



Wish you were here?

If you fancy combining a day at the coast with some great migration-watching, then consider the Isle of Thanet

Words: Ed Hutchings

A popular resort for more than two centuries, Margate's late-20th Century slump was long and bleak, as British holidaymakers ditched Victorian frump for the carefree coasts of Spain. But this grand old seaside town, with fine sand beaches and artistic associations, has bounced off the bottom.

Though heavily developed, the position of the Isle of Thanet in the extreme north-east corner of Kent, at the south end of the North Sea, makes it an obvious point for observing migration. It is a noted seawatching location and coastal scrub harbours a variety of passerine migrants. Chalk cliffs form the coastline from Ramsgate in the south to Margate.

The rocky foreshore is interspersed with sandy bays. Grass covers most of the clifftop between Foreness Point and North Foreland, but more substantial cover occurs on the edge of North Foreland golf course and, a mile inland from Foreness Point, at the north end of Northdown Park. In winter, one might expect to find Red-throated Diver, Great Crested Grebe, Eider and large auks (mostly Guillemot) offshore. The rocky shoreline holds a variety of wintering waders, most notably

substantial numbers of Sanderling and a regular group of Purple Sandpiper, which tend to roost in the sandy bays at White Ness. Small numbers of Rock Pipit and occasional Black Redstart are also present.

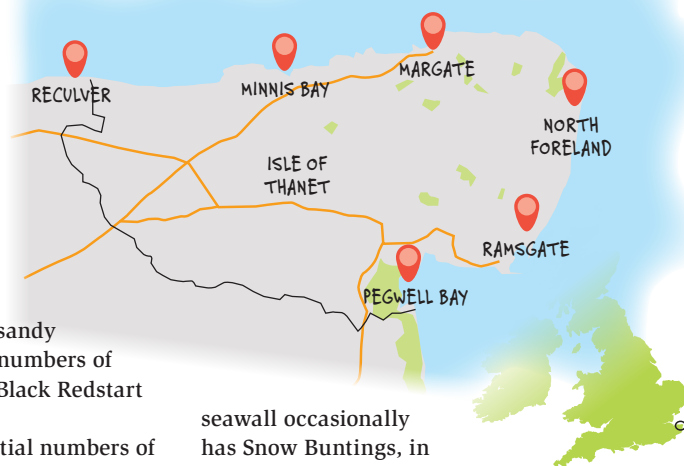
During passage, substantial numbers of pipits, wagtails, chats, thrushes, warblers and finches pass through. Falls of the commoner night migrants are usually associated with east winds, with scarcer species such as Richard's Pipit, Icterine, Yellow-browed and Pallas's Warblers, and Red-breasted Flycatcher all regular in autumn. It is then that seawatching is most productive during north winds, with Gannet, Manx Shearwater, Arctic, Great and Pomarine Skuas, Kittiwake, terns and auks (including Little Auk in late October to November). Sparrowhawk, Merlin, Hen Harrier and Short-eared Owl all regularly arrive from the sea, with Osprey, Honey Buzzard, Buzzard and Rough-legged Buzzards, and Red Kite occasionally noted. Breeding birds include colonies of Fulmar on the clifftops.

East of Margate, the mudflats extending from Minnis Bay to Reculver are always reliable for a variety of waders and the

seawall occasionally has Snow Buntings, in winter. However, the real attraction here is seawatching. Stormy weather in the right season can produce anything from Leach's Petrel to Sabine's Gull, as well as all the skuas, auks, divers and shearwaters. This is also a great place for visible migration.

Just north of St Nicholas At Wade (where there is an interesting church), the bushes at Chambers Wall and Shuart Lane provide useful shelter for migrants, including rarities such as Booted, Yellow-browed, Greenish, Arctic and Pallas's Warblers, Woodchat Shrike and Desert Wheatear. In 2001, a Dusky Warbler was recorded here. Chambers Wall is excellent during migration periods. Shuart Lane is a regular ringing site and, therefore, a well watched area that turns up lots on passage.

