

# Grey Heron

*Ardea cinerea*

Category A

Breeding resident and passage migrant.

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

Breeds across much of Europe and Asia north to 60°N and south to the Indian Ocean islands and Java. Most of the European populations are migratory, with more northern and eastern breeders moving to western Europe or the Mediterranean Basin. British breeders are chiefly non-migratory, making nomadic movements within 150km of natal heronries, although some move to Ireland and a few from southern England move to France and the Low Countries. In severe winters most will starve rather than emigrate. Also breeds in Africa, chiefly south of the equator.

*Kent status (KOS 2021):*

In Kent it is a widespread resident and partial migrant.



Grey Heron at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)

The Grey Heron 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 "a common resident species in Kent, and must be familiar to all those who live near the coasts or in the lower-lying portions of the county", so there can be little doubt that it was to be found locally. He only listed two extant heronries, one at Chilham and the other at Cobham Park (near Rochester), although also mentioned a few that no longer existed.

Harrison (1953) stated that "it is evident that the Heron is an abundant species in the county, and, moreover, it would seem also to be a fairly static population", and this position has changed little since then.

Harrison also recounted how, "on the 13<sup>th</sup> March 1948, Mr. R. G. Williams discovered a new heronry below Lympe Castle on the thickly wooded slope above the Royal Military Canal. He was able to see eight nests with birds either sitting or in attendance; when revisited in 1949, Mr. Williams believed that there were about eleven occupied nests". It would however appear that the heronry pre-dated this "discovery" as a national census in 1937 recorded 15 occupied nests there (Watmough in prep.), although it was not listed in the first British survey in 1928 (Nicholson 1929).



Grey Heron at West Hythe (Brian Harper)



Grey Heron at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)

Taylor *et al.* (1981) described the Lymgne Park Wood colony as one of the five major heronries in Kent during their review period (1952-1976) and this continues to be true today.

**Breeding atlas distribution**

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

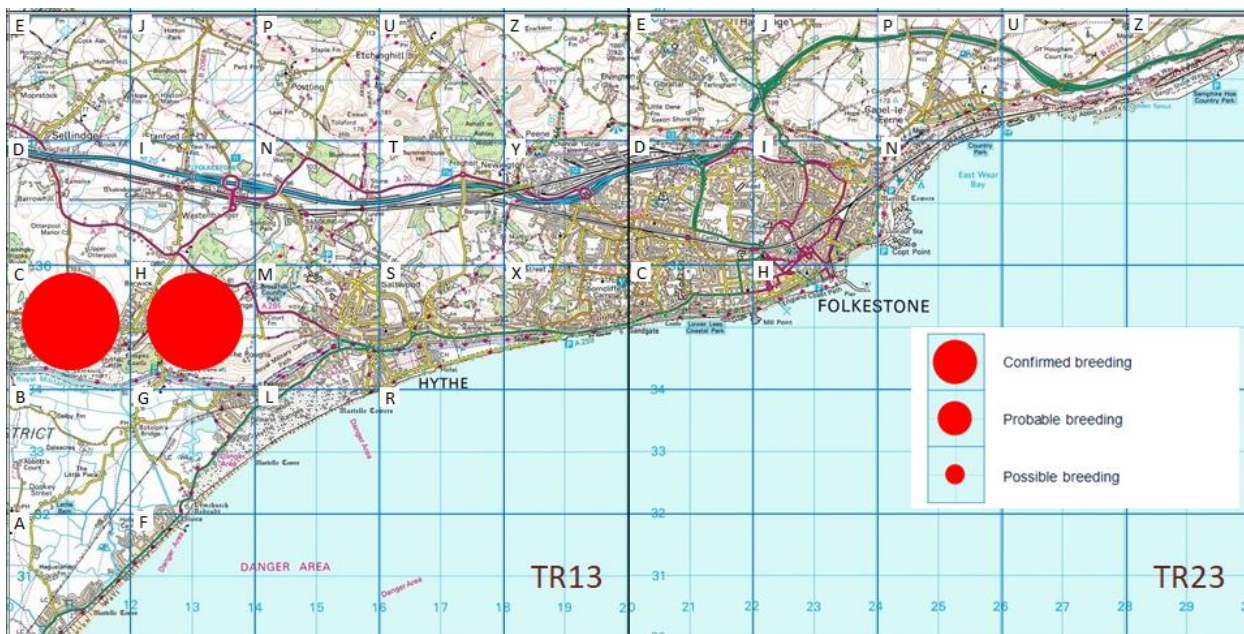


Figure 1: Breeding distribution of Grey Heron at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Nesting was confirmed in the two tetrads that are spanned by the Lymgne Park Wood heronry and there were no breeding records from elsewhere. 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. The majority of the heronry is situated within TR13 H with just one or two nests within TR13 C in recent years. It is possible that these were not occupied during the first atlas period or perhaps overlooked.

