

# House Martin

*Delichon urbicum*

Category A

Breeding summer visitor and passage migrant.

*World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):*

A widespread breeding summer visitor across virtually all of Europe and central and northern Asia. European birds winter wholly within the Afrotropics, although there are occasional winter records from the Mediterranean basin and western Europe north to Britain.

*Kent status (KOS 2021):*

It is a widespread summer visitor to Kent and a passage migrant, occasionally in large numbers in autumn.

The House Martin was included in Knight and Tolputt's "List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood" (1871). This list covered an area of six miles radius from Folkestone town hall, therefore extending further inland than the current Folkestone and Hythe area, so this does not provide conclusive evidence of its occurrence here. However, Ticehurst (1909) considered it to be "an abundant and evenly distributed species in summer, breeding numerous in all the towns and villages in the county", so there can be little doubt that it was to be found locally.



House Martin at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)



House Martin at Creteway Down (Brian Harper)

## Breeding atlas distribution

Figure 1 shows the breeding distribution by tetrad based on the results of the 2007-13 BTO/KOS atlas fieldwork.

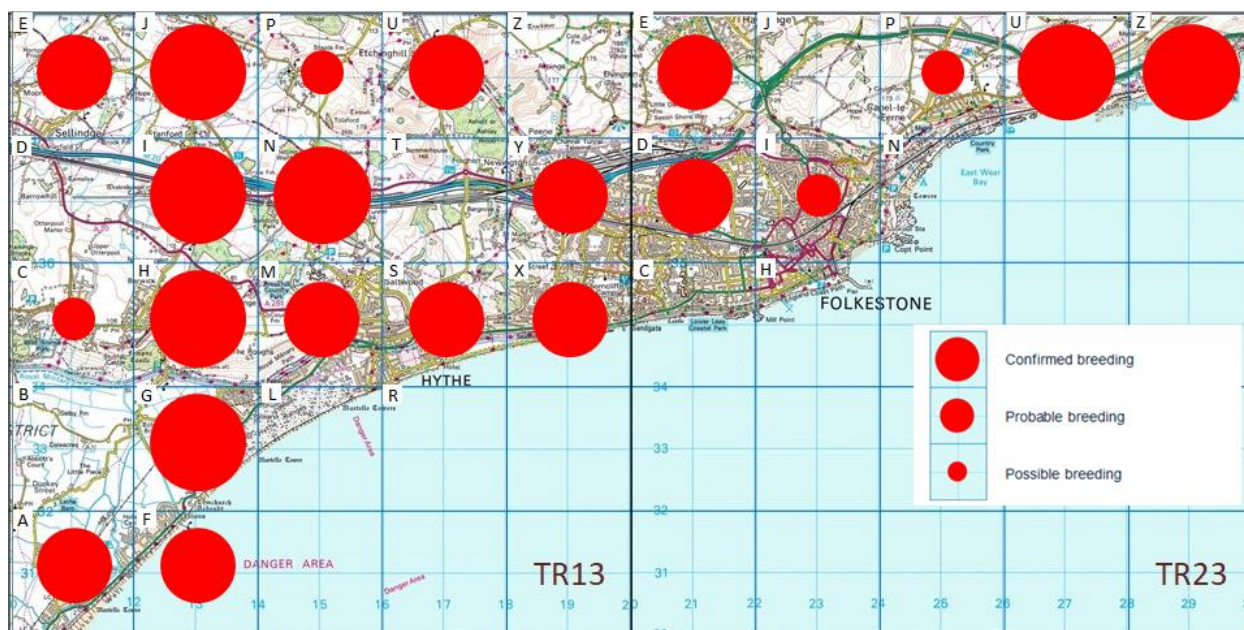


Figure 1: Breeding distribution of House Martin at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was confirmed in seven tetrads, with probable breeding in ten more and possible breeding in four others. The table below shows how this compares to previous atlases (Taylor *et al.* 1981; Henderson & Hodge 1998). The confirmed and probable breeding categories have been combined to account for differing definitions of these in the first atlas.

