

Chiffchaff

Phylloscopus collybita

Category A

Breeding summer visitor and passage migrant, with small numbers wintering.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds throughout the upper and middle latitudes of the Western Palearctic, extending eastwards across Siberia to Yakutiya and Lake Baikal. Western populations winter within and to the south of the breeding range, whilst eastern populations vacate the breeding areas entirely.

Winters south to the northern Afrotropics, Arabia and northern India. In Britain some breeding birds remain for the winter and may be joined by continental birds, whilst evidence shows that individuals may return to the same area in successive winters (Snow & Perrins 1998).



Chiffchaff at Hythe (Brian Harper)

Kent status (KOS 2021):

It is a widespread summer visitor and passage migrant in Kent, with an increasing wintering population.

The Chiffchaff 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) found it to be "fairly generally distributed throughout the wooded districts" and widespread on passage 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.

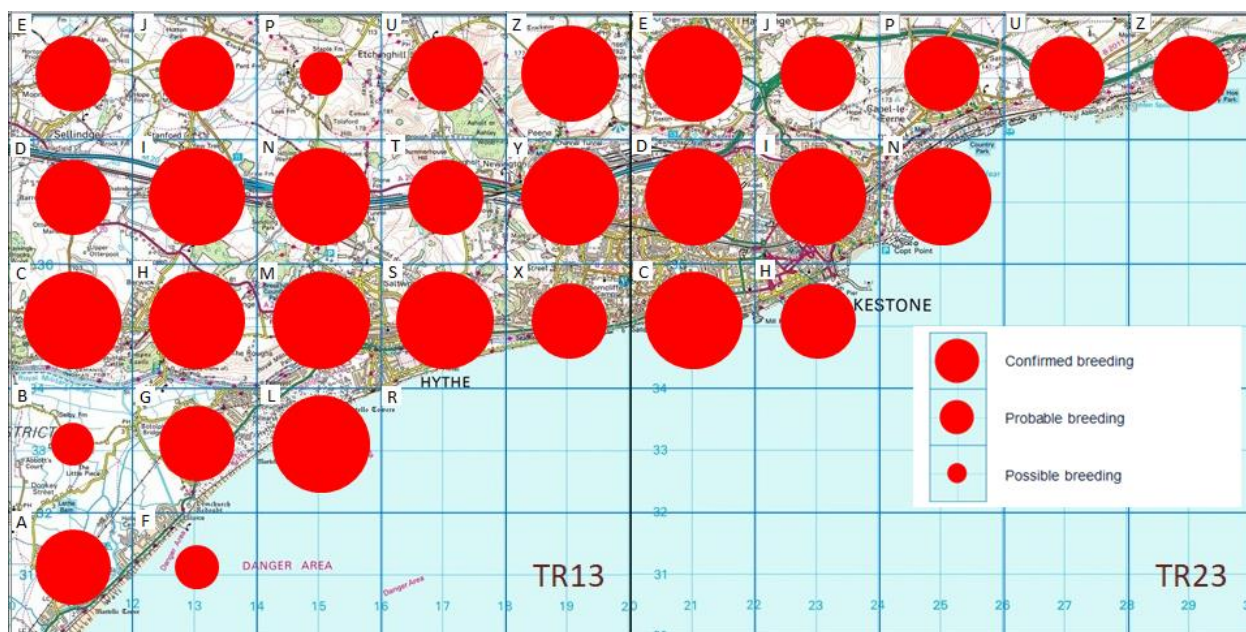


Figure 1: Breeding distribution of Chiffchaff at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was confirmed in 14 tetrads, with probable breeding in 13 more and possible breeding in three 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%)	2	(6%)	3	(10%)
Probable/Confirmed	17	(55%)	24	(77%)	27	(87%)
Total	18	(58%)	26	(84%)	30	(97%)
Change			+8	(+44%)	+4	(+15%)

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	+44%	+15%	+67%
Kent	+39%	+14%	+58%

Harrison (1953) considered the Chiffchaff to be closely linked to woodland coppices, parklands and gardens and known only as a passage migrant in the more treeless districts. He found to be “never quite so numerous as the Willow Warbler”, whilst in “some years it is definitely scarce”. Taylor *et al.* also considered to be “rather more exacting in its ecological requirement than the Willow Warbler, needing tall trees as song-posts, and for this reason is very local in comparatively treeless districts, especially ... on Romney Marsh”. In the first county atlas all but one instance of confirmed breeding locally was in TR13 in the 15 tetrads distributed from the canal northwards (the other was in TR23 N).

Henderson & Hodge described an increase from an occupation of 58% of tetrads across the county in the first atlas to 81% by the second atlas. This was mirrored by an increase from 58% to 84% locally, with an increase from one to ten tetrads with probable/confirmed breeding in TR23.