Breeding atlases	1967 - 1973		1988 - 1994		2007 - 2013	
Possible	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
Probable/Confirmed	1	(3%)	2	(6%)	2	(6%)
Total	1	(3%)	2	(6%)	2	(6%)
Change			+1	(+100%)	0	(0%)

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	+100%	0%	+100%
Kent	-32%	+120%	+50%

Figure 2 shows the number of nesting pairs present within the Lymgne Park Wood heronry since regular censuses resumed after the Second World War. The blank years seem likely to be as a result of lack of coverage rather than a genuine absence. The average number of nests across the entire 75-year period (excluding blanks) is 15.8 and the recent average since a continuous sequence of counts began in 2000 is 14.0. Whilst the heronry has held considerably higher numbers at times (with a peak of 38 in 1971) and been prone to significant fluctuations, the current population had appeared to be stable at around 12 to 15 pairs, but there were lower counts in the last two years.

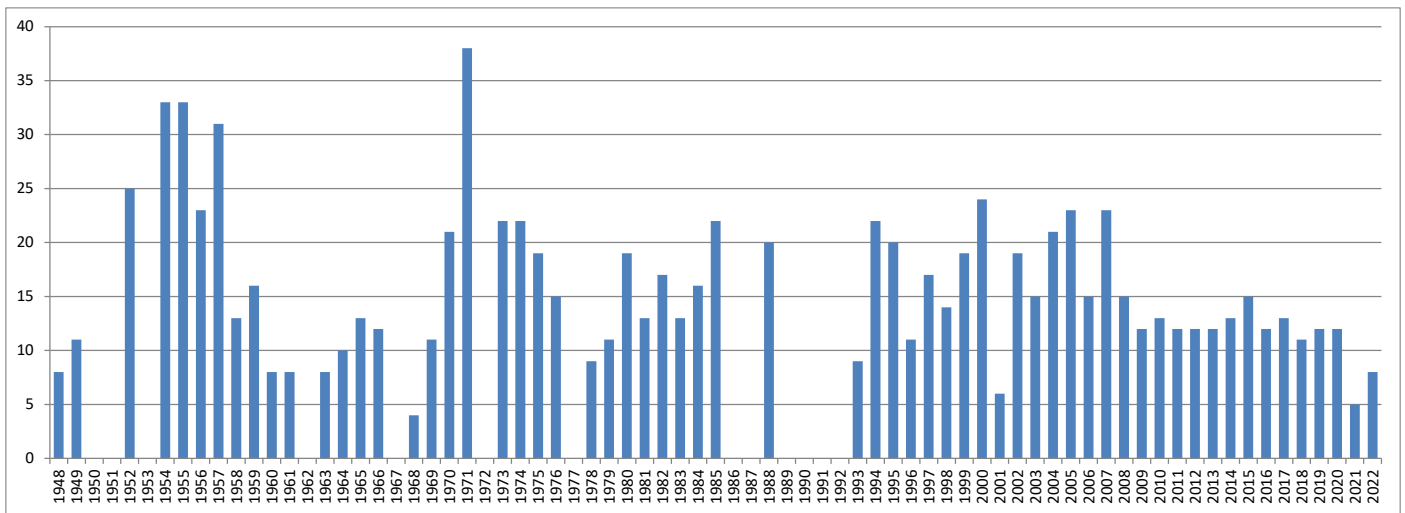


Figure 2: Number of Grey Heron nests at Lympne Park Wood since 1948

Clements *et al.* (2015) stated that the overall picture since the second Kent atlas is of stability, though considered that there may have been a possible downturn in recent years following successive cold winters, which increase mortality rates. However, there appear to be indications that this decline in the county may be continuing and may be reflected in the local counts (Watmough).

**Overall distribution**

Figure 3 shows the distribution of all records of Grey Heron by tetrad, with records in 30 tetrads (97%).

