

Twite

| | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Linaria flavirostris</i> | Category A |
| Rare passage migrant. | 21 records, 117 birds |

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds in upland Britain and Ireland, also in Norway, Russia and Turkey, discontinuously eastwards to Mongolia, western China and the eastern Himalayas. British and Irish populations winter chiefly along the coast, with birds breeding in the southern Pennines moving south-east to winter chiefly on the east coast from Lincolnshire to northern Kent. Some birds cross the North Sea, mainly to the Low Countries. Populations breeding in Fenno-Scandia and Russia winter in northern and eastern Europe. There was a widespread decline in Britain in the twentieth century, which is reflected by the reducing numbers of winter and passage birds further south.

Kent status (KOS 2022):

It is an increasingly irregular and steadily declining passage migrant and winter visitor to the county.

Ticehurst (1909) wrote that “the Twite is solely a cold weather visitor to the county, and arrives during the first week in October. Its numbers vary a good deal from year to year, and are no doubt dependent on the severity or otherwise of the weather to the north”. He continued to note that “during their stay in Kent Twites are entirely confined to marshes, flats and sand-dunes near the coast, and these they inhabit wherever they occur”, whilst “though the Twite may occasionally occur inland, I am not acquainted with a single instance of it having done so”.

The Twite 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 mile radius from Folkestone town hall. Whilst this range extends further inland than the current Folkestone and Hythe area, in light of Ticehurst’s comments it seems certain to have occurred at the coast and so within the modern boundary.

Harrison (1953) thought that there was “some evidence indicating that the Twite is increasing as a winter visitor to Kent” and also recorded it as a passage migrant in small numbers.

Taylor *et al.* (1981) described how “the Twite favours the saltmarshes of north and east Kent, where wintering numbers began to increase during the 1950s” and there had been three-figure counts on the saltmarshes of north and east Kent by the early 1960s. The first documented local records occurred in 1960, when Roger Norman saw three at Nickolls Quarry on the 23rd March (Norman 2007) and David Musson noted two flying west at Folkestone on the 13th October and six flying west there on the 8th November.

The increase in the county continued into the 1970s and Taylor *et al.* concluded that the average winter population in the county at the end of their review period (1976) was about 1,200 birds, although there were no further local sightings until the 1980s, presumably due to a lack of coverage. The next local records involved 12 seen flying west at Copt Point by Rob Lee on the 21st October 1984 and eight seen flying west at Mill Point by Ian Roberts on the 1st November 1989.

Thereafter it occurred with some regularity in the 1990s, with 12 records in the eight years between 1993 and 2000, but has only been noted on four occasions since, including two intriguing and possibly related reports from the Cheriton area in February 2017.

This decrease reflects the position across the county, where the winter population has decreased from 1,200 in the mid-1970s to just one bird in 2018/19. The decline in numbers across the three main wintering sites in Kent (two along the north Kent coast and at Pegwell Bay) since the 1971/72 winter are shown in figure 1 (reproduced from the Kent Bird Report for 2017). It has recently been added as a species that requires a description by the KOS Rarities Committee.

