Sussex Bird Report 2023

Sussex Ornithological Society

Just a few were recorded from East Sussex in the remaining three months of the year, including 12 at Pett Level on 11 Oct and six there on the 16th, seven west past Fairlight on the 13th, and three past Rottingdean on the 29th, with single birds past Splash Point on 5 Nov, Normans' Bay on the 12th and at Pett Level on the 24th, the last of the year.

Small numbers were recorded from a variety of West Sussex sites in October, but after singles at Widewater (Lancing) on 1 Nov, Shoreham Hbr on the 4th and Elmer Rocks (Middleton-on-Sea) on the 13th, all the remaining records were from Pagham Hbr, Medmerry, Chichester Hbr and, primarily, Selsey Bill, where they were recorded almost daily until the year's end with the biggest count being 19 on 22 Dec. [A House]

Sandwich Tern and juvenile, Selsey, 30 April (Ads Bowley)

Little Tern *Sternula albifrons*

Scarce breeding summer visitor and fairly common passage migrant. Amber-listed species of medium conservation concern. Schedule 1 species.

The monthly totals at the principal seawatching sites were as follows:

	Apr		May		Jun		Jul		Aug		Sep		Sep		Oct	
	E	W	E	W	E	W	E	W	E	W	E	W	E	W	E	W
Selsey Bill	292	-	79	-	8	5	-	37	-	1	-	1	184	221	64	58
Worthing	31	-	9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	23	3	-
Splash Point (Seaford)	6	3	-	-	nc	nc	-	-	-	-	-	-	nc	nc	nc	nc
Birling Gap	3	-	-	-	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	1	2	-	-

Even allowing for some duplication, due to the presence of lingering birds offshore, there was a notable increase in birds seen flying east past Selsey Bill and at Worthing in the spring, but as can be seen above, it remains a very scarce species off the East Sussex headlands.

The first of the year were two at Rye Hbr on 17 Apr, with another passing Lancing on that day, 11 days later than the 10-year average. The first past Selsey Bill was not until the 19th, followed by a little influx there on the 22nd of 25 E, with one or two elsewhere indicating the start of more significant movement. The species was recorded daily thereafter.

A count of 41 in Pagham Hbr on 24 Apr was noteworthy, whilst at Selsey Bill 122 E on the 26th and 72 E on the 27th were by far the biggest movements during the spring, with 56 E there on 3 May the only other significant count.

The breeding season brought mixed fortunes. Sadly, the previously thriving colony in Pagham Hbr ended up with only 18 pairs settling and just one chick fledged, after the much larger Sandwich Tern and gull colonies were abandoned, leaving the Little Terns very exposed to predation. The one glimmer of optimism was the unexpected colonisation of the shingle banks at nearby Medmerry, where three pairs fledged four chicks. There was good news at Rye Hbr where the small colony of seven pairs fledged ten young.

Unsurprisingly, the Pagham Hbr colony had cleared out by early July, but at Rye Hbr birds were present throughout the month, with a peak of 15 on the 8th and the last two recorded on the 29th. Six presumably passing birds were seen there on 20 Aug, with the last of the year on the 25th.

There was a small eastward passage past Selsey Bill, with 12 offshore on 6 Jul the biggest count, while the traditional post-breeding gathering on Pilsey Island (Chichester Hbr) peaked at 44 on 24 Jul, with 19 still present on 4 Aug.

There were a few more than usual late into August, including 5 W past Church Norton on the 19th, 1 W past Selsey Bill the following day, five in Chichester Hbr on the 22nd, three there the following day, and the last two there on 10 Sep. The last of the year was 1 W past Selsey Bill on the late date of 25 Sep. [A House]

Little Tern, by Stephen Message

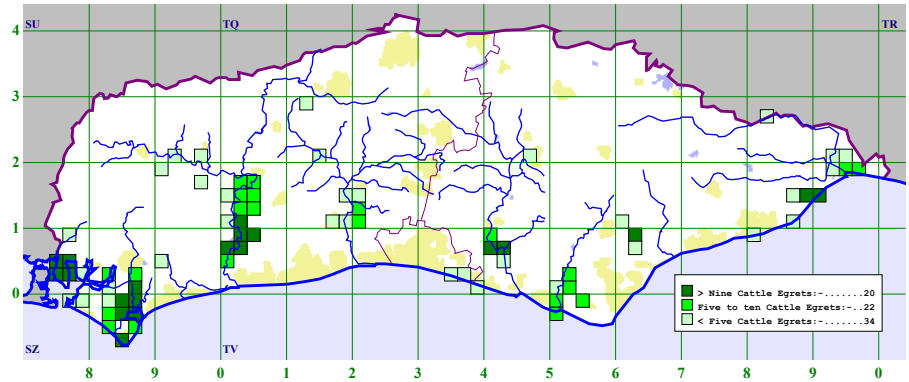
Night-heron, Pett Level, 18 April (Barry Yates)

Cattle Egret

Bubulcus ibis

Scarce resident; increasing visitor and bred for the first time in 2020. Amber-listed species of medium conservation concern.

