

Lesser Redpoll

Acanthis cabaret

Category A

Winter visitor and passage migrant, has probably bred.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

It was almost confined to Britain and Ireland, with an isolated population in the alps, until 1920 since when it has spread, apparently from Britain, to coastal areas of north-west Europe and inland to parts of central Europe. The main cause of colonisation is thought to be large-scale habitat changes due to planting of conifers for forestry, shelter-belts and amenity. British populations often winter within Britain but, in years when food is scarce, also winters further south and east in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, western Germany and very occasionally Iberia. Isolated populations breeding in the central European Alps are largely resident, moving to lower altitudes in winter.



Lesser Redpoll at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)

Kent status (KOS 2021):

In Kent it is passage migrant and winter visitor in variable numbers. It was formerly also a breeding species, with possibly a few pairs still nesting in the county in some years.

The Lesser Redpoll 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 "fairly numerous, and distributed throughout the county in suitable haunts" in winter, when "it is not infrequently seen in the alder copses in company with Siskins, and generally to be found wherever there are birches and hornbeams in woods and parks, but it may also be met with in the marshes where there is an abundance of thistles and rank vegetation, on the seeds of which it chiefly subsists". It does seem very likely 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.

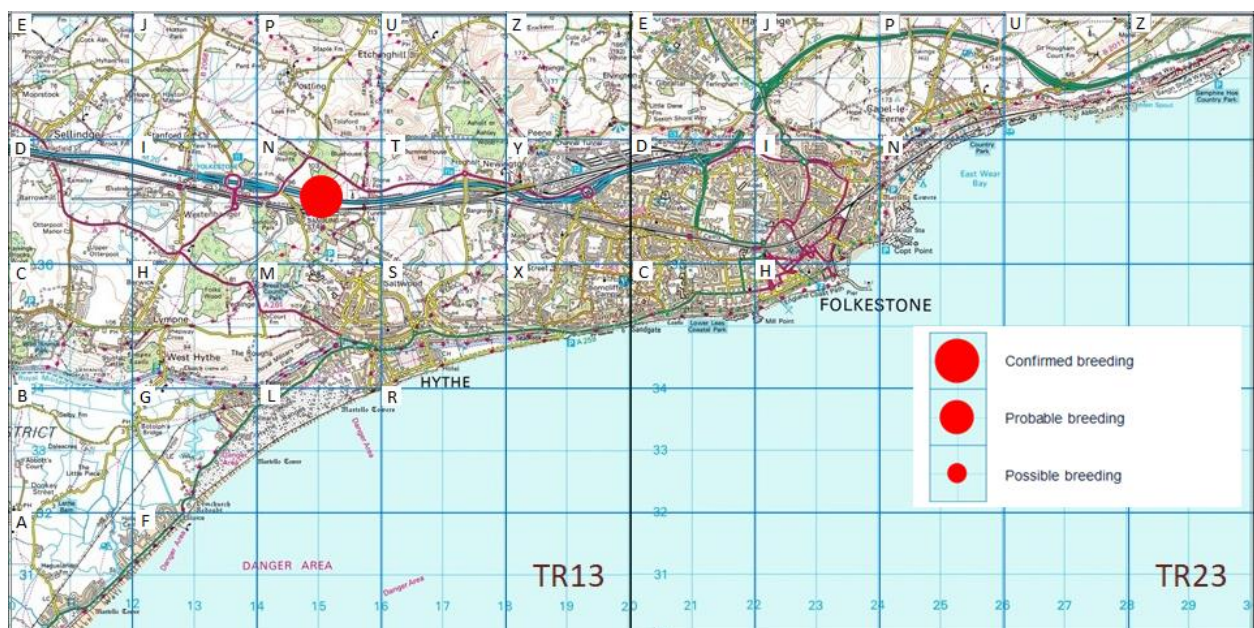


Figure 1: Breeding distribution of Lesser Redpoll at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

The only indication of breeding involved a possible incidence in one tetrad. 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%)	3	(10%)	1	(3%)
Probable/Confirmed	0	(0%)	1	(3%)	0	(0%)
Total	0	(0%)	4	(13%)	1	(3%)
Change			+4	(--%)	-3	(-300%)

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	--%	-300%	--%
Kent	+60%	-29%	-86%

Although both Ticehurst and Harrison (1953) considered the Lesser Redpoll to be common in winter, they observed that the summer populations fluctuated considerably. Breeding records were few and local, and mainly from the Weald.