Breeding atlases	1967 - 1973		1988 - 1994		2007 - 2013	
Possible	1	(3%)	9	(29%)	4	(13%)
Probable/Confirmed	24	(77%)	20	(65%)	17	(55%)
Total	25	(81%)	29	(94%)	21	(68%)
Change			+4	(+16%)	-8	(-28%)

The table below shows the changes in tetrad occupancy across the three atlas periods.

Trends	First to second atlas (1967-73 to 1988-94)	Second to third atlas (1988-94 to 2007-13)	First to third atlas (1967-73 to 2007-13)
Local	+16%	-28%	-16%
Kent	+14%	-31%	-21%

The apparent increase between the first and second atlases was probably a result of improved coverage as the position across the county was largely stable and Henderson & Hodge actually stated that “anecdotal evidence suggests that the population is in decline, but hard evidence to support this is hard to come by”. However by the time of the third atlas this decline had become readily apparent.

Clements *et al.* (2015) noted that “there is little doubt that House Martin numbers are in decline within Kent. The number of occupied tetrads has fallen markedly” (by 31%), “while the [BTO Breeding Bird Survey] (BBS) trend suggests a halving of the population over twenty years” (a 57% reduction between 1995 and 2012).

The most recent Kent Bird Report (KOS, 2020) reported that this “rapid decline” was continuing and that the “occupation of BBS squares in Kent has decreased from 45% in 1994 to around 10% in 2018”. The authors attributed this to “with traditional wooden eaves nest sites being lost to uPVC replacements that nests cannot readily adhere to”. Locally there was reduction in occupied tetrads of 28% between second and third atlases, and anecdotal evidence indicates that this decline has since continued.

Balmer *et al.* (2013) described how the abundance change map derived from the latest atlas results showed a pattern common to several long-distance migrants, including Sand Martin and Swallow, whereby tetrad occupancy has increased in many parts of Ireland and northern Britain but decreased in south-east England. The causes of these regional differences are unclear. Ockendon *et al.* (2012) stated that given that this regional pattern is shared by several long-distance migrants with differing breeding ecology, it seems likely that factors acting on migration or in the wintering grounds are important. Climatic changes could also be a contributing factor.



House Martin at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)



House Martin at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)

Taylor *et al* remarked on “this species present-day virtual dependence on man-made structures for its nest sites” and Henderson & Hodge commented that “before utilising human settlements, House Martins must have nested on sites such as cliff faces and in caves, and would presumably have been a good deal scarcer” than they were then.

Taylor *et al* mentioned their “ancestral habits of breeding on the chalk cliffs between Folkestone and Dover” and these colonies have long been known, with John Hollyer noting their breeding on the cliff-face at Abbotscliffe in 1956. There is little early information on population levels but it appears that at least 50 pairs were present along the cliffs during the 1980s and 1990s.



House Martins at nest at Samphire Hoe (Andy Luckhurst)



House Martin at nest at Samphire Hoe (Ian Roberts)



The creation of Samphire Hoe has improved access to the base of the cliffs and made surveying of this species much easier. There are two distinct House Martin colonies on the cliffs, one at the western end of Samphire Hoe, below Abbotscliffe and a one at the eastern end, below Shakespeare Cliff (which extends into TR1333 and beyond the local recording area). The eastern colony typically holds larger numbers and the highest count to date was in 2019, when there were 29 active nests at the western colony and 50 active nests at the eastern colony, giving a total population of 79 breeding pairs.

### **Overall distribution**

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of House Martin by tetrad, with records in 31 tetrads (100%).