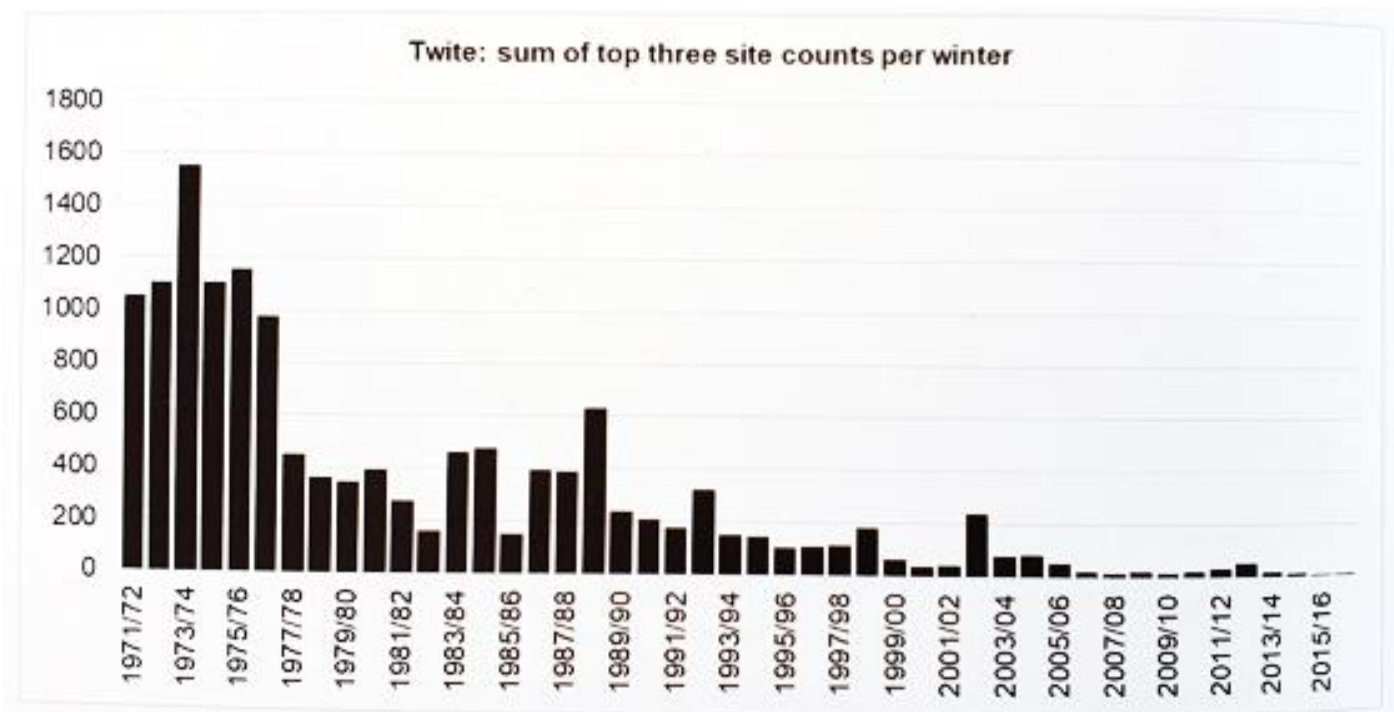


Figure 1: Wintering numbers of Twite at the three top sites in Kent since 1971/72

Balmer *et al.* (2013) highlighted a loss of wintering birds from southern England, although this was offset by a gain in more northern areas, possibly in response to climatic change.

The local records by year since 1985 are shown in figure 2.

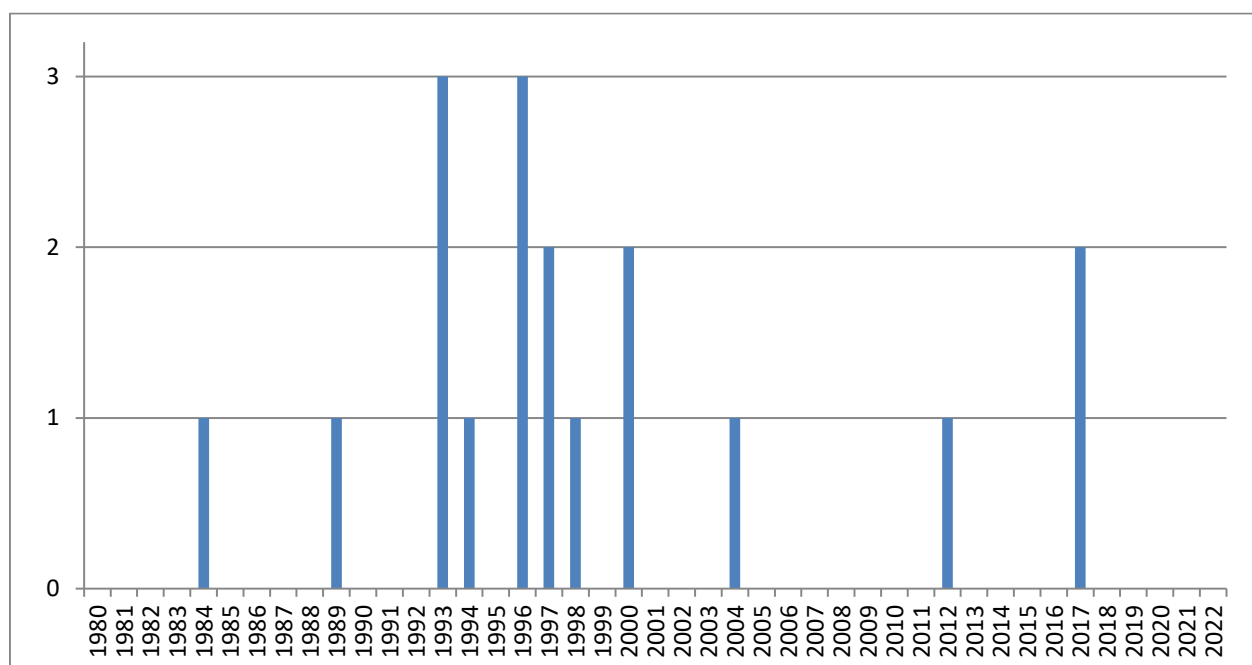


Figure 2: Twite records at Folkestone and Hythe since 1985

The majority (67%) of records have occurred in late autumn, between the 12th October (week 41) and 8th November (week 45), with two in January, three in February and two in March, as shown in figure 3.

