

The Little Egret in Kent: a success story

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The Birds of Kent (1981, KOS) classifies Little Egret as a “rare vagrant”, with a total of 12 birds recorded in eight years between 1957 and 1976. Half of these birds were in North Kent, with four in the Stour valley and the remaining two at Dungeness. The species status didn't alter much over the next decade and a half - one or two birds on an almost annual basis, with North Kent retaining the lion's share of the records and the remainder split between Dungeness and the Stour valley.

In 1989, a national influx totalling 100+ saw five birds reach Kent, with two in the north of the county and singles at Dungeness, Stodmarsh and Bough Beech, the first West Kent occurrence. Despite this influx, there was only a single record the following year – a spring bird at Dungeness. However, things were starting to change ever more rapidly. The 1992 KBR stated that Little Egret was a “rare, but increasingly regular visitor”. By 1993, “rare” had been downgraded to “scarce” and in 1994 the caveat “now wintering in small numbers” was added. Double figure counts were becoming regular and from 1995 the species was classified as “rapidly increasing”. The Medway Estuary emerged as the county hot spot, with record-breaking counts of 33 at Funton on 7th September 1998 and 72 at the same site on 28th August 1999.

Despite these major increases, the Little Egret remained a rare visitor to Northward Hill RSPB reserve. While numbers were going ballistic elsewhere in North Kent, the reserve log records a single bird in 1997, a blank year in 1998 and two birds on two dates in 1999. So it was something of a surprise for warden Alan Parker to discover a bird in the heronry on 15th May 2000 and even more of a surprise to find it sitting on a nest on the 23rd! But the timing was perfect, exactly 100 years since the first heron nest was discovered in Northward Hill wood.

This initial attempt was thought to have been unsuccessful because on June 9th, two pairs were seen mating, with a second nest noted later that same day. The first young egret was seen in the nest on 18th July, with two noted on the 25th. Four fledged juveniles were present on the edge of the wood from 17th August until they dispersed on the 23rd. This constituted the first confirmed breeding of Little Egret in Kent and also the first breeding on an RSPB reserve.

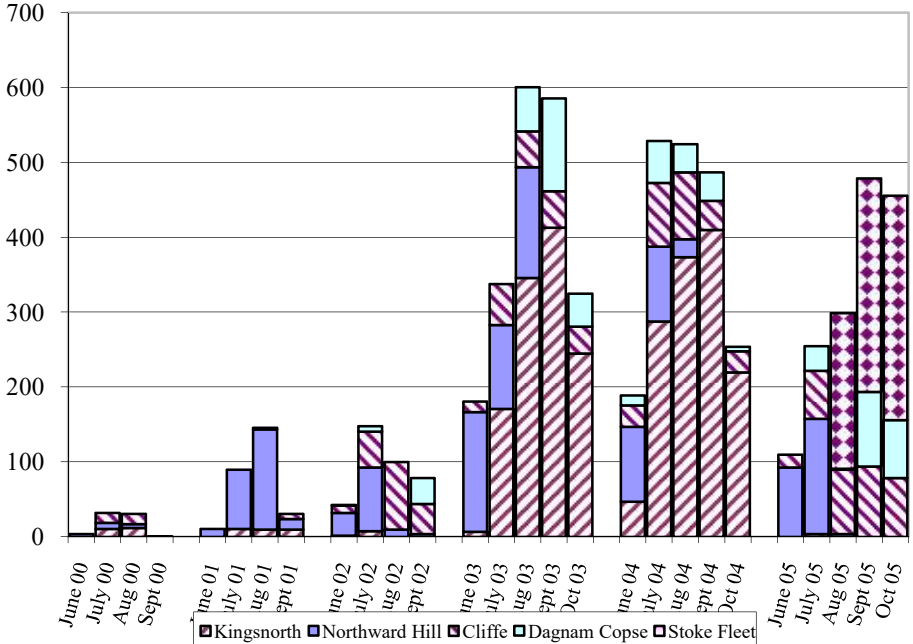
The following year, four pairs fledged at least 10 young in the Northward Hill heronry; and at a second site in North Kent, 16-18 young fledged from seven nests. The Little Egret had become an established part of the county's resident avifauna in the space of less than 10 years. The two breeding colonies continued to increase, with 18 pairs/nests at both sites in 2002, then 30 and 45 at Northward Hill in 2003 and 2004 respectively. At the second site, the tendency for the birds to nest in dense ivy meant that accurate counts were not possible, but double-figure counts were present in both years.

