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Wading Bird Monitoring of the Thanet Coast SPA in Jan/Feb 2025

A Report to Bird Wise East Kent (Thanet Coast and Sandwich Bay SAMMS)



Curlews by Luke Sole

Summary

This report presents the results of wading bird surveys of the Thanet Coast and Sandwich Bay Special Protection Area (SPA) in winter 2024/25 by Sandwich Bay Bird Observatory Trust (SBBOT). The area concerned was visited twice, on 25th January and 15th February 2025, and a total of 16 species of wading bird were recorded (Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*, Redshank *Tringa totanus*, Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*, Sanderling *Calidris alba*, Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*, Purple Sandpiper *Calidris maritima*, Curlew *Numenius arquata*, Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*, Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*, Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*, Knot *Calidris canutus*, Dunlin *Calidris alpina*, Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*, Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*, Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*, and Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*). The total number of wading birds ranged between 3,450-3,750 with Sector 1 consistently containing the highest numbers and diversity. The most numerous bird was Lapwing with notable totals of Sanderling, Golden Plover, and Turnstone recorded. Disturbance to wading birds at high tide remained an ongoing issue with management still needed to reduce its effect on the wintering wader populations in the SPA.

Introduction

The Thanet Coast and Sandwich Bay SPA is known for its internationally important wintering numbers of Turnstone and Golden Plover. SBBOT have co-ordinated Turnstone surveys along the Thanet Coast and Sandwich Bay SPA for the last 20 years and have shown an ongoing decline in wintering numbers (Walton & Hodgson, 2018). In 2019, Footprint Ecology provided baseline data of all common wading bird species along the same stretch of Thanet coastline, and this was repeated by SBBOT in 2020 and 2022. Data from these surveys confirmed a further decline in the wintering Turnstone population (Saunders & Liley (2019), Walton (2020), (2022)). SBBOT repeated this survey in 2025 with the aim of detecting changes in the wider wading bird population of the Thanet Coast and Sandwich Bay SPA.

Method

This study focussed entirely on counts of wading birds. Wintering waders were surveyed using standard BTO WeBS protocol (Bibby et al, 2000). All counts were undertaken according to Health and Safety guidelines.

The survey area was divided into 21 Sectors of roughly 2km in length. Each sector was identical to the sectors surveyed by SBBOT and Footprint Ecology in previous years. These were:

1. Pegwell Bay
2. Pegwell - West Cliff
3. Ramsgate Harbour & Beach
4. Dumpton/Dumpton Gap
5. Broadstairs
6. North Foreland/Kingsgate Bay
7. Botany/Palm Bay
8. Margate (East)
9. Margate
10. St. Mildred's Bay
11. Westgate Bay
12. Grenham Bay/Birchington
13. Minnis Bay
14. Plumpudding Island
15. Coldharbour/Reculver East
16. Reculver West
17. Herne Bay East
18. Herne Bay
19. Hampton/Hampton Pier
20. Long Rock/Hampton
21. Whitstable/Tankerton

All 21 Survey Sectors were surveyed at the same time, by 21 separate observers, beginning half an hour before high tide and ending half an hour after, on both 25th January and 15th February 2025. The whole length of the allocated stretch of coastline was counted and all data logged on a sheet in the field (see Appendix 1). Double-counting was kept to a minimum by noting the time, number, and species, of any movements in and out of each Sector. Optics such as binoculars and telescopes were used as necessary.

Results

The weather on 25th January was grey (8/8 cloud), a bit breezy (NE 3), but with little/no rain. Conditions were calmer on 15th February (SW 1) and clearer (2/8 cloud) and with no rain. High Tide at Margate on 25th January was 09:30 (3.7m) and 13:50 (4.4m) on 15th February.

Table 1 The number of wading birds recorded in 21 sectors along the Thanet coastline on 25th January 2025.