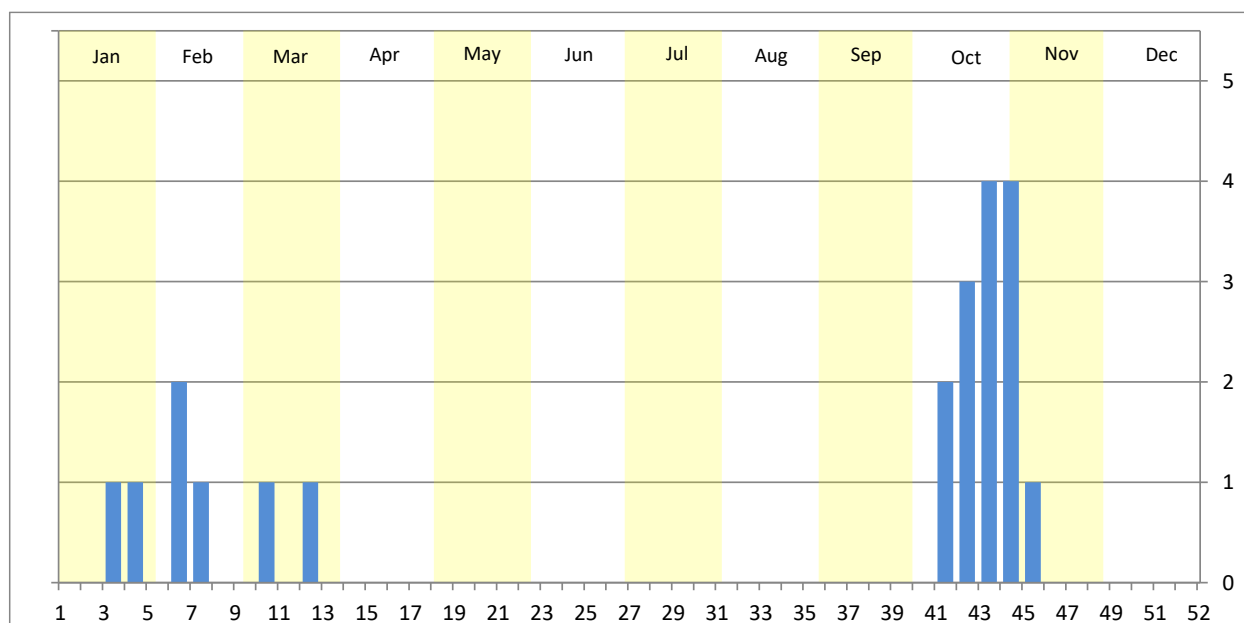


Figure 3: Twite records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Figure 4 shows the location of records by tetrad.



Figure 4: Distribution of all Twite records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The full list of records is as follows:

- 1960** Nickolls Quarry, three at new pit, 23rd March (R. K. Norman)
- 1960** Folkestone, two flew west, 13th October (D. F. Musson)
- 1960** Folkestone, six flew west, 8th November (D. F. Musson)
- 1984** Copt Point, 12 flew west, 21st October (R. Lee)
- 1989** Mill Point, eight flew west, 1st November (I. A. Roberts)
- 1993** Hythe Ranges, one flew south-west, 17th January (R. K. Norman)
- 1993** Nickolls Quarry, one flew west, 17th October (R. K. Norman)
- 1993** Abbotscliffe, 12, 29th October (D. A. Gibson)
- 1994** Nickolls Quarry, seven flew west, 27th October (R. K. Norman)
- 1996** Nickolls Quarry, one with Linnets, 17th February (R. K. Norman)

1996 Abbotscliffe, eight flew west, 19th October (D. A. Gibson)
1996 Abbotscliffe, one flew west, 23rd October (D. A. Gibson)
1997 Nickolls Quarry, two, 26th October (R. K. Norman)
1997 Abbotscliffe, two, 30th to 31st October (D. A. Gibson)
1998 Abbotscliffe, 14 flew west, 12th October (D. A. Gibson)
2000 Nickolls Quarry, one, 5th March (R. K. Norman)
2000 Samphire Hoe, one with Linnets, 19th October (D. E. Smith)
2004 Samphire Hoe, one, 2nd November (P. Holt)
2012 Saltwood, small flock (one seen but several heard) flew south, 24th January (P. Howe)
2017 Cheriton (Shearway area), eight, 6th February (J. Varley)
2017 Cheriton (Broadmead Village), c.20-30, 9th February (J. Wood), possibly involving some of the birds from above

References

Balmer, D., Gillings, S., Caffrey, B., Swann, B., Downie, I & Fuller, R. 2013. *Bird Atlas 2007-11: The Breeding and Wintering Birds of Britain and Ireland*. British Trust for Ornithology.

Harrison, J. M. 1953. *The Birds of Kent*. Witherby, London.

Kent Ornithological Society (KOS) 1953-2022. *Kent Bird Reports*. Kent Ornithological Society.

Knight, V. & Tolputt, F. 1871. List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood. *Fourth Annual Report of the Folkestone Natural History Society*. Available at: www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/46103

Norman, R. K. 2007. The Birds of Palmarsh Gravel Pit. <https://folkestonebirds.com/where-to-watch> (see "Further Information" section).

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

Taylor, D., Davenport, D. & Flegg, J. 1981. *Birds of Kent*. Kent Ornithological Society.

Ticehurst, N. F. 1909. *A History of the Birds of Kent*. Witherby, London.

Acknowledgements

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

I am indebted to Andrew Henderson and Tim Hodge for providing access to the Kent Ornithological Society archives.