At Northward Hill, the egrets arrive back at their nesting sites later than the Grey Herons. The first birds have usually appeared by the end of March, with the bulk arriving during April. They tend to nest at higher densities than the herons. Four or five nests in one tree is

about the maximum for herons, but up to 10 pairs of egrets will nest in one favoured tree. They will also nest in the much smaller trees in the under-storey. Nest sizes are confusingly variable (the largest Little Egret nests are bigger than the smallest Grey Heron nests!), making accurate counting of the nests a tricky operation. BWP states that the clutch size for Little Egret is 3-6, but the majority of broods seen have a maximum of three young, so the clutch size may be smaller than the maximum stated. Breeding success has been good though, with at least 50 fledged young at Northward Hill in 2003. Some of the young birds at the second site have been colour-ringed (black letters on red, orange or yellow rings) and 2002 saw the first British Little Egret recovery of a bird found dead in Essex. Other birds have been seen at Cliffe Pools and at several sites in Bedfordshire.

In addition to the increasing nesting population, post-breeding roosts were also increasing to an amazing degree, especially in the north of the county (see figure 1). Tidal roosts can be found on the Medway at sites like Nor Marsh and Funton, but evening roosts are invariably in areas of trees, ranging in size from small copses to larger blocks of woodland. At Northward Hill in the early evening in mid-summer, many birds can be seen perched in the tops of the oak trees. Birds arrive throughout the evening, usually singly or in groups of two or three, but occasionally in larger flocks of up to ten or more. The birds arrive from all points of the compass, but the majority come in from the north or east. Early arrivals join the birds sitting in the tree-tops, but later in the evening the birds disappear below the canopy to roost. The majority leave the roost pre-dawn. Currently, it's thought that most of the birds roosting at Northward Hill are part of the breeding population, but this wasn't always the case e.g. in August 2001, 134 were recorded on the 17th.

Figure 1: Major roosts in Kent from 2000-2005



Currently, it's thought that most of the birds roosting at Northward Hill are part of the breeding population, but this wasn't always the case. In August 2001, 134 were recorded on the 17th. A smaller roost of up to 34 birds was noted at Sandwich Bay. All these roosts tended to disperse in the late summer, but large numbers remained to winter in the county. Again in 2001, WeBS counts in the Medway produced totals of 103 in October and 106 in November. Smaller winter roosts were present with over 36 at Ham Road pits and more than 12 at Stodmarsh.

The roost situation in the Thames-Medway area seems remarkably fluid – roosts build up in an area for a year or two and then move on: e.g. Two Tree Island on the Essex side had up to 50 birds in 2003, but these appear to have moved probably into Kent, as there were none in 2004; and the huge Kingsnorth roost of 2003/4 had all but disappeared in 2005, and now appears to have taken up residence at Stoke Fleet. In 2003, numbers of roosting egrets peaked in September, with a total of 660 at a number of sites in the Thames-Medway area; and an additional 290 counted at various sites in Essex. Numbers again peaked in September in 2004, with totals of 578 in Kent and 487 in Essex, giving an impressive 1,065 as a grand total! Winter numbers are less, but regularly get into three figures on the Medway.

Away from the north coast, the greatest number of records come from the winter periods, with most still in single figures. However, Pegwell Bay has also developed an autumn roost, with a peak of 59 in July 2004. As with north Kent, the roosting situation in the Stour valley appears to be quite fluid, with numbers appearing at sites like Sandwich Bay and Stodmarsh in one year and not re-appearing the next.

Whether we will ever see egret roosts in Kent on a scale of those found in the tropics is open to debate. But while few of the county's birders might have imagined that they would be able to spend an evening watching hundreds of these exotic birds winging their way to roost in a Kentish woodland even 10 years ago, there can be little doubt that scenes like these will be witnessed with increasing frequency across the county in years to come.

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