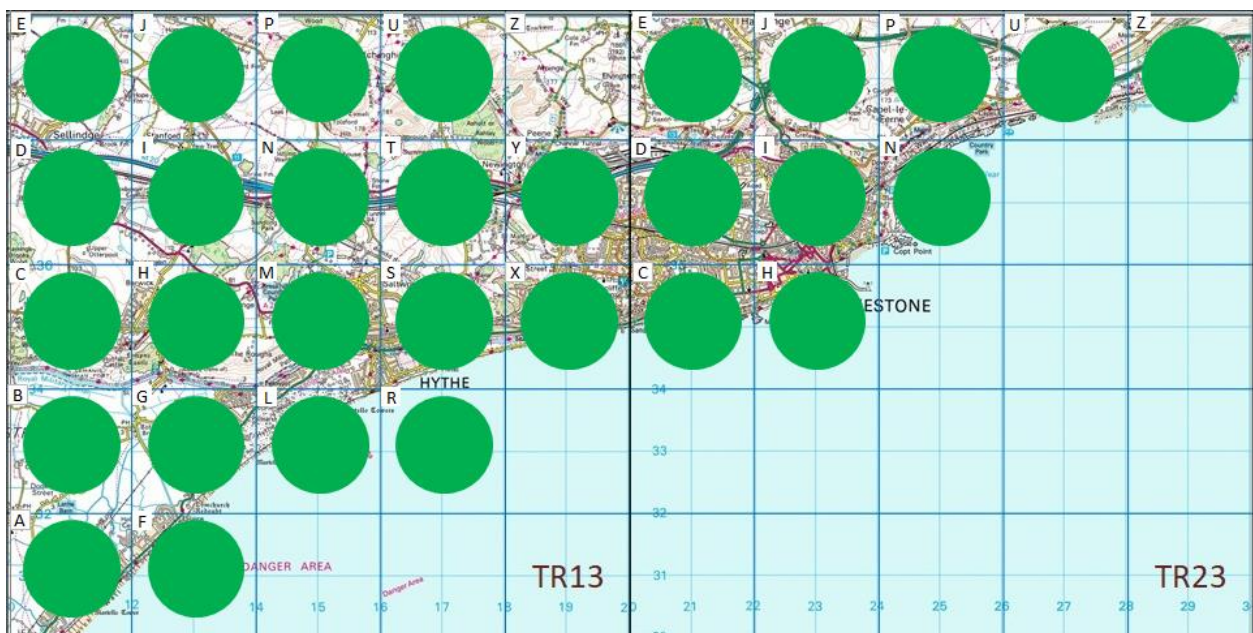


Figure 3: Distribution of all Grey Heron records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The Grey Heron has only not been recorded to date from TR13 Z (an area of dry chalk grassland around Peene Quarry). Taylor *et al.* wrote that in the breeding season birds may commute many miles to suitable feeding grounds, whilst outside the breeding season individuals or small groups may be found feeding on suitable waters anywhere in the county, including coastlines. In summer flocks of juveniles and adults may gather near to the heronries, but otherwise large groups are scarce. Locally there have been several counts of up to 12 birds at sites near to Lympne Park Wood, including West Hythe dam, Botolph’s Bridge and Nickolls Quarry.

Harrison thought it was not very much given to migratory movements but Taylor *et al* were able to provide details of Kentish-ringed birds that had been recovered as far north as Yorkshire and west to Worcester in the winter after ringing, and several killed in various parts of northern France.

They also mentioned recoveries in the county of birds ringed as nestlings in the Netherlands and Sweden, whilst KOS (2020) also adds movements to or from Belgium and Denmark.



Grey Herons at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)



Grey Heron at West Hythe (Brian Harper)

Small numbers are frequently seen at coastal sites, sometimes arriving in off the sea or departing out to sea. Occasionally larger groups may occur and double-figure counts of birds on passage have been recorded on 11 dates:

- 10 west at Copt Point on the 12<sup>th</sup> October 1988
- 14 west at Church Hougham on the 27<sup>th</sup> August 1990
- 20 west at Capel-le-Ferne Gun Site on the 14<sup>th</sup> September 1999
- 10 east at sea at Copt Point on the 9<sup>th</sup> April 2003
- 14 in off the sea at Abbotscliffe on the 16<sup>th</sup> June 2003
- 17 west at Abbotscliffe on the 11<sup>th</sup> October 2006
- 16 west at Abbotscliffe on the 13<sup>th</sup> September 2008
- 10 west at Samphire Hoe on the 18<sup>th</sup> September 2008
- 12 over Creteway Down on the 18<sup>th</sup> September 2014
- 14 west at Samphire Hoe on the 24<sup>th</sup> September 2017
- 10 west at Copt Point on the 26<sup>th</sup> August 2019

### **References**

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Grey Heron in freshwater habitat at Botolph's Bridge  
(Brian Harper)



Grey Heron in coastal habitat at Samphire Hoe  
(Phil Smith)

### ***Acknowledgements***

The tetrad map images were produced from the Ordnance Survey [Get-a-map service](http://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/get-a-map) and are reproduced with kind permission of [Ordnance Survey](http://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk).

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