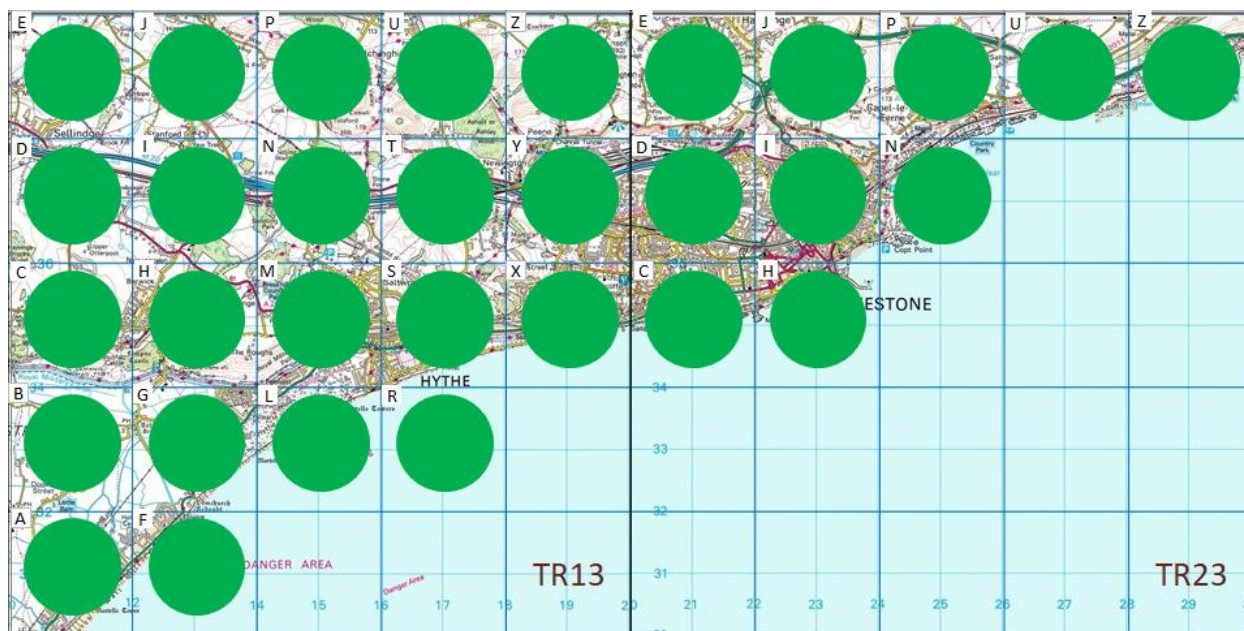


Figure 2: Distribution of all House Martin records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The earliest ever arrival, one seen arriving in off the sea at Copt Point by Dale Gibson on the 7<sup>th</sup> February 2004, was quite exceptional as records in this month were unprecedented in the county (where the earliest record previous had been on the 5<sup>th</sup> March). It was however reflected elsewhere in Kent and along the south coast of England, where temperatures were exceptional for the time of year (with a high of 17.9°C degrees in Kent on the 4<sup>th</sup>). A single bird had been present on the Isle of Wight from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> of February but then on the 7<sup>th</sup> there were singles at Copt Point and Sandown, with two at St. Margaret's Bay and Deal, and further singles in West Sussex and Dorset, with up to six were reported from the Isle of Wight.



House Martin at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)



House Martins at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)

Even March records are uncommon, with sightings in just six years:

Two at Copt Point on the 15<sup>th</sup> March 1997  
Two at Capel Battery on the 15<sup>th</sup> March 2000  
One at Nickolls Quarry on the 26<sup>th</sup> March 2017  
Three at Samphire Hoe on the 28<sup>th</sup> March 1998  
One at Folkestone Warren on the 31<sup>st</sup> March 1984  
One at Abbotscliffe and Samphire Hoe on the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016

The mean arrival date over the last decade has been the 5<sup>th</sup> April and the earliest double-figure count was 10 at Nickolls Quarry on the 11<sup>th</sup> April 2015, whilst numbers tend to remain fairly low during April, increasing in the last week of the month, when there have been peak counts of 40 at Nickolls Quarry on the 28<sup>th</sup> April 2002 and 30<sup>th</sup> April 2003. The main arrival occurs in May, with the earliest three-figure count being 100 at Samphire Hoe on the 7<sup>th</sup> May 2017, whilst counts in excess of 150 have occurred as follows:

