

# Stonechat

*Saxicola rubicola*

Category [A]

Breeding resident, winter visitor and passage migrant.

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

Breeds across western and southern Europe, North Africa, Turkey and the Caucasus. Winters in the south of its breeding range, with the northern and eastern populations being more migratory.

*Kent status (KOS 2021):*

In Kent it is a local but increasing breeder, a passage migrant and a winter visitor.



Stonechat at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)

The Stonechat 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 "generally, but very sparsely, distributed where there are gorse commons and waste lands suitable to its requirements" and remarked that "its main stronghold is on the chalk downs at the back of Folkestone and Dover, and thence in suitable places along the whole length of the ridge as far as Maidstone".

## 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 Stonechat at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was confirmed in two tetrads, with possible breeding in three more. 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%)	0	(0%)	3	(10%)
Probable/Confirmed	1	(3%)	1	(3%)	2	(6%)
Total	1	(3%)	1	(3%)	5	(16%)
Change			0	(0%)	+4	(+400%)

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	+X%	+X%	+X%
Kent	+X%	+X%	+X%

Taylor *et al.* noted that “the most regular sites are now gorse patches along the coastal chalk Downs near Dover” and that “the annual breeding population averages less than four pairs”.

Henderson & Hodge stated that between 3 and 11 pairs were reported in the county in the years during the second atlas period (1988-1994) but thought that some breeding pairs may be overlooked and estimated the Kent population at 10-15 pairs. The most recent atlas found a substantial increase, with Clements *et al.* (2015) proposing that the county population may be as high as 50 to 100 pairs, with the change map showing significant gains along the north Kent coast, at Dungeness and in the Folkestone and Hythe area. The continued increase may be attributable to recent milder winters.

Locally it was only found in TR23 Z in both the first and second county atlases, but had spread by the time of the third atlas into the adjacent TR23 U and possibly TR23 P, with possible breeding also in TR13 L and TR13 M. It has also increased within its core range of TR23 Z, where the numbers of breeding territories at Samphire Hoe have been monitored since it opened to the public in July 1997, and there were five to six territories here in the 2000s, increasing to eight from 2018. One pair has bred successfully below Abbotscliffe (TR23 U) in most years recently, with an additional territorial male (or possibly an overlooked pair) present in some years, whilst there have been occasional records of a territorial male at Folkestone Warren (TR23 P). Up to two pairs have probably bred at Hythe Roughts (TR13 M) in recent years, whilst there have been occasional sightings in suitable habitat at Hythe Ranges (TR13 L) within the breeding season (where there is a historical record of a pair breeding in 1958) (Norman, 2006).

### Overall distribution

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of Stonechat by tetrad, with records in 18 tetrads (58%).