Cattle Egrets were recorded from 76 tetrads (8%), an increase from 73 in 2022. The bulk of the records were still from the Selsey peninsula and the Arun Valley, but numbers are increasing in East Sussex as shown in the following distribution map.



Maximum monthly counts from key sites are shown in the following table.

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Chichester Hbr	4	7	2	1	2	10	12	11	15	6	11	1
Selsey peninsula	32	24	12	24	29	20	44	50	35	40	12	44
Arun Valley	15	16	18	8	2	6	10	7	19	35	62	48
Ouse Valley	-	-	1	2	1	-	-	-	-	16	20	-
Cuckmere Valley	2	-	-	-	-	1	-	6	5	-	3	-
Pevensey Levels	2	1	-	-	1	-	-	20	1	2	-	2
Rye Bay	1	-	1	1	3	2	3	3	7	7	20	8

In the first winter period mobile groups moved around fields on the Selsey peninsula, favouring Marsh Fm (Sidlesham) and Pagham Hbr, with a maximum of 32 at Hunston on 5 Jan. Groups of ten to 13 were seen regularly in the Arun Valley, with a maximum of 16 near Arundel on 1 Feb and 18 at Arundel WWT on 25 Mar. Elsewhere two were at Charleston Reedbed (Cuckmere Valley) on 8 Jan, one at the Knepp Estate on the 20th and one at Woods Mill (Henfield) on several dates in March.

Breeding was confirmed at Pagham Hbr with 29 occupied nests in the colony at Owl Copse, double the 14 in 2022, and there was one occupied nest in the newly discovered heronry at Chidmere Pond (Chidham). Nest building was observed at an East Sussex site and two adults with a juvenile were reported from Iford Brooks on 16 Sep.

After the breeding season, groups of 30 or more with some juveniles moved around the Selsey peninsula with 44 at Ferry Pool (Sidlesham) on 28 Jul and a maximum of 50 at Pagham Hbr on 26 Aug. In the Arun Valley up to four were seen regularly at both Pulborough Brooks and up to seven at Arundel WWT, with eight at Amberley Wild Brooks on 24 Jun and ten at Arundel on 23 Jul. Further east there were counts of one to six in the Cuckmere Valley, Pevensey Levels and the Rye Bay area with an exceptional 20 at Horse Eye Level (Pevensey Levels) on 14 Aug.

In autumn and the second winter period small groups and larger feeding flocks were seen regularly foraging with cattle on the Selsey peninsula, with a maximum of 40 in the fields at Marsh

Finders' Accounts of Notable Species

Little Swift, Eastbourne, 2 January 2023

David Thorns

Looking out of the window on the bank holiday morning of the second day of the new year I could see that it was bright, clear and sunny; blue skies with fluffy white clouds and visibly little wind. Wow, what a difference this was from the recent weeks of grey days, strong gusty winds and rain showers! I had to get outside and do some birding, but which of my usual two patches would it be? Perhaps West Rise Marsh (high water levels, bit of a slog, bootfuls of water), or would it be Beachy Head (lots of dog-walkers, knackering steep uphill slopes)? No, today felt like an easy stroll for once, so why not check out properly, for the first time, Eastbourne's Sovereign Harbour where I knew I might get a good duck, diver or grebe.

At about 11:15 I parked the car and began walking the seafront eastwards towards Langney Point with its Martello Tower visible a few hundred yards ahead. Remembering that this was to be "serious birding" I started to count the birds for a day-list: there was a Starling, there a Herring Gull, a few Feral Pigeons and, almost immediately and unbelievably, what was unmistakably a *Swift* of all things winnowing quickly over my head towards the harbour! My heart started to race and whilst lifting the binoculars I knew this had to be a major bird and, sure enough, there was the strikingly obvious rectangular white rump patch I was already half-expecting to find.