170 west at Abbotscliffe on the 20<sup>th</sup> May 2000  
260 east at Capel-le-Ferne on the 21<sup>st</sup> May 2000  
200 at Castle Hill on the 31<sup>st</sup> May 2000  
196 in off the sea at Capel-le-Ferne on the 25<sup>th</sup> May 2003  
300 at Nickolls Quarry on the 24<sup>th</sup> May 2013  
400 at Capel-le-Ferne on the 29<sup>th</sup> May 2013

Autumn passage usually peaks during September or early October. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1984 c.5,000 (an “estimated flock of c.10,000 Swallows/martins”) flew east over Hythe “ahead of a weather front” and further counts of 5,000 or more have been logged on a dozen further occasions:

6,000 west at Abbotscliffe on the 5<sup>th</sup> September 1992  
6,000 east at Abbotscliffe on the 21<sup>st</sup> September 1992  
13,000 east at Folkestone on the 25<sup>th</sup> September 1994  
6,000 east at Abbotscliffe on the 15<sup>th</sup> September 1996  
6,000 west at Abbotscliffe on the 5<sup>th</sup> September 2000  
10,000 west at Hythe Ranges on the 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2000  
5,550 west at Abbotscliffe on the 20<sup>th</sup> September 2003  
c.50,000 west at Hythe on the 24<sup>th</sup> September 2014  
8,000 at Abbotscliffe on the 19<sup>th</sup> September 2015  
7,500 west at Abbotscliffe on the 20<sup>th</sup> September 2015  
c.5,000 south at Beachborough Ponds on the 14<sup>th</sup> Sep 2018 (“at least 10,000 Swallows and House Martins”)  
8,000 west at Seabrook on the 27<sup>th</sup> September 2018

The peak count of around 50,000 seen flying west over Hythe by Ian Roberts on the 24<sup>th</sup> September occurred over a two hour period from 07:30, after early rain had cleared, with birds moving at a rate of over 500 per minute at times.

Numbers decrease fairly rapidly during October and the latest ever four-figure count involved 1,000 at Abbotscliffe on the 16<sup>th</sup> October 2004, whilst the latest three-figure count was 275 flying west there on the 20<sup>th</sup> October 2012 and there have been two double-figure counts in November: ten at Abbotscliffe on the 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1997 and a flock of around 50 reported by Ralph Thorogood along the canal at Hythe on the 16<sup>th</sup> November 2011. This latter sighting is quite exceptional and there have been just ten later records, as follows:

One at West Hythe on the 19<sup>th</sup> November 1950  
Two west at Mill Point on the 21<sup>st</sup> November 2015  
One at Princes Parade on the 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2015  
One at Princes Parade on the 28<sup>th</sup> November 2015  
One south over Horn Street on the 29<sup>th</sup> November 2012  
One at Hythe on the 30<sup>th</sup> November 1963  
One at Lympne on the 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1974  
Two at Nickolls Quarry on the 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2022, with singles there on the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> November

The mean departure date over the last decade was the 1<sup>st</sup> November.

William Nevin noted two instances of particularly late nesting in the 1950s, when one “was seen feeding young in a nest in the High Street, Hythe” on the 16<sup>th</sup> October 1955 and “two pairs were still feeding young in nests at Hythe” on the 12<sup>th</sup> October 1957. In more recent years Derek Smith has provided details of young still being fed in the nest at Samphire Hoe at the end of September (in 2012).

One ringed as a juvenile at Folkestone on the 20<sup>th</sup> September 1960 was re-trapped near Doncaster, South Yorkshire (190 miles to the north-west) on the 26<sup>th</sup> May 1961.



House Martin at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)



House Martin at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)



House Martin at Creteway Down (Brian Harper)

Click [here](#) to listen to a local audio recording of one calling at Hawkinge on the 15<sup>th</sup> May 2022 (Ian Roberts).

## References

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## Acknowledgements

The tetrad map images were produced from the Ordnance Survey [Get-a-map service](#) and are reproduced with kind permission of [Ordnance Survey](#).

I am indebted to Andrew Henderson and Tim Hodge for providing access to the Kent Ornithological Society archives.