

Wheatear

Oenanthe oenanthe

Category A

Formerly bred, now only does so occasionally. A common passage migrant.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

A widespread breeding species across most of Europe, eastwards throughout much of central and northern Asia, and south to Iran. Also breeds in Greenland and arctic North America. There has been a decline in the population in western Europe, probably chiefly due to habitat changes, although the Sahel drought in the late 1960s is perhaps also implicated. Winters in tropical Africa south of the Sahara.



Wheatear at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)

Kent status (KOS 2021):

In Kent it is a local breeding species and a widespread passage migrant in varying numbers.

The Wheatear 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) noted that it "arrives in spring along the whole of the south coast of Kent" and that "the autumn emigration is noticed throughout the county", so there can be little doubt that it was to be found locally.

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 Wheatear at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was confirmed in one tetrad, with possible breeding in one more. 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	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	1	(3%)
Probable/Confirmed	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	1	(3%)
Total	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	2	(6%)
Change			0	(0%)	+2	(--%)

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	0%	--%	--%
Kent	-37%	+21%	-23%

Regarding its distribution as a breeding species Ticehurst mentioned that it could be encountered along the south coast between Dungeness and Dymchurch, where it bred in rabbit holes, and neither he nor Harrison (1953) appears to have been aware of its presence at Hythe Ranges, where Roger Norman found it nesting on the shingle when he first visited at the end of the 1940s. He noted that in the western section of the ranges that he regularly watched “two to three pairs bred annually from 1950 at least until 1962 (with four pairs in 1957)”, whilst further east “another one to two pairs bred in six years except for 1960, when there were four pairs” (Norman, 2006). Roger noted that in 1957 a nest was found in part of the wreckage of a V-1 flying bomb, illustrating Ticehurst’s remark that “on shingle it will utilise any curious and convenient situation or article which suits its purpose”.

Roger also noted that at Nickolls Quarry a pair were present between the 15th March and July 1952 and “presumably bred in the vicinity” (Norman, 2007).

The lack of breeding records from the first atlas period presumably reflected a lack of coverage, as Roger Norman found that it was still breeding at Hythe Ranges when he returned to the area in 1990, although only a single pair remained. These records were unfortunately not included in the second county atlas. A single pair continued to breed there in each year to 1996 and intermittently until 2001, but there has been no confirmed nesting since.

It was included in the most recent atlas as possibly breeding at Hythe Ranges (TR13 L) as one was present in suitable breeding habitat on the 11th May 2012, although this may have been a late migrant (access to the site is restricted making it difficult to follow up on potential breeding records). Further sightings there on the 16th May 2015 and 12th May 2018 might have been late migrants or indications of breeding, whilst a male there on the 6th June 2015 appears to be late to have been a migrant.



Wheatear at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)



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The confirmed breeding record in the most recent atlas related to series of sightings at Samphire Hoe in 2011: a male was singing there on the 21st and 31st May, whilst a pair were present on the 1st June and the female was reportedly seen carrying food on the 5th June, but no fledged young were noted so perhaps they were predated. This was the first occurrence of breeding at this site, although a juvenile was noted there on the 18th June 1999.

There has been no confirmation of breeding there since but there have been a number of summer sightings. In 2014 a juvenile was seen on several dates from the 21st July, in 2015 singles was present on the 21st May and 1st July, in 2016 there were singles on the 24th May, 1st June and 26th June, in 2017 there were singles on the 18th June and 11th to 14th July, and in 2020 one was seen on the 15th July, with two on the 21st July. It is unlikely that it could manage to nest undetected at this relatively well-watched site, whilst the May records could relate to late migrants and the July records could relate to early migrants (although the latter are earlier than any recorded elsewhere), so these sightings are intriguing.

On the 29th April 2017 a possible breeding pair appeared to be defending a rabbit hole at Peene Quarry but were not subsequently reported. There have also been a handful of isolated mid-summer records away from the breeding sites: a male was at Copt Point on the 19th June 1987, a juvenile was at Round Down on the 11th July 2007 and a juvenile was at Princes Parade on the 25th June 2012.