Now the panic set in - it was a Little Swift for goodness sake, it would *never* stick around, *nobody* else would ever see it! Now I'm naturally a grumpy so-and-so when it comes to social media….I would never get a Twitter account and I had only recently, finally, under pressure, given in to getting

Little Swift, Sovereign Harbour, 2 January (Adam Huttly)

The influx of Leach's Petrels and other seabirds in November 2023

Paul James

Introduction

The arrival of Storm Ciarán in early November 2023 produced a major influx of seabirds into the English Channel including unprecedented numbers of Leach's Petrels *Hydrobates leucorhous* along the Sussex coast. Storm Ciarán was an exceptionally severe storm for the time of year. Winds across northern France and the Channel Islands were comparable in severity with those recorded in southeast England during the 'Great Storm' of 16 October 1987. Very strong winds were also experienced along the South Coast with gusts of 60 to 70 knots (69 to 81mph) though the worst weather impacts occurred to the south across the English Channel. Storm Ciarán was also an exceptionally deep area of low pressure, a recording of 953.3hPa in Devon was the lowest November pressure on record. The meteorological chart for 06:00 hrs on 2 Nov (Fig. 1.) shows the low pressure centre for Storm Ciarán over the English Channel and tightly packed isobars along the South Coast indicating the strength of the winds at the time.

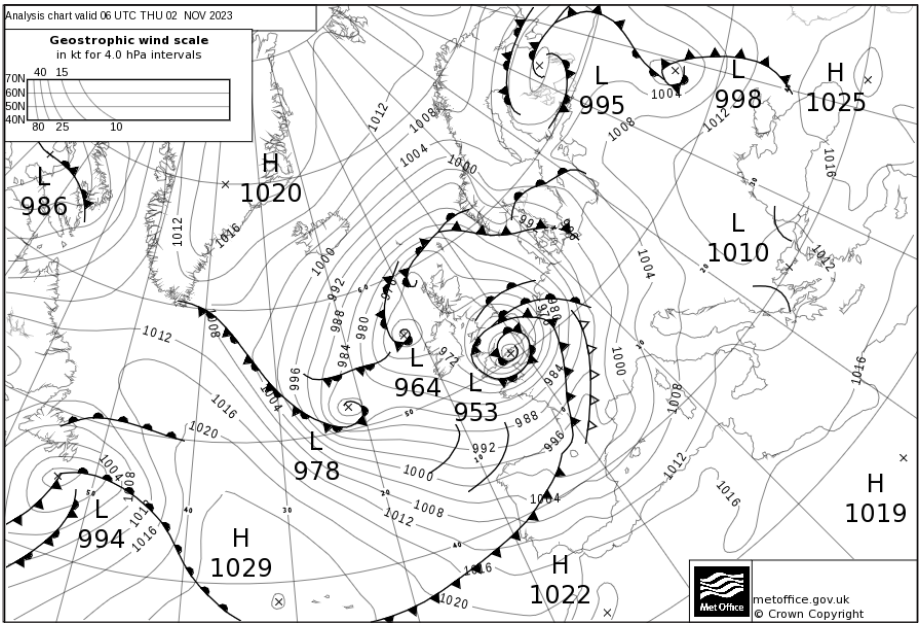


Figure 1. *Meteorological chart for 2 Nov 2023 (courtesy of the Met Office).*

As well as Leach's Petrel, other species also featured including Grey Phalarope *Phalaropus fulicarius,* Sabine's Gull *Xema sabini,* Little Gull *Hydrocoloeus minutus,* Great Skua *Stercorarius skua,* Arctic Skua *Stercorarius parasiticus,* Storm Petrel *Hydrobates pelagicus* and Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris borealis.*

The BTO/GWCT survey of breeding Woodcock in 2023: numbers and distribution in Sussex

Helen Crabtree

Introduction

In 2023 the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), funded by and in collaboration with the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT), conducted a national survey of breeding Woodcock Scolopax rusticola. The main aim of the survey at a national level was to measure the change in the breeding population since the previous population estimate was calculated from the results of a survey conducted in 2013 by the BTO and the GWCT (Heward *et al.* 2015).

The breeding distribution of Woodcock covers much of Britain and Ireland, but the nocturnal habits and cryptic nature of this species make it difficult to monitor the breeding population using traditional survey methods such as the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey (BBS). A special survey method was devised for a national survey in 2003 (Hoodless *et al.* 2009), using counts of the territorial roding flights undertaken by males at dusk and dawn to estimate the numbers of males present at individual sites (Hoodless *et al.* 2008). The 2013 survey and the current survey used the same method of counting territorial roding flights. This article presents the results of the BTO survey in Sussex in 2023 and these results are compared with those obtained from the 2013 survey in Sussex.

Survey methods

The sites surveyed were 1x 1-km squares which had mostly been randomly selected from within the known breeding range and were known to contain some woodland. In Sussex, 178 squares were initially selected to be surveyed. Of these, 99 squares were designated as high-priority sites because they had been randomly selected and had been previously surveyed in 2003 or 2013. Some of the lower-priority squares had been self-selected by observers for the 2013 survey or for annual monitoring since the 2013 survey. The selected squares were allocated to volunteers where possible.