Taylor *et al.* (1981) reported a marked increase in the breeding population from the mid-1960s, associated with the spread of conifer plantations, with growth initially mostly in the woodlands of the Weald and around the Stour Valley. By the end of their review period (1976), it had colonised 234 (23%) of the tetrads in the county, favouring young conifer plantations, birch, hawthorn and willow scrub at well-established gravel pits and waste land, and with increasing records in suburban gardens and orchards, though with no local breeding records.



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There were no records of local breeding in the first county but it was located in four tetrads in the second atlas, with probable or confirmed breeding in TR13 P and possible breeding in TR13 D, TR23 I and TR23 N, with the latter two instances at coastal sites perhaps relating to migrants. Henderson & Hodge commented on the rapid expansion in the county from 1962, which reached a peak in 1977, and a downward trend that then followed and was still continuing during the second atlas (although it was still noted in 34% of tetrads across the county, with an estimated 500 to 1,000 pairs).

During the most recent atlas there was just one instance of possible breeding, with a single bird noted in suitable nesting habitat at Chesterfield Wood on the 13th April 2012, however this could have involved a late migrant.

Clements *et al.* (2015) commented on the continuation of the rapid decline of this species' fortunes in the county, noting that the population was "possibly only a quarter" of that estimated in the second atlas by 1996. Subsequent Kent Bird Reports have recorded only a scatter of breeding season records, with one confirmed breeding pair near Horsmonden in 2005. During the third atlas period, probable or confirmed breeding records were returned from just six tetrads in areas of coniferous woodland in the High Weald, with a scatter of possible breeding records from other woodland areas (in total it was only noted in 1% of tetrads across Kent).

Clements *et al.* referred to declines in both survival and productivity as reasons for this collapse in numbers, with the main ecological drivers thought to be related to woodland changes, with less planting of young forestry and a reduction in birch seeds which are a main food source. Balmer *et al.* (2013) reported that at a national level the breeding range had only decreased by 16%, but marked losses in eastern and southern areas have been offset by gains in western and northern areas.

The Kent Bird Report for 2019 (KOS 2021) stated that there were "possibly still a few pairs" breeding in the county, although the last confirmed instance was in 2005. Small numbers have been noted though in suitable breeding habitat in some summers since, most often in the Hemsted Forest area.

Overall distribution

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of Lesser Redpoll by tetrad, with records in 28 tetrads (90%).

