

## Isabelline Wheatear

*Oenanthe isabellina*

Category A

Very rare vagrant

1 record

Breeds in dry, usually mountainous areas on the Black Sea coast from eastern Greece north to Ukraine and south-west Russia, and east from Turkey through Kazakhstan and Mongolia to northern China, south to Iran and northern Pakistan. Winters in Africa from the Sahel zone to east Africa, and in the Middle East to southern Iran, Pakistan and north-west India. It is a very rare vagrant to Western Europe (Snow & Perrins, 1998).



Isabelline Wheatear at Church Hougham (Rob Wilson)

The first British record occurred in May 1887 but there was ninety year gap until the next in 1977. After further singles in 1979, 1980 and 1988 it has since occurred with some regularity, with a total of 51 records to the end of 2019, including record influxes of eight in 2016 and 2019, and a recent average of between one and two per annum. Apart from the first national record, all others have occurred between September and November (BBRC, 2021, Rare Bird Alert 2021). The local record is currently also still the only county record.

The only local record was found by Ian Roberts and Jamie Gibson at Abbotscliffe on the 6<sup>th</sup> October 1996, and later settled at Church Hougham for the rest of the day. An account of the record is provided below.

The record by year is shown in figure 1.

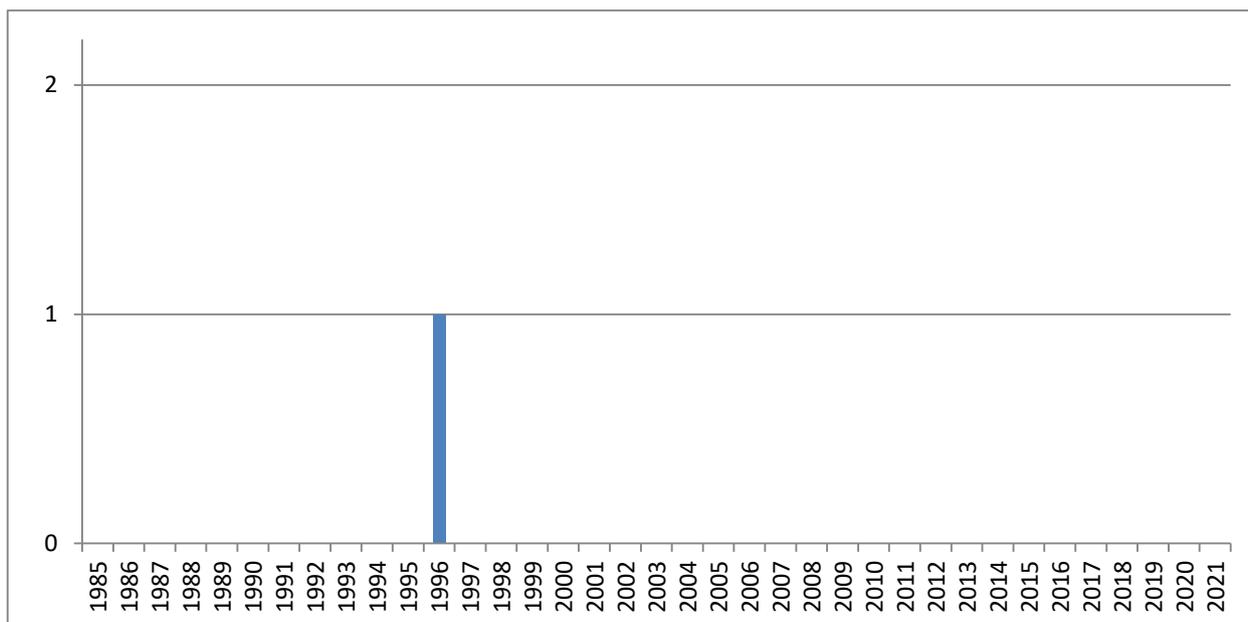


Figure 1: Isabelline Wheatear records at Folkestone and Hythe

The record by week is given in figure 2

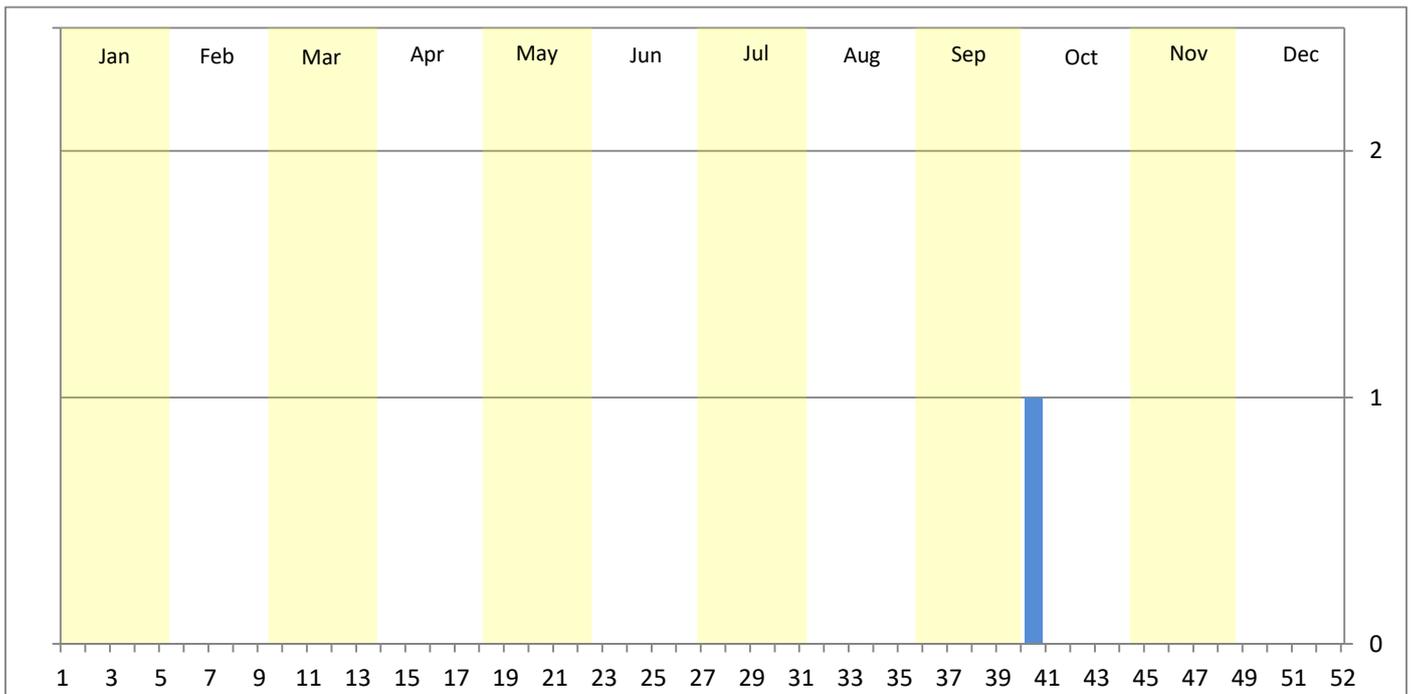


Figure 2: Isabelline Wheatear records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Figure 3 shows the distribution of records by tetrad, with the single area record being noted in two adjacent tetrads.

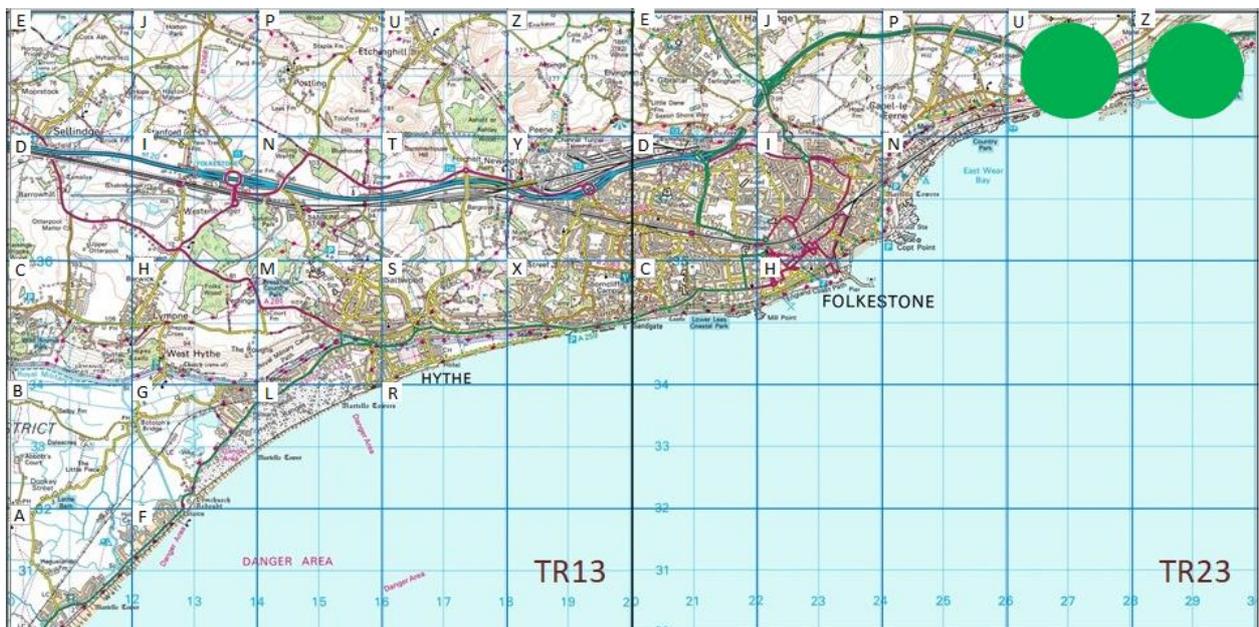


Figure 3: Distribution of all Isabelline Wheatear records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Confirmation of the only area record is as follows:

