

Storm Petrels in Kent, May 2006

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The movement of Storm Petrels in Kent and elsewhere along the south coast during 20th-28th May 2006 was truly unprecedented. A series of depressions had carried many thousands of Storm Petrels from the Western Approaches and Bay of Biscay into the English Channel, some reaching the Dover Straits. Relatively small numbers were seen in the North Sea and the heaviest passage in Kent was of birds attempting to recover their position by flying west past Dungeness.

The background: early records in Kent

First recorded for Kent by William Boys, from one obtained at Margate in January 1782, the Storm Petrel remained a very scarce visitor to the Kent coast until the remarkable events of May 2006. Ticehurst (1909) listed about ten records and also referred to previous authors who had stated that they were aware of occasional occurrences. The records include an eyebrow-raising account of one shot among a flock of Hoopoes at Margate during a storm in January 1873, and the first inland reports. Harrison (1953) listed about nine further records up to 1951. When they had precise dates, all of these early records fell during September-February, with half during October-November.

The period 1952-2005

During this period, there were acceptable records of 107 individual Storm Petrels in Kent. There were seven in 1980, ten in 1987 and 19 in 2000, but otherwise no more than five in any year, and 17 years were wholly blank. Autumn and winter were clearly the best times to be in with a chance of seeing the species: only seven of the 107 occurred between mid January and the end of August, and no less than 64% were recorded during 8th October-11th November. They were seen right around the coast, with 40% off north Kent, 20% off Reculver/Thanet and 20% off Dungeness, as well as a few elsewhere including four birds inland.

Incidentally, these statistics omit a few records: these include five seen from a ferry well offshore in July 1974 and some for which no supporting details were received. The latter include a few apparently attracted by tape-lures at Kingsdown and Sandwich Bay in the autumns of 1999 and 2000; we have so far failed to obtain details of these claims although we would like to do so.

May 2006 at Dungeness

With large numbers of Storm Petrels being reported off various headlands to the west, notably Portland Bill, observers at Dungeness were watching for petrels from the 19th but with no luck. However, there were signs that something odd might happen, as a few Manx Shearwaters began to appear, flying west in strong SW to WSW winds on the 19th and 20th. The first Storm Petrels were eventually found, from the seawatching hide, on the morning of 21st as the wind backed to SSE. They were a bit distant and difficult to see well so we decided that it might be better to watch from the fishing boats on the east side of the point. This was much better - we were able to pick the birds up as they approached rather than as they were going past and many were coming close inshore. By the end of the day we had seen a remarkable 43 Storm Petrels. There were also large numbers of other seabirds passing through and included three Balearic Shearwaters, 126 Manx Shearwaters, 442 Fulmars, 206 Gannets, two Great Skuas and 419 Kittiwakes. It was a very strange feeling to be looking for seabirds at the end of May coming from the east rather than the usual west. The wind veered to WSW on 22nd but passage continued, albeit in reduced numbers, with 19 Storm Petrels along with a Balearic Shearwater, 33 Manx Shearwaters, 131 Fulmars and four Great Skuas of note. The wind dropped slightly on 23rd and this appeared to allow even more birds through with a new record of 80 Storm Petrels along with 21 Manx Shearwaters and the unlikely sight of two adult Long-tailed Skuas also heading west into the wind. The wind remained in the SW on 24th but freshened and produced the record count of 133 Storm Petrels during the day. There was a distinct rush shortly after dawn when up to 20 could be seen at once with many birds lingering and feeding for a few minutes before heading off into the wind.

The wind remained in the west for the next few days and overall numbers began to decline but in any other year would have still been considered exceptional. The 25th produced 56 Storm Petrels, 35 Manx Shearwaters, a Balearic Shearwater and 460 Gannets, and then on the 26th, there were 29 Storm Petrels, 12 Manx Shearwaters and an adult Roseate Tern, and on the 27th, 36 Storm Petrels, a Balearic and two Manx Shearwaters. The last 15 Storm Petrels were seen on the 28th but the wind then backed NW and the passage ended.