Clements *et al.* (2015) reported a continued increase across the county to 92% of occupied tetrads by the third atlas, describing a pattern of gains in marginal habitat, such as the Romney Marsh. Again the local position was very similar, with an increase to 97% of tetrads occupied and a spread on the Romney Marsh. The continued increase in population is thought to be linked to changes in winter distribution attributed, at least in part, to milder winters (Balmer *et al.* 2013).

Overall distribution

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of Chiffchaff by tetrad, with records in 30 tetrads (97%).

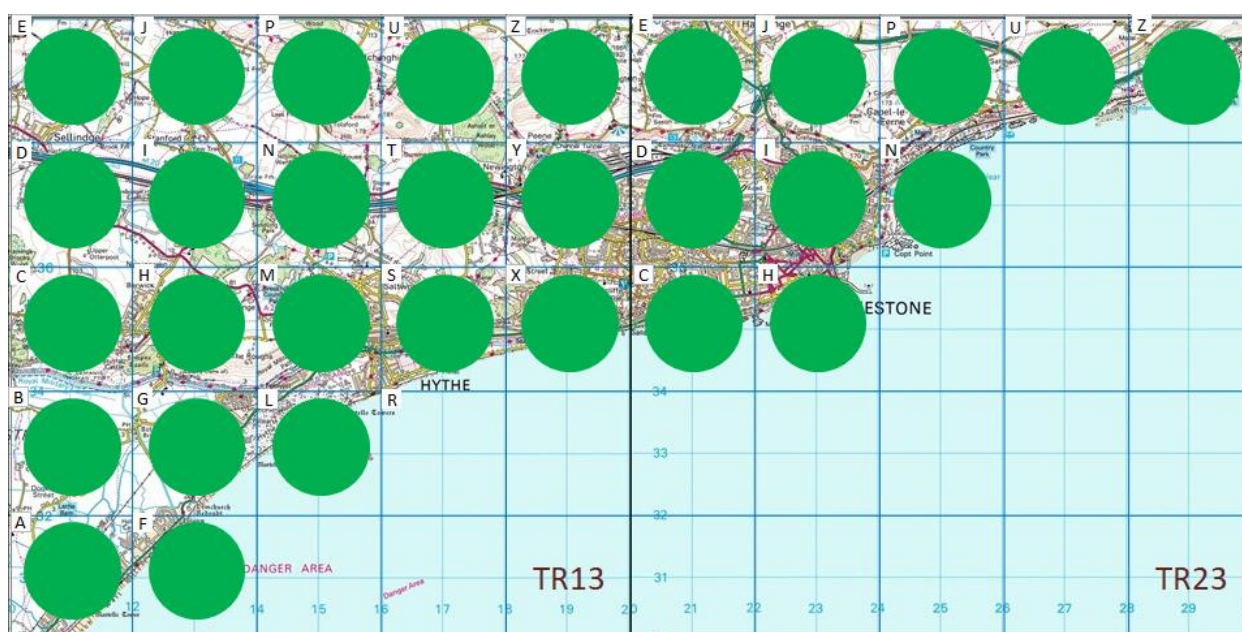


Figure 2: Distribution of all Chiffchaff records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The Chiffchaff has undergone a marked change in status since the time of Harrison, who was only able to cite five winter records in Kent. Taylor *et al.* described fairly regular reports of overwintering since 1960 although found it “difficult to ascertain the numbers involved”, however considered a count of four together in February 1971 to be exceptional.

The first documented local sightings involved singles seen by William Nevin at Hythe on the 16th January and 25th February 1959 (possibly involving the same individual) quickly followed by one seen by Miss V. Day at Folkestone in early January 1961. Further singles were seen at Folkestone at the end of February 1969, at West Hythe on the 25th February 1970 and at Folkestone on the 21st December 1980, with two at Park Farm on the 24th January 1983 and another at Folkestone Warren on the 22nd December of that year.

Singles were seen along the Hythe Canal on the 6th February 1984, at Mill Point on the 6th December 1989 and at Folkestone in January 1991, whilst six were counted at Mill Point on the 8th December 1991. There have regular winter records since, with annual occurrences since 1995.

Most sightings have involved ones and twos, but there have been larger counts of three along the canal to the west of Hythe on the 19th February 2005, three at Nickolls Quarry on the 15th December 2006, up to five along the canal at Princes Parade in December 2014/January 2015, up to seven there in December 2015/January 2016, up to four at the Willop Sewage Works in February 2017, January 2022 and December 2022, up to seven at Beachborough Lakes in December 2018 and three there in February 2019.

Harrison gave an earliest arrival date in spring of the 9th March but by time of Taylor *et al.* arrivals were occurring earlier and the mean arrival date was around the 11th March, although the earliest spring dates were already becoming “confused by the presence of wintering birds”. The earliest local arrival prior to the 1980s involved one along the canal west of Hythe on the 21st March 1960, whilst in the 1980s there were two at West Hythe on the 6th March 1984, one at Copt Point on the 12th March 1981, six at West Hythe on the 13th March 1982 and one at Cheriton on the 18th March 1989.