Sector	Turnstone	Redshank	Ringed Plover	Sanderling	Oystercatcher	Purple Sandpiper	Curlew	Golden Plover	Grey Plover	Lapwing	Knot	Dunlin	Snipe	Black-tailed Godwit	Bar-tailed Godwit	Avocet	Total
1	2	30	0	40	15	0	85	107	90	880	58	510	3	1	72	1	1821
2	12	24	0	0	25	0	96	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	157
3	33	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	34
4	1	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7
5	26	0	0	0	8	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	37
6	17	0	36	125	0	0	13	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	191
7	14	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	18
8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
9	37	14	0	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	57
10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
12	5	7	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	16
13	49	51	0	24	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	127
14	45	43	78	100	190	0	20	0	40	0	3	19	0	0	0	0	538
15	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
16	0	0	0	18	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	18
17	16	1	0	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	26
18	6	31	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	37
19	22	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	22
20	54	13	25	96	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	37	0	0	0	0	228
21	19	1	0	13	3	0	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	46
Total	358	216	141	430	245	14	227	107	131	880	61	567	3	1	72	1	3454

Table 2 The number of wading birds recorded in 21 sectors along the Thanet coastline on 15th February 2025.

Sector	Turnstone	Redshank	Ringed Plover	Sanderling	Oystercatcher	Purple Sandpiper	Curlew	Golden Plover	Grey Plover	Lapwing	Knot	Dunlin	Snipe	Black-tailed Godwit	Bar-tailed Godwit	Avocet	Total
1	6	27	0	140	600	0	90	90	90	870	2	220	2	5	89	4	2235
2	0	49	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	54
3	32	0	0	0	0	13	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	45
4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
5	49	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	49
6	19	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	19
7	15	0	47	74	208	0	26	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	370
8	14	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	14
9	44	16	0	270	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	332
10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
12	1	13	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	14
13	146	12	0	168	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	326
14	39	1	0	27	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	67
15	19	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	20
16	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
17	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
18	19	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	23
19	39	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	39
20	47	4	12	3	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	44	1	0	0	0	113
21	18	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	19
Total	509	133	59	683	809	15	121	90	91	870	2	264	3	5	89	4	3747

A total of 3,454 wading birds of 16 species was recorded on 25th January 2025 (see Table 1). This total is lower than the surveys in 2022 but higher than all in 2020 and 2019 (Saunders & Liley (2019), Walton (2020), (2022)). There was also a good number of three-figure counts (ten species) indicating that no one species dominated. The top spot was taken by Lapwing, represented by a single flock of 880 birds in Sector 1, followed by Dunlin with 567 and Sanderling with 430. As seen in previous years, Sector 1 held the most individuals with 1,821 recorded. The next highest was 538 in Sector 14 and 228 in Sector 20. There were no wading birds recorded in Sectors 8, 10, and 15, and just one in Sector 11. Sectors with the highest species diversity were 1 (14), 14 (nine), and 20 (seven).

A total of 3,747 wading birds of 16 species was recorded on 15th February 2025 (see Table 2), slightly higher than the January survey. Again, the most numerous species was Lapwing with 870, though this time Oystercatcher was close with 809, followed by Sanderling with 683. Sector 1 contained 2,235 birds, far more than any other Sector, with 370 in Sector 7 the next best and 332 in Sector 9. Sectors with the highest species diversity were 1 (14), 20 (eight), and 7 (five) but no wading birds featured in Sectors 4, 10, and 19.