Many observers added Storm Petrel to their Kent and even Life lists and it was incredible that they could turn up at almost time of day during the peak passage and within 30 minutes or so would have seen at least one individual. The views were often excellent and some people even managed to get photographs of them.

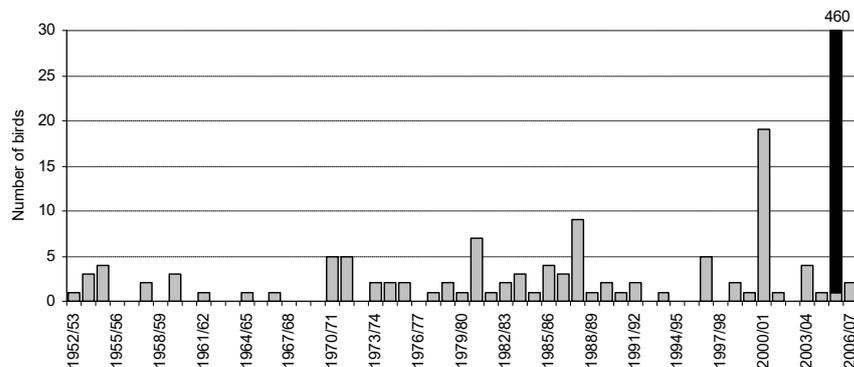
May 2006 around Kent

Although many more were seen at Dungeness, Storm Petrels were recorded elsewhere along the Kent coast as far as North Foreland. The table below shows the daily totals at each locality. We assumed birds seen on each day and at each site were separate, which is probably more or less true.

Location	Daily numbers	Total
Dungeness	43 on 21st, 19 on 22nd, 80 on 23rd, 133 on 24th, 56 on 25th, 29 on 26th, 36 on 27th & 15 on 28th; all moving W	411
Folkestone	Singles W on 20th, 21st & 22nd, 11 W on 24th	14

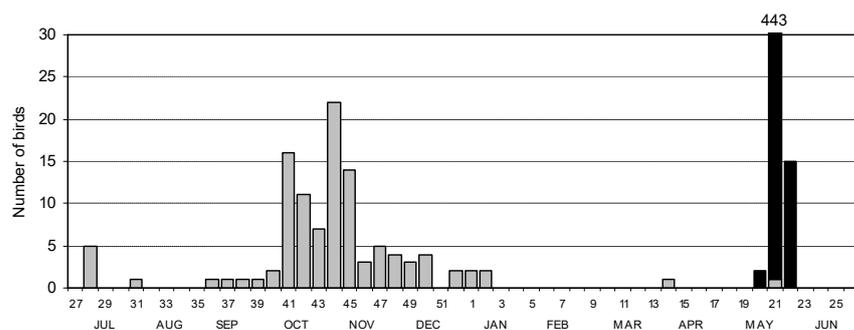
St Margaret's Bay	One on 20th, two on 22nd, one on 24th, and four on each date during 25th-27th; all moving S	17
Deal	10 lingering around the pier on 25th	10
Sandwich Bay	Three on 22nd, one on 23rd, moving S	4
North Foreland	Three S on 23rd	3
Daily totals	Two on 20th, 46 on 21st, 27 on 22nd, 81 on 23rd, 145 on 24th, 70 on 25th. 33 on 26th, 40 on 27th & 15 on 28th	459

The graphs below illustrate how exceptional the passage was. They are based on data from 1952 to 2006, and show most records in grey but those from May 2006 in black. Note that the 2006/07 total (July-June years are more logical than calendar years for this species) extends way beyond the limit of the y-axis in the annual totals graph, as does the week 21 total in the seasonal pattern graph.



Storm Petrel annual totals,

1952/53-2006/07



Walpole-Bond, J. (1938) *A History of the Birds of Sussex*. Witherby, London.