To the north, Reculver Towers witnesses decent numbers of skuas, Leach's Petrel ➤



BIRD THE WORLD THANET, KENT

Foreness beach



(regular), Sooty Shearwater and Sabine's Gull. It is also a popular spot for seawatching, especially when northern or north-easterlies prevail. While much busier than Margate Cemetery, Northdown Park has witnessed some notable rarities, including regular Pallas's and Yellow-browed Warblers, as well as Firecrest.

Early mornings in passage times can produce good numbers of migrants. The cemetery itself has turned up plenty of scarcities, the odd rarity and several 'megs', including a Dusky Thrush in 2013 that attracted 2,000 'twitchers'.

Seawatching at North Foreland can produce skuas, auks and divers in winter, while waders between here and the beach at Joss Bay include Purple Sandpiper and rarities on passage. The area around the sewage pumping station turns up regular Shore Lark and the cabbage fields may attract anything during migration.

In winter, this coast holds numbers of Purple Sandpiper and Rock Pipit which can be found at any of the bays with careful searching, as can Black Redstart and, to a lesser extent, Shore Lark.

Ramsgate Harbour is famous for overwintering Kingfisher, as featured in the finale to last year's BBC Winterwatch. The trio of regular diver species shelter

here occasionally, while Peregrine and Raven have both made a comeback in the area. On the east coast of Kent, south of Ramsgate, Pegwell Bay is noted for migrants, including a sprinkling of scarce species and rarities. The peak seasons are March to June and August to November.

The bay attracts waders and wildfowl, especially in winter. Extensive areas of mudflats, sandflats and dunes surrounding the mouth of the Stour estuary are protected and maintained by the National Trust and Kent Wildlife Trust. The coast is dominated by a series of sand dunes, many of which have been converted into golf courses.

Inland, a large proportion of the area is farmed and waders roost on these fields at high tide. Small areas of freshwater marsh, reedbeds, bushes and trees add diversity. This is a site where a telescope is vital and knowledge of the tides most useful. The first spring arrivals are in March and include Garganey, Black Redstart and Firecrest, and by the end of the month Sandwich Terns begin to appear. The bulk of the passage is from April to May, when several scarce migrants are regularly recorded, including Kentish Plover and Golden Oriole.

Summer is quiet but as many as 30 pairs of Little Tern breed in the area, and Kittiwakes, from their breeding cliffs at Dover, are frequently seen.

The autumn wader passage begins in mid-July and continues into September. East winds encourage the occasional fall, which inevitably includes a scarce species or two. By late autumn, the bulk consists of Goldcrest,

HOW TO GET THERE

North Foreland can be reached by following the B2052 north from Broadstairs. There is a car park, from where one can seawatch, overlooking Joss Bay, just north of the lighthouse. The clifftop between Foreness Point and Botany Bay may be accessed by following the B2052 west past the Captain Digby pub for half a mile.

Turn right into St George's Road and take the second right, Kingsgate Avenue. Follow this to its end and park. Walk north-west along the coast to Foreness Point.

It is possible to drive to Foreness Point by proceeding north along Queen Elizabeth Avenue, turning sharp right and then left into Princess Margaret Avenue until one reaches the pitch and putt golf course. Park in the spaces provided and walk to the Coastguard Station, which offers some shelter for seawatching. Northdown Park is bordered by the B2052 to the south and the B2051 (Queen Elizabeth Avenue) to the west, to park.



Robin, thrushes, Starling and finches arriving from the continent to winter in Britain. Divers, grebes and sea ducks may be seen offshore in winter and Hen Harrier and Short-eared Owl hunt the marshes. Next to Pegwell Bay, the old hover port has been reclaimed by nature and produces a Wryneck or Hoopoe in most years. If one still has time, the Powell-Cotton Museum at Quex Park is worth a visit for its three galleries of taxidermic dioramas, depicting more than 500 African and Asian animals set against their natural habitats. **BW**

INFO THANET

● Ed would like to thank wildlife filmmaker Keith Ross (@ramsgatebirds on Twitter) for showing him around and Julie Andrews of Thanet District Council (visitthanet.co.uk) for facilitating the trip.

● The artist J M Turner painted more canvasses in Margate than anywhere else and the best views are from the Sands hotel, where double rooms with breakfast costs from £120 per night.
Tel: 01843 228228