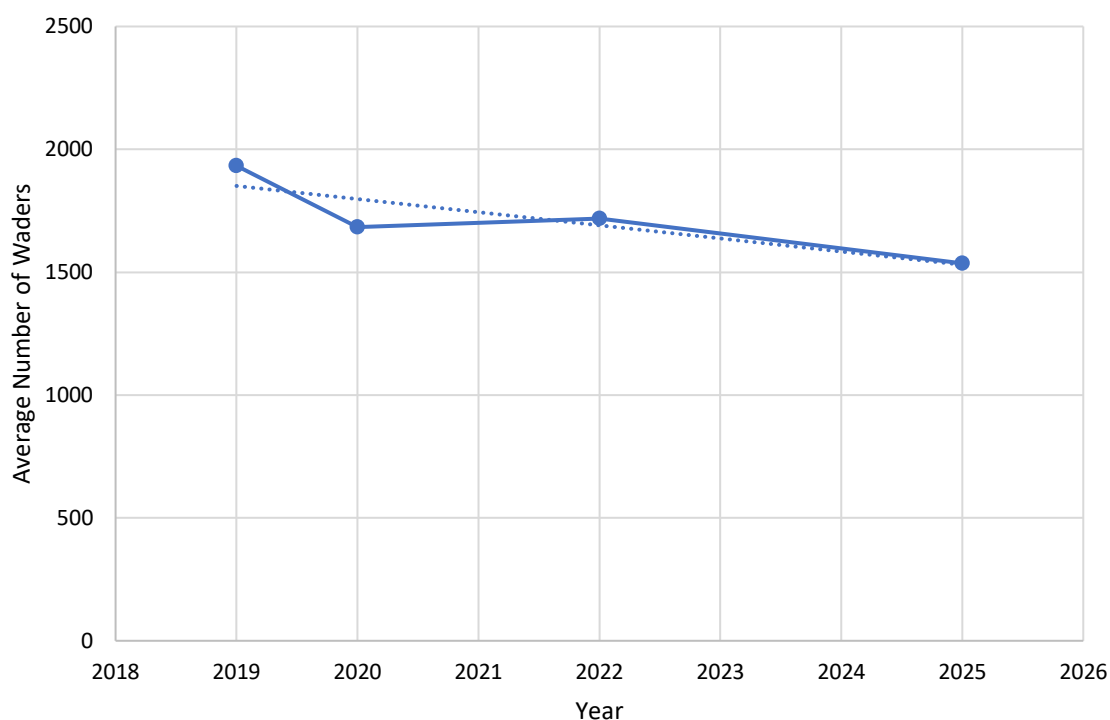
Discussion

As in all previous surveys, the two dates in January and February produced broadly similar results. These two particular visits recorded less than a 10% difference in the number of individuals and the exact same composition of species. Both visits produced high numbers of individuals compared to the previous surveys in 2019 and 2020 by Footprint Ecology and SBBOT (Saunders & Liley (2019), Walton (2020)), but lower than the 2022 SBBOT survey (Walton, 2022). There was an average of 3,601 birds recorded and averages of 164.5 birds per Sector in January and 178.4 in February.

As in 2022, the high number of individuals encountered during this survey period can be mostly explained by the significant numbers in Sector 1 (1,821 and 2,235). Sector 1 (Pegwell Bay) is the main core feeding and roosting area for many species in the area and a designated LNR, SSSI, SAC, SPA, NNR, and RAMSAR site. Exogenous factors, such as tide state, weather, and disturbance, can produce high variability between visits and many birds often use the adjacent nature reserve at Shellness Point, Sandwich Bay, just outside of this survey's geographical remit (per SBBOT). By removing Sector 1 and its variability, the data shows a slightly declining total between 1,500 and 2,000 birds between 2019 and 2025 (see graph on the next page).

Away from Sector 1, the Sectors 14 and 20 showed some of the highest wader numbers in January but Sectors 7 and 9 were the highest in February. This disparity is out of character from past surveys which tended to show the same Sectors. However, looking at these four Sectors over both surveys shows some consistency. For example, Sectors 7 and 9 performed reasonably well in January and Sectors 14 and 20 especially so in February. In fact, Sectors 14 (Plumpudding Island to Cold Harbour) and 20 (Long Rock (Swalecliffe) to Hampton) have been highlighted as valuable in previous surveys (Saunders & Liley (2019), Walton (2020), (2022)). They continue to be important areas for feeding and roosting waders.

Figure.3 The average number of waders in Sectors 2-21 in 2019, 2020, 2022, and 2025.