Clements *et al.* (2015) noted that the population in Kent has fluctuated, in parallel with the wide variation shown by the national BTO Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) data. It was estimated that the Kent population reached 80 or more pairs in the 1950s, but numbers had fallen to an estimated 20-35 pairs by the time of the second county atlas. The position had shown little change by the third county atlas, with the population thought to lie within the range of 20-30 pairs.

It is difficult to be certain due to discontinued observations, but locally the population may also have peaked in the 1950s. The increased utilisation of Hythe Ranges and the associated disturbance levels may have been a factor that affected numbers there. It is no longer a regular breeding species but may still nest on occasion.

Overall distribution

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of Wheatear by tetrad, with records in 24 tetrads (77%).

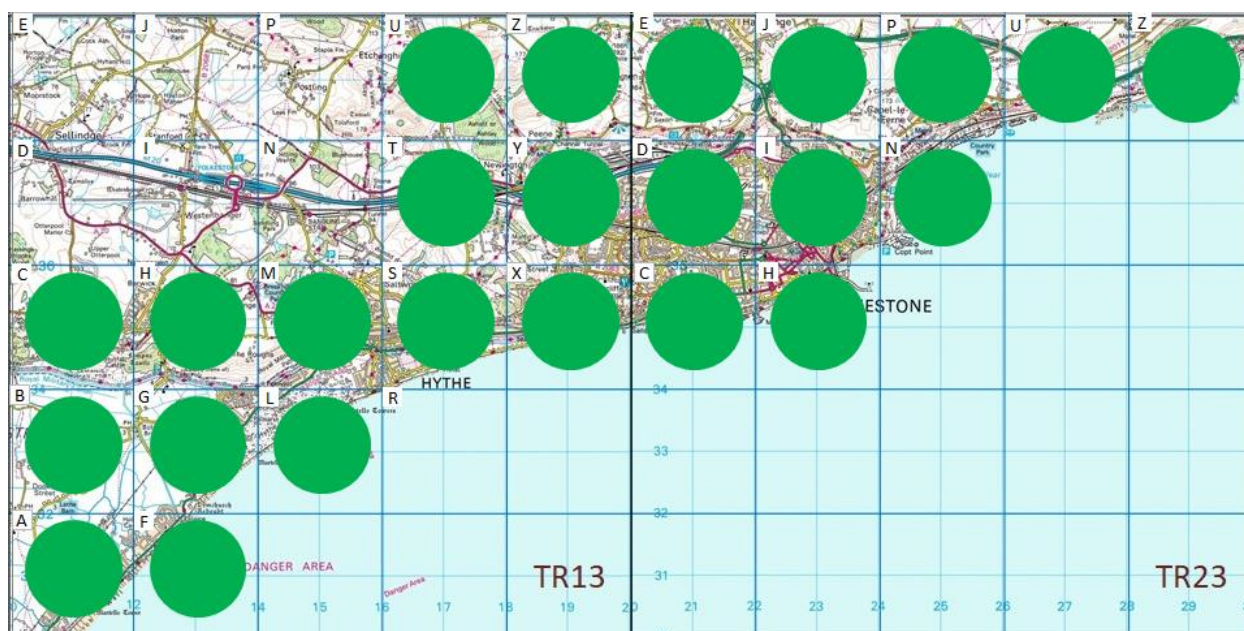


Figure 2: Distribution of all Wheatear records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

However, it continues to be a regular passage migrant. The earliest returning migrant away from breeding sites was at Beachborough Park on the 26th July 2016, whilst a juvenile at Samphire Hoe on the same date in 2017 had been ringed on Skokholm Island, off Pembrokeshire, 23 days earlier.

Other July records have included one at Abbotscliffe on the 27th July 1997, singles at Copt Point on the 28th July 1987 and 28th July 1997, one at Mill Point on the 29th July 2019, one at Folkestone on the 30th July 1996 and two at Abbotscliffe on the 31st July 2011. There have also been several sightings at Samphire Hoe in the last four days of the month.