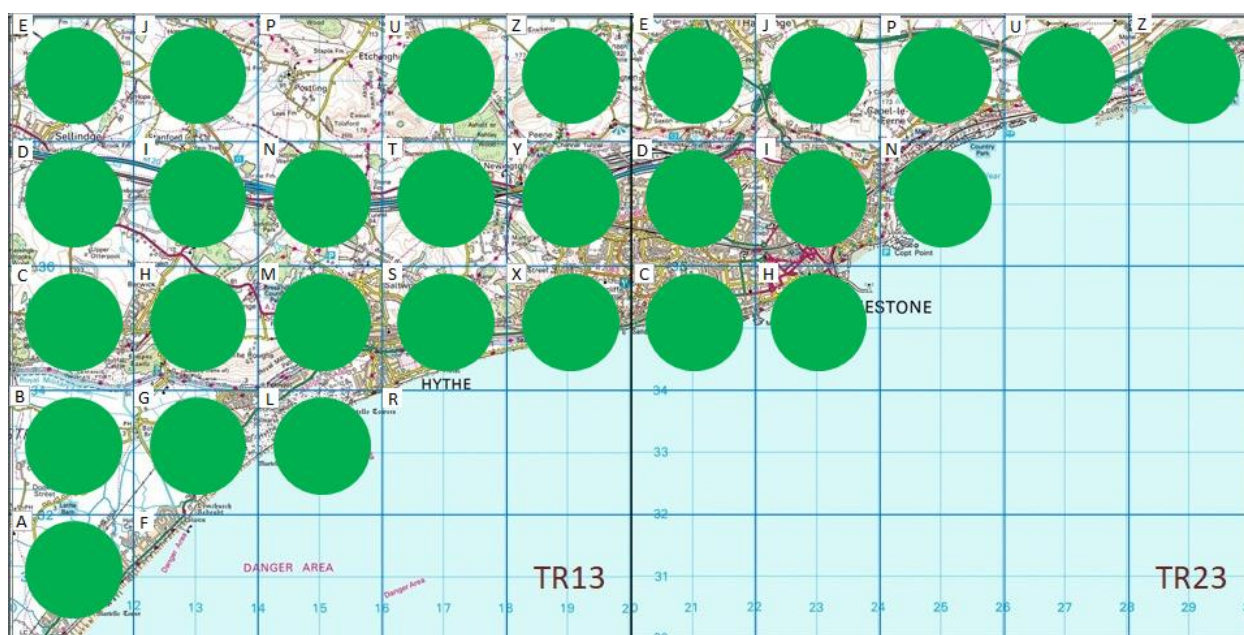


Figure 2: Distribution of all Lesser Redpoll records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The earliest autumn arrival comprised three at Nickolls Quarry on the 2nd September 2002, whilst the only other record in the first half of September involved one arriving in off the sea at Capel Battery on the 8th September 1997. Autumn passage is typically noted from mid-September, with the largest counts in this month involving 48 flying east at Abbotscliffe on the 27th September 1997, 44 flying east there the following day and 28 flying east there on the 28th September 2020.

Annual variability in autumn passage is significant, with a mean over the last two decades of 190 per autumn, but with just single figure totals in some years (2014 and 2019) and very large numbers in others (with over 500 in three years: 562 in 2003, 686 in 2015 and 805 in 2020).

The largest numbers have been logged in October or early November, with counts in excess of 50 having been noted on a number of occasions:

100 at Hythe from the 7th to 9th November 1960
 60 west at Mill Point on the 1st November 1989
 54 east at Abbotscliffe on the 29th October 1993
 133 east at Capel-le-Ferne Café on the 21st October 2003
 179 in/east at Capel-le-Ferne Café on the 24th October 2003
 81 east at Abbotscliffe on the 4th November 2003
 81 east at Abbotscliffe on the 1st November 2010
 201 east at Abbotscliffe on the 27th October 2012
 62 east at Abbotscliffe on the 13th October 2015
 61 east at Abbotscliffe on the 15th October 2015
 62 east at Horn Street on the 5th October 2020
 58 In/west at Abbotscliffe on the 9th October 2020
 66 east at Abbotscliffe on the 16th October 2020
 104 east at Abbotscliffe on the 17th October 2020
 255 east at Willop Outfall on the 18th October 2020

Five of these large counts, including the highest, occurred during the record autumn passage in 2020.

Autumn passage typically dwindles quickly after the first week of November, although small numbers may be noted throughout the month. The only significant later movements were noted in 2010, when 37 flew east on the 15th November and 30 flew east on the 22nd November.

Wintering numbers are generally small, with the largest count relating to 40 noted by H. Schreiber at Sandling Park “in the first quarter” of 1974. There have been occasional records since from woods in the Saltwood area, with a peak of up to 30 present at Brockhill Country Park in January 2006, but in many years none are noted. Neil Frampton saw a “a few birds annually, usually with Siskins, on alders which line the banks of the canal between West Hythe and Hythe” in the 1980s and there were still regular records there until 2006, with a peak of seven on the 23rd January 2004, but very few since. Ones or twos may be noted occasionally at other sites, with the only counts of note having involved up to 12 at Beachborough Park in January 2018 and up to eight there in December of that year.



Lesser Redpoll at Folkestone (Sue Dixon)



Lesser Redpoll at Beachborough (Steve Tomlinson)

Spring passage may be noted between mid-March and mid-May but is much lighter than autumn, although annual variability is equally significant. The mean over the last two decades is just six per spring, with four “blank” years and peaks of 36 in 2012 and 34 in 2019. There is little correlation between volumes of spring and autumn passage, for example the record autumn in 2020 was preceded by a “blank” spring and followed by a total of just five in spring 2021. The only spring movements of more than two have involved:

4 east at Abbotscliffe on the 27th March 2012
 20 in off the sea at the cliffs (8 at Capel Battery and 12 at Abbotscliffe) on the 29th March 2012
 4 west at Capel Battery on the 7th May 2012
 4 west at Beachborough Park on the 20th March 2019

There have only been three sightings after mid-May: two flying in off the sea at Abbotscliffe on the 17th May 1998, two flying north-west at Abbotscliffe on the 26th May 2021 and one at Beachborough Park on the 30th May 2018.

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](#).

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