Conversely, Sectors 8, 10, and 15 performed poorly in January and Sectors 4, 10, and 19 in February. Sectors 4 (Dumpton/Dumpton Bay) and 10 (St Mildred's Bay) have been previously highlighted as holding low numbers of wading birds (Saunders & Liley (2019), Walton (2020), (2022)). Both sites have little available space at high tide and are walked heavily by local dog-walkers. It is worth acknowledging that there is some degree of movement between Sectors and these 'lesser' sites may be more useful to wading birds when disturbance is high elsewhere, or in certain inclement weather conditions.

There was no difference in species composition between the visits in January and February and the range of species recorded was very similar to previous years. No new species were recorded but Black-tailed Godwit, Bar-tailed Godwit, Snipe, and Avocet were irregular species recorded again. The species totals showed a reasonable consistency between visits but some species were more variable than others. For example, Lapwing was very consistent going from 880 to 870 and Purple Sandpiper from 14 to 15 birds, whereas Oystercatcher saw a lot of change and went up from 245 to 809 and Knot down from 61 to two. Lapwing, Dunlin, and Sanderling were most numerous on the January count and then Lapwing, Oystercatcher, and Sanderling on the February count. These species are all often included in the top five species recorded along this coastline. Sanderling once again fared very well. Despite the counts somewhat lower than recorded on the most recent survey (Walton, 2022), it is still well in excess of the 1% threshold of wintering birds in Great Britain (Frost et al, 2019). There was no sign of the larger numbers of Purple Sandpiper recorded on the 2023 survey but the 216 Ringed Plovers recorded on the February visit was the highest number since the Footprint Ecology survey of 2019 (Saunders & Liley (2019), Walton (2020)).

Turnstone and Golden Plover are important species in the Thanet Coast and Sandwich Bay SPA. A total of 107 Golden Plovers were recorded on the January survey and 90 on the February survey. These counts equate to roughly a quarter of the SPA qualifying feature (411 birds). The shingle and rocky habitats along the Thanet coastline are not always the favoured habitat for this species, with large flocks often found inland on arable land (Henderson &

Sutherland, 2017), so it isn't too surprising to find that all birds were recorded from Sector 1 where there is more appropriate habitat available. The wintering population of Turnstone has been declining along the Thanet coastline for the last 20 years and more (Walton & Hodgson, 2018). In previous years, the SBBOT and Footprint Ecology surveys produced counts of Turnstone in the range of 348-558 (Saunders & Liley (2019), Walton (2020), (2022)). This survey recorded 358 Turnstones on the January visit and 509 in February. The first count is at the lower end of the expected range but balanced by the second count closer to the higher end. This second count was above the 1% threshold of wintering birds in Great Britain (Frost et al, 2019). Sectors 9, 13, 14, and 20 consistently held higher numbers of Turnstones than the other Sectors.

This survey did not monitor the frequency or the effects of disturbance, but as in previous years, it was impossible to avoid noticing the high levels of disturbance across the survey area. Participants in the survey again remarked at the number of dogs off the lead in their Sector at high tide. Baynes & Hyland (2014) acknowledged the recreational impact on Turnstones in the Thanet Coast and Sandwich Bay SPA and anecdotally there seems little reduction in disturbance levels since.

Overall, the surveys in January and February 2025 have shown that a wide variety of wading bird species still use the Thanet Coast and Sandwich Bay SPA. The wintering populations of the two key species of Golden Plover and Turnstone seem to be stable. It's possible there has been a slight decline in the overall species' total over the last few surveys. Recommendations include continuing the surveys every few years, trialling other types of survey (such as mid-week, or incorporating Sandwich Bay), and implementing mitigation with more impact to discourage bird disturbance.

References

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By Steffan Walton, Warden, Sandwich Bay Bird Observatory Trust, May 2025.

Appendix 1: Participant Count Form

Two co-ordinated Wading bird counts of the NE Kent (mainly the NE Kent Marine Protected Area) will be undertaken in the winter of 21/22. The first will take place during high tide on Saturday **25 January 2025**, with the second on Sunday **15 February 2025**.