Wheatear at Hythe Roughts (Brian Harper)



Wheatear at the Dymchurch Redoubt (Brian Harper)

Autumn passage peaks during August and September, when counts in excess of 15 have been noted on several occasions:

30 at Nickolls Quarry on the 1st September 1957
30 at Cheriton Hill on the 25th September 1982
16 at Abbotscliffe on the 14th August 1992, with 18 on the 18th and 19 on the 29th August
18 at Abbotscliffe on the 5th September 1992, with 17 on the 14th September
20 at Abbotscliffe on the 21st and 26th August 1993
20 at Church Hougham on the 24th August 1995
19 at Church Hougham on the 13th August 1996
16 at Abbotscliffe on the 26th August 1996
19 at Church Hougham on the 30th August 1996
21 at Church Hougham on the 28th August 1997
18 at Samphire Hoe on the 25th September 2008
18 at Samphire Hoe on the 10th September 2011
20 at Samphire Hoe on the 19th August 2014
17 at Hythe Ranges on the 24th August 2014
22 at Hythe Ranges on the 22nd September 2022

Numbers decrease through October, when the only double-figure counts have comprised 11 at Abbotscliffe on the 1st October 2000 and 12 at Hythe Ranges the following day, whilst stragglers have been seen into the first week of November in six years, with later birds at Samphire Hoe on the 8th November 2011 and the 9th November 1997. An exceptionally late individual was seen by Phil Smith and Mark Kennett at Samphire Hoe on the 4th December 2016.

The Wheatear is often the first passerine trans-Saharan migrant to arrive in the spring and its appearance is always eagerly anticipated. The earliest ever spring arrival occurred in 2021, when Cathy Hearsey saw a male at Samphire Hoe on the 24th February 2021. This remarkable sighting was attributed to a plume of warm air from northern Africa that raised local temperatures to over 13°C and led to a small arrival in southern and western Britain at this time, including one at Dungeness on the 21st February.

The next earliest was not noted until the second week of March, when there was one at Samphire Hoe on the 8th March 2015 (with it or another there on the 10th March), whilst other sightings in the first fortnight of March have involved one at Samphire Hoe on the 9th March 2000, singles at Copt Point on the 12th March 1990, Church Hougham on the 12th March 1995 and Samphire Hoe on the 12th March 2011, at Botolph's Bridge on the 13th March 1991 and Samphire Hoe on the 13th March 2007, and at Hythe on the 14th March 1960.

The passage of European breeding birds peaks in late March or early April, when double-figure counts have comprised 11 at Hythe on the 24th March 1968, 12 at Folkestone on the 23rd March 1996, and 11 at Hythe and 15 at Samphire Hoe on the 7th April 2011.



Wheatear at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)



Wheatear at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)

Greenland Wheatear

Oenanthe oenanthe leucorhoa

Birds breeding in Greenland and arctic North America (form *leucorhoa*) do not return to these regions until mid-May and pass through western Europe in late April and early May. A second “wave” of passage at this time presumably mostly involves birds of this race. Double-figure counts have involved:

- 15 at Folkestone on the 20th April 1996
- 10 at Abbotscliffe on the 22nd Apr 1998
- 25 at the cliffs (including 17 at Abbotscliffe) on the 22nd April 2004
- 11 at Samphire Hoe on the 26th April 2005
- 12 at Samphire Hoe on the 5th May 2012, with 21 there the next day
- 10 at Samphire Hoe on the 26th April 2013
- 10 at Samphire Hoe on the 29th April 2017
- 18 at Hythe Ranges on the 23rd April 2018
- 13 at Samphire Hoe on the 1st May 2018

Stragglers may occur into late May, with sightings at Samphire discussed above, and other records as follows: singles at Church Hougham on the 24th May 2018, Princes Parade on the 26th May 2018 and Hythe on the 27th May 2021, and a very late pair at Abbotscliffe on the 1st June 2001.

Birds of this form also pass through in the autumn, and Taylor *et al.* presumed that they were “probably as regular in this season as in the spring”, though are less frequently recognised.

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Wheatear at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)



Wheatear at Hotel Imperial golf course (Brian Harper)

Acknowledgements

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

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