

# Great White Pelican

*Pelecanus onocrotalus*

Category D

Possible vagrant

3 records

In Europe, breeding is confined to the Danube Delta in Romania and Ukraine, which holds around half of the entire Palearctic population. Small numbers breed in Greece and Turkey, in the Volga Delta and throughout central Asia. Northern breeders are migratory, with European population wintering south to eastern Africa. Asian populations winter in the Indus Delta, Pakistan and locally in north-west India. Other largely sedentary populations breed locally in eastern and southern Africa.

Category D covers species which would otherwise appear in Categories A or B except that there is reasonable doubt that they have ever occurred in a wild state. In the Netherlands, where there is no Category D or equivalent, the species features on the national list with 9 accepted records to the end of 2011.

A recent paper by Jiguet *et al* (Jiguet, F., Doxa, A., & Robert, A. 2008. *The origin of out-of-range pelicans in Europe: wild bird dispersal or zoo escapes?* [Ibis 150: 606-618](#)) gave support for vagrancy within Europe. It found that annual out-of-range numbers could be predicted by breeding colony size and breeding success in Greece, with a further effect of Sahel rainfall during the previous year. In northern and western Europe the occurrence of wild birds were to be expected in April to May (the dispersion of adult-type non-breeders in spring), and to a lesser extent in August to September (failed breeders in summer). Records from a number of countries, including France, matched this pattern.

The 16 records in category D as held by the British Birds Rarities Committee appear to fall into two distinct categories, with a couple in May and the rest between July and November. This correlates to some extent with the expected pattern of natural vagrancy but with a greater proportion, and a more protracted arrival, in the autumn. However in 2006 a bird seen initially in The Netherlands on the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 31<sup>st</sup> May (in line with the expected arrival date of an adult-type non-breeder) which was accepted as the ninth Dutch record, later moved to Germany on the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> July, then returned to The Netherlands from the 20<sup>th</sup> July to the 13<sup>th</sup> August before crossing the North Sea to Norfolk on the 16<sup>th</sup> August. It then wandered widely, as far west as Anglesey and as far north as Morayshire before ultimately being taken into care in Northumberland. If this were indeed a wild bird it would illustrate how arrival in Britain could be considerably later than its appearance in Western Europe, and also how mobile and long-staying an individual might be.

It should be noted however that ageing Great White Pelicans is difficult in the field, especially outside the breeding season, because 2- or 3-year-old immatures can look adult-like. Furthermore the 2006 record was the first to adequately exclude the possibility of the similar American White Pelican *P. erythrorhynchos*, which is held in captivity in Britain and could possibly escape. Observers should concentrate on the pattern of the primary coverts, bill colour and the amount of contrast in the wing.

The category D records exclude known escapes which bore colour-rings and may not include all potential vagrants as not all records are submitted. Indeed the BBRC only received one formal submission (from Morayshire) of the wide-ranging and long-staying 2006 individual.

In Kent Ticehurst (*A History of the Birds of Kent*, 1909) includes details of one present at Seasalter from July to October 1906, though he considered it to be an escape, and Harrison (*The Birds of Kent*, 1953) documented a pelican of "undetermined species" in the Sandwich district in March 1951. The more recent *The Birds of Kent* (1981) gave three further records: one at the Wicks on the 13<sup>th</sup> October 1971, which had been seen the previous week on Walland Marsh, two at Dungeness on the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> November 1972 and one at Fordwich between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> July 1975.

In 1996 one which had been seen at Rye in East Sussex on the 29<sup>th</sup> January 1996 was seen flying north-west over Folkestone the next day. It was then relocated at Nickoll's Quarry, where it was still present the following morning before it flew off and was later seen heading east over Cheriton. Presumably the same bird was seen at Felixstowe in Suffolk in early February. Another was reported at Hythe on the 10<sup>th</sup> October 1998.

In 2006 one was seen at Bough Beech from 30<sup>th</sup> July to 4<sup>th</sup> September, before what was presumably the same bird moved to Essex the following day, then on to Cambridgeshire mid-month and was last reported in Suffolk in late September. On 29<sup>th</sup> November 2006 it, or another, was seen flying over Park Farm, Folkestone.

Confirmation of the local area records is as follows:

**1996** Cheriton, Folkestone and Nickoll's Quarry, 30<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> January, (D. A. Gibson, R. K. Norman)

**1998** Hythe, one, 10<sup>th</sup> October (per Kent Bird Report)

**2006** Folkestone, one flew over, 9<sup>th</sup> November (J. A. Gibson)

It should be noted that the possibility of the similar American White Pelican was not necessarily excluded.