**1996** Abbotscliffe and Church Hougham, one, 6<sup>th</sup> October, photographed (I. A. Roberts, J. A. Gibson *et al*)

An account of the first area record is given below.

## **Isabelline Wheatear at Abbotscliffe and Church Hougham**

**6<sup>th</sup> October 1996**

(Ian A Roberts, Jamie A Gibson)

### **Weather conditions:**

A dry, mostly overcast day, with a light north-westerly wind, and showers from midday.

### **Circumstances of the find:**

At about 10 a.m. on the 6<sup>th</sup> October 1996 Jamie Gibson and I were walking along the cliff top path at Abbotscliffe when I noticed a pale passerine on the fence in front, about 30 feet away. I raised my bins and saw a very pale looking Wheatear, and attracted JAG's attention to it. It flew past us and landed again on the fence only 25 feet or so away.

In flight I saw pale underwings, and (having seen two Isabelline Wheatears before) realised what this meant, so was very keen to get the 'scope on it when it landed. We noted a number of features which indicated Isabelline; the upperparts were pale, with little marking to the head, and the wings were very pale, with broad buff fringes and a dark and contrasting alula. It also appeared large and robust, with a short tail and a big bill. We were both very cautious of this identification to begin with, but after several flight views when the underwings were clearly seen and some excellent views of the bird perched, we became certain that this was the county's first Isabelline Wheatear.

It had worked its way inland (for almost a mile) while we were watching it, before it settled in a field at Church Hougham, where it remained for the rest of the day. We 'phoned the news out about 11:30 a.m. and about 500 or more birders saw it during the afternoon. Everyone was happy with the identification. It was not seen on the 7<sup>th</sup>, despite searching. The bird was photographed by Rob Wilson.

### **Description of the bird:**

Size, shape, jizz: compared to memories of Northern, it appeared larger and more robust, longer-legged and shorter-tailed, with a "pot-bellied" appearance. It was noticeably large-billed. It was often upright, with the tail being short and well clear of the ground. In flight the wings were broader and more rounded.

Head and upperparts: The upperparts were pale sandy-brown, but their appearance varied considerably with the light conditions. The head was relatively plain, with slightly darker lores, being more obvious when seen head-on, and there was no eye-stripe behind the eye. It had a whitish supercilium extending to just behind the eye.

The wing feathers were mid-brown, with thin buff edges to the primaries, and broad buff edges to the tertials and secondaries, the latter forming an obvious panel. The coverts also had broad pale fringes, and the alula was contrastingly dark, appearing blackish, with a neat white fringe. The underwing was very pale, appearing translucent in flight. The underwing coverts/axillaries, seen when the bird was preening, were white. The underside of remiges were very pale (whitish), with darker tips forming a dark surround to the underwing. The underwings were an easily seen and diagnostic feature, and one I had noticed with ease on the two Isabellines I have seen previously, although I generally find the underwing on Northern Wheatear very difficult to see.

The tail had more black than on Northern, extending for about two-thirds of the tail, and had less stem to the 'T', appearing almost as a solid black square.

Underparts: The chin and throat were whitish, and the breast and sides of the neck had a warm peachy wash. The belly and vent were whitish.

### **Comments on the record:**

This was the first record for Kent and the tenth for Britain, and appears in the Kent Bird Report and BBRC reports for 1996 (KOS 1998, BBRC 1997).

## **References**

BBRC statistics: <https://www.bbrc.org.uk/main-information/statistics> (accessed 2021)

Kent Bird Reports. Kent Ornithological Society

KOS Kent list: <https://kentos.org.uk/kent-list> (accessed 2021)

Rare Bird Alert Previous Records: [www.rarebirdalert.co.uk/RealData/rarityrecords.asp?id=11440](http://www.rarebirdalert.co.uk/RealData/rarityrecords.asp?id=11440) (accessed 2021)

Rogers, M. J. & the Rarities Committee, 1997. Report on rare birds in Great Britain in 1996. *British Birds*: 90, 453-522

Snow, D. & Perrins, C.M., 1998. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Oxford University Press.



Isabelline Wheatear at Church Hougham (Rob Wilson)

***Acknowledgements***

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