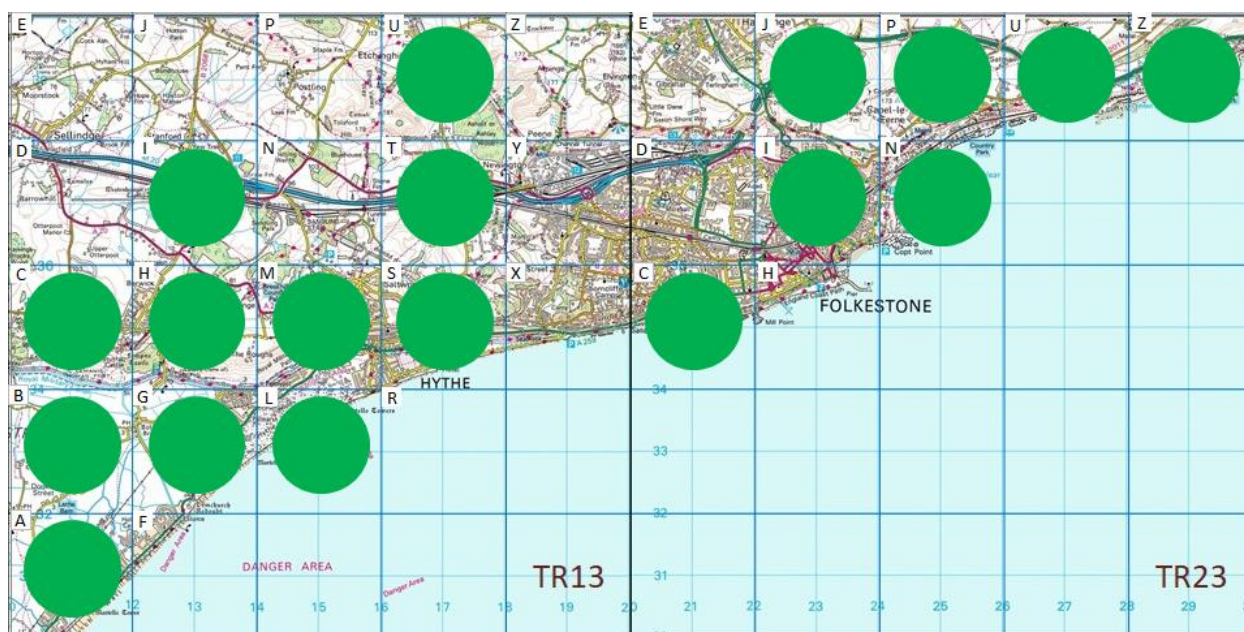


Figure 2: Distribution of all Stonechat records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Harrison (1953) reported “little evidence at present of an immigration”, however thought that “research may yet disclose some autumnal immigration from abroad” and that there were “suggestive records of concentrations in the coastal areas during September and October, well in advance of any adverse weather conditions”, citing that “Miss A. V. Stone recorded large numbers at Folkestone Warren, on the 15<sup>th</sup> October 1937”.

Taylor *et al* noted a marked increase in the wintering population during the mild winters of the 1970s and recognised regular spring and autumn passages.

It is difficult to distinguish between resident and migrant birds at the breeding sites, particularly at Samphire Hoe where post-breeding numbers can be high. Counts in excess of ten at Abbotscliffe however would seem likely to include a fair proportion of passage birds, as follows:

12 on the 12<sup>th</sup> October 1991  
25 on the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1993  
12 on the 12<sup>th</sup> September 1998  
12 on the 14<sup>th</sup> October 2000  
13 on the 13<sup>th</sup> October 2001  
12 on the 4<sup>th</sup> October 2006  
14 on the 14<sup>th</sup> October 2006  
20 on the 19<sup>th</sup> October 2008  
23 on the 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2022



Stonechat at Abbotscliffe (Ian Roberts)



Stonechat at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)

Away from the breeding sites, migrants or wintering birds may be noted from late August, but it is scarce before mid-September, with early records as follows: one at Beachborough Park on the 30<sup>th</sup> August 2018, one at Capel-le-Ferne on the 7<sup>th</sup> September 2000, one at Nickolls Quarry on the 8<sup>th</sup> September 1957, one at Botolph's Bridge on the 9<sup>th</sup> September 2008 and one at Mill Point (the only site record) on the 13<sup>th</sup> September 1989. Passage peaks between late September and early November, when counts in excess of three have been noted as follows:

4 at Copt Point in November 1984  
4 at Nickolls Quarry on the 6<sup>th</sup> November 1994  
5 at Nickolls Quarry on several dates in October 2001, with 4 remaining until late November  
4 at Nickolls Quarry on the 8<sup>th</sup> October 2002  
4 at Nickolls Quarry on the 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> October 2003  
4 at Nickolls Quarry on the 15<sup>th</sup> October 2004  
4 at Botolph's Bridge on the 26<sup>th</sup> September 2015  
4 at Beachborough Park from the 19<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> October 2016  
5 at Copt Point on the 16<sup>th</sup> October 2020

Small numbers may be widely distributed in winter, usually ones or twos, but up to three may be regularly seen at Nickolls Quarry, with four present there in December 2006. Elsewhere there were three at Copt Point on the 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1966 and three at the Hotel Imperial Golf Course in January 1989 and January 1990.





Stonechat at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)



Stonechat at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)

In recent years around 10 to 15 have remained at Samphire Hoe throughout the winter, with an estimated wintering population of between 30 and 35 birds across the local area.

Spring passage is light and very difficult to detect at breeding or wintering sites, but singles may appear at a wide range of sites.



Stonechat at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)



Stonechat at Samphire Hoe (Martin Collins)

**Continental Stonechat**  
*Saxicola rubicola rubicola*

The Stonechat comprises two subspecies: nominate *rubicola* in central and southern Europe and north-west Africa and *hibernans* in Britain, Ireland, north-west France and the west coast of Iberia. However, the two forms intergrade on the near-continent and some authors argue that there is merely a cline of darker plumage to the north-west and brighter plumage to the south-east and that *hibernans* is therefore potentially invalid.

