long. The head was mostly white apart from the obvious black 'bandit mask' and some faint streaking on the crown, particularly towards the rear.

Upperparts: The mantle was grey and the rump white. The upperwings were grey with darker primary tips, a faint dark carpal bar and some dark markings on the primary coverts. The underwings were white with darker primary tips. The tail was grey with darker tips to the outer tail feathers.

Underparts: The underpart were clean white. Legs red.

It is presumably the same bird as one seen in Essex between the 19th and the 20th November.



Forster's Tern at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)



Forster's Tern at Princes Parade (Martin Casemore)



Forster's Tern at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)



Forster's Tern at Princes Parade (Glenn Honey)



Forster's Tern at Princes Parade (Martin Collins)