All squares were surveyed from fixed points and regardless of whether squares had been surveyed previously volunteers were asked to select the most appropriate count points to maximize the chances of observing roding Woodcock. Each volunteer was asked to locate the largest area of mature woodland within the survey square, and to then select a count point within this woodland (ideally at least 100 m from the woodland edge) but within a glade or ride or felled area such that roding Woodcock would be visible against the sky rather than obscured by a closed canopy. A count point could be located up to 400 m outside a selected square if no suitable count point could be found within the square.

Volunteers were first asked to make a reconnaissance visit to each of their allocated sites in April to select a suitable count point. Volunteers were then asked to make three evening survey visits to each of their allocated sites during the period 1 May to 30 Jun, with at least one week between visits. On each visit, volunteers were required to observe from the selected fixed point for a total duration of 75 mins, beginning 15 mins before sunset. Each time that a roding Woodcock was seen or heard during this 75-min period, this was noted as an individual registration on the recording form, with the time noted to the nearest minute. If two or more birds were seen or heard passing the count point together, this was counted as one registration and the number of birds was noted. If no roding birds were recorded during two evening visits, it was essential that visit details were returned although subsequent visits were not required.

For any survey site the number of observations of roding birds during a timed period can be used to estimate the number of individual males present using the results of research by Hoodless *et al.* (2008). This method of estimation is described by Crabtree (2014). Counts of observations of roding males can be difficult to interpret because it is impossible for an observer to distinguish between different individual birds, and because a few dominant males may rode for long periods whilst other males may only rode for short periods. Using the described method the numbers of individual males present at each site were estimated.

Volunteers were also asked to undertake habitat recording during the period 15 May to 15 Jun, to characterize the woodland surrounding each count point (within 200 m). This habitat recording involved selecting woodland types and dominant ground vegetation types from lists provided, and also indicating the level of grazing activity at the site by deer and other livestock. Habitat data collected in Sussex is complex and relates to an insufficient number of sites for any detailed analysis so this aspect of the survey is not discussed here.

Survey results

The required surveys were conducted at a total of 90 sites in Sussex in 2023; these comprised 65 high-priority sites (which had also been surveyed in 2003 or 2013), 14 low-priority randomly-selected sites and 11 additional sites selected by the observers (some of which had also been surveyed in 2013). At 65 of the 90 surveyed sites, no roding Woodcock were seen or heard at all by the observers during at least two evening visits. For the 25 sites where roding Woodcock were encountered, the maximum numbers of observations were used to estimate the numbers of individual males present (Crabtree 2014, Hoodless *et al.* 2008) and the results are given in Figure 1. Combining the estimated numbers at all of the sites, a total of 46 individual roding males were estimated to be present. Of the 25 sites, seven were on the West Sussex commons with the highest numbers of individual males recorded at Woolbeding Common (5), Black Down (6), Ebernoe Common (4) and Wiggonholt Common (3). Perhaps surprisingly the numbers recorded on the Ashdown Forest were very low with Woodcock only found at four of the 11 surveyed sites and the highest number of individual males recorded at Wren's Warren (3).

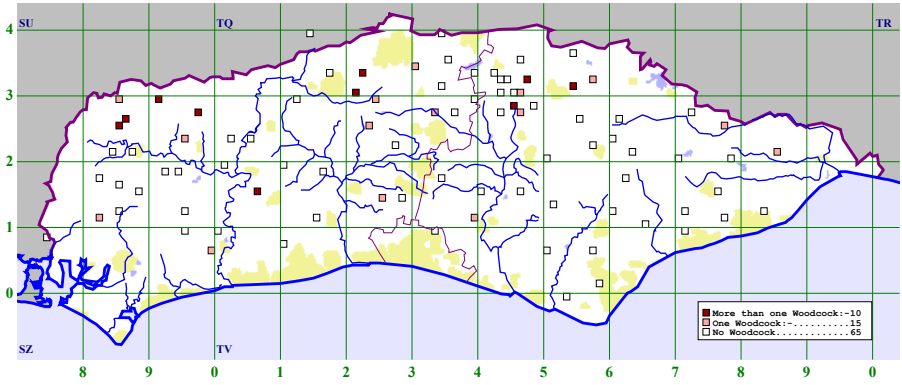


Figure 1. *The numbers of individual male Woodcock estimated to be present at each of the sites surveyed in 2023, applying the relationship demonstrated by Hoodless et al. (2008) to the maximum numbers of observations of roding birds.*