The subspecies *hibernans* is a common breeder in Britain but *rubicola* is not on the British List. However, *rubicola*-like birds are recorded regularly in south-east England, including several sightings locally in March and April, and birds with this appearance also form part of the breeding population in the South-east. It is therefore possible that *rubicola* is frequent in Britain or that the intergrade zone on the near-continent actually includes south-east England as well. The identification of *rubicola* is problematic, confounded by variation within *hibernans* throughout its range and by the existence of intergrades (BBRC 2016).



Stonechat at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)



Stonechat at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)



Colour-ringed Stonechat at Samphire Hoe  
(Martin Collins)



Stonechat at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)

The East Kent Wildlife Group is currently undertaking a colour-ringing study of Stonechats at Samphire Hoe, investigating changes from summer to winter populations.

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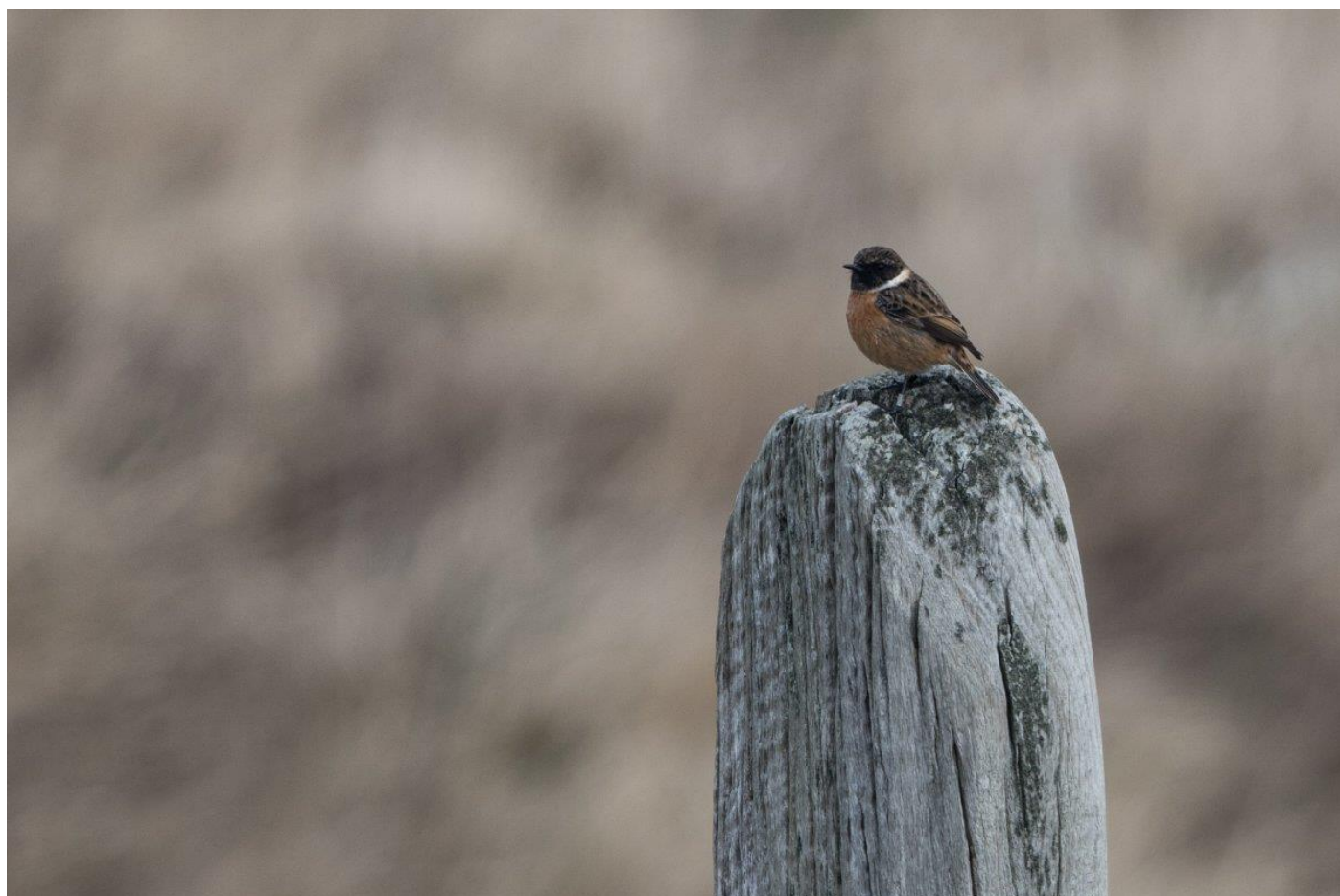
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Stonechat at Samphire Hoe (Martin Collins)