Chiffchaff at West Hythe (Brian Harper)



Chiffchaff at Hythe (Brian Harper)

The increase in wintering birds has made it increasingly difficult to identify the first spring migrants but these probably typically arrive in the first week of March, with arrival gathering pace from mid-month. The earliest double-figure counts have occurred on the 17th March with c.10 along the canal at Princes Parade in 2008 and 15 there in 2017. Passage usually peaks during the last week of March, when the largest counts have involved 20 at Hythe on the 29th March 1996 and Folkestone Warren on the 29th March 1998, 25 along the canal at Princes Parade on the 30th March 2016 and 30 at Hythe on the 24th March 1981 and the 28th March 1996. Counts during April have included 20 at Hythe on the 3rd April 1995 and 20+ along the canal west of Hythe on the 14th April 2013.

Autumn movement begins in late August and is protracted, with the main departure occurring during September and October, and stragglers recorded into late November although termination of passage is often masked by overwintering.

It is remarkable, considering the fairly recent spread and apparent increase in population, that the largest count by a considerable distance occurred as long ago as 1967, when over 700 were seen at Cheriton on the 25th September. There have only been four subsequent dates when there have been three figure totals in the area: 100+ at Creteway Down on the 29th September 2013, 102 (52 at Samphire Hoe and 50 at Abbotscliffe) on the 3rd October 2019, 150+ at Princes Parade on the 5th October 2014 and 209 (including 97 at Princes Parade, 61 at Folkestone Warren and 30 at Samphire Hoe) on the 17th September 2017.

Click [here](#) to listen to a local audio recording of two birds (one singing and one calling) at West Hythe on the 23rd May 2015 (Brian Harper).



Chiffchaff at Willop Sewage Works (Brian Harper)



Chiffchaff at West Hythe (Brian Harper)

Scandinavian Chiffchaff and Siberian Chiffchaff

P. c. abietinus and *P. c. tristis*

The form *P. c. abietinus* (Scandinavian Chiffchaff), which breeds in northern Fennoscandia east to the Ural Mountains in northwest Russia, and south to the Black Sea, is widely thought to occur as a regular passage migrant and winter visitor in Britain (e.g. Balmer *et al.*). This form is morphologically very similar to nominate Chiffchaff, with only minor average differences in plumage and biometrics, and no consistent differences in songs or calls. Collinson *et al.* (2018) found surprisingly few *abietinus* in a sample of birds trapped in Britain that underwent DNA analysis, however they concluded that “it seems more likely that *abietinus* does reach Britain and other western European countries, potentially in good numbers, but most are lost among the nominate birds that they closely resemble”.

The form *P. c. tristis* (Siberian Chiffchaff), which breeds in Russia east of the Urals, and in Kazakhstan and Mongolia, wintering in Iran and the northern Indian subcontinent, is a scarce winter visitor and passage migrant (usually in late autumn and occasionally in spring) to Britain, with an annual mean over the last decade of around 250 sightings (White & Kehoe, 2019). This form is morphologically more distinct, particularly the eastern birds (from east of the Yenisey River) which have the upperparts and sides of the breast diffused with a distinctive olive-buff, richer, more chestnut tones in the ear-coverts and no yellow in the supercilium (or anywhere except the axillaries and underwing-coverts) and olive tones restricted to the edges of the wing feathers and scapulars. Western birds originating from between the Urals and the Yenisey River (the “*fulvescens*” of some authors) though may have yellow in the supercilium and olive tones to some crown and mantle feathers. All *tristis* have an extremely divergent song, and the characteristic monosyllabic ‘sad’ call that gives this subspecies its name.

The breeding range of *tristis* overlaps with that of *abietinus* in a relatively narrow contact zone in Russia, from the Arkhangelsk region to the southern Urals. Interbreeding occurs in this zone, producing a high proportion of intermediates and the spectre of intergradation has haunted identification of extralimital Siberian Chiffchaffs in western Europe (Collinson *et al.*).

There have been five local records of birds that showed classic morphological features, and were heard to give the characteristic call, as follows:

- 2000** Capel-le-Ferne, one, 8th November (I. A. Roberts)
2006 Nickolls Quarry, one, 15th December (I. A. Roberts)
2013 Samphire Hoe, one, 9th December (P. Holt)
2017 Willop Sewage Works, one, 6th to 24th February (I. A. Roberts)
2019 Willop Sewage Works, one, 7th November (I. A. Roberts)

There have been a number of other sightings locally of birds that have showed at least some morphological characters but could not be confirmed.

Collinson *et al.* found that many “grey” migrant Chiffchaffs, identified morphologically by ringers in the Netherlands as *abietinus*, were found to be genetically *tristis*, raising the possibility that *tristis* may be more regular in occurrence in western Europe than currently believed.



tristis Chiffchaff at the Willop Sewage Works in 2019
(Ian Roberts)



tristis Chiffchaff at the Willop Sewage Works in 2017
(Ian Roberts)

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Acknowledgements

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