Surveyors should walk the whole length of their allocated stretch of coastline - **commencing ½ hour before high tide** - counting all Waders occurring in that section and ensuring that double-counting is kept to a minimum. Please note any movements & direction (west or east, etc.) and times of birds leaving the sector in the remarks column.

Details of Co-ordinated Wader Count Sectors			
Sector No.	Sector	From	To
1	Pegwell Bay	TR342628: South end of Pegwell Bay Nature Reserve, where coastal path turns sharply north along bay	TR354644: Opposite old hoverport road, west of Little Cliffsend Farm
2	Pegwell to West Cliff	TR354644: Opposite old hoverport road, west of Little Cliffsend Farm	TR377642: Western limit of Ramsgate Harbour, eastern limit of West Cliff
3	Ramsgate (harbour & beach)	TR377642: Western limit of Ramsgate Harbour, eastern limit of West Cliff	TR392655: By large groyne at north end of Ramsgate main beach
4	Dumpton / Dumpton Bay	TR392655: By large groyne at north end of Ramsgate main beach	TR398673: South end of Louisa Bay south of Viking Bay
5	Broadstairs	TR398673: South end of Louisa Bay south of Viking Bay	TR401694: South of Joss Bay & North Foreland Lighthouse, opposite Convent
6	North Foreland / Kingsgate Bay	TR401694: South of Joss Bay & North Foreland Lighthouse, opposite Convent	TR393711: Botany Bay, by public toilet block
7	Botany Bay to Palm Bay	TR393711: Botany Bay, by public toilet block	TR372715: Bathing Pool / Jet Ski hire
8	Margate east	TR372715: Bathing Pool / Jet Ski hire	TR354712: Main Pier at Margate Harbour
9	Margate (Westbrook Bay & Margate Bay)	TR354712: Main Pier at Margate Harbour	TR335705: Small slipway at west end of Westbrook Bay, east of 'Sunken Gardens' by shelter
10	St Mildred's Bay	TR335705: Small slipway at west end of Westbrook Bay, east of 'Sunken Gardens' by shelter	TR321705: Westgate Pavilion ('Ledge Point' on O/S map)
11	Westgate Bay	TR321705: Westgate Pavilion ('Ledge Point' on O/S map)	TR308699: Eastern limit of Epple Bay
12	Grenham Bay / Birchington	TR308699: Eastern limit of Epple Bay	TR291701: Western limit of Grenham Bay
13	Minnis Bay	TR291701: Western limit of Grenham Bay	TR273694: Western end of small groynes at 'Plum pudding Island', opposite mussel bed & public path leading south
14	Plum pudding Island to Cold Harbour	TR273694: Western end of small groynes at 'Plum pudding Island', opposite mussel bed & public path leading south	TR252694: Cold Harbour, opposite mussel beds & lagoons
15	Cold Harbour to Reculver east	TR252694: Cold Harbour, opposite mussel beds & lagoons	TR230694: Western end of shellfish hatchery
16	Reculver west	TR230694: Western end of shellfish hatchery	TR211687: Car park near 'Bishopstone Manor'
17	Herne Bay east ('Beltinge Cliff')	TR211687: Car park near 'Bishopstone Manor'	TR191685: Half-way along cliff, opposite 'Wantsum Walk' on O/S map
18	Herne Bay	TR191685: Half-way along cliff, opposite 'Wantsum Walk' on O/S map	TR172683: Herne Bay Pier
19	Hampton / Hampton Pier	TR172683: Herne Bay Pier	TR157679: Small slipway to west of Hampton Pier
20	Long Rock (Swalecliff) to Hampton	TR157679: Small slipway to west of Hampton Pier	TR137678: Long Rock, opposite sand spit
21	Whitstable / Tankerton	TR137678: Long Rock, opposite sand spit	TR108670: Whitstable Harbour

1. Co-ordinated Wader Count Survey: 25 January 2025

[illegible]

2. Co-ordinated Turnstone Count Survey: 15 February 2025

[illegible]