

# Meadow Pipit

*Anthus pratensis*

Category [A]

Breeding resident, winter visitor and passage migrant.

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

Breeds across northern Europe, from Iceland south to France and eastwards through Germany, Poland and Fenno-Scandia, through Russia to the Ob' river. In western Europe it is a resident or partial migrant, but northern and eastern populations migrate to winter in southern Europe and north-west Africa.

*Kent status (KOS 2021):*

It is a widespread breeding species in Kent, particularly around the coast, also a passage migrant and winter visitor.



Meadow Pipit at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)

The Meadow Pipit 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 "abundant over the greater part of the county wherever there are marsh-lands and rough pastures, especially in the open parts of the high ground ... and in marshes near the south coast", as well as a widespread winter visitor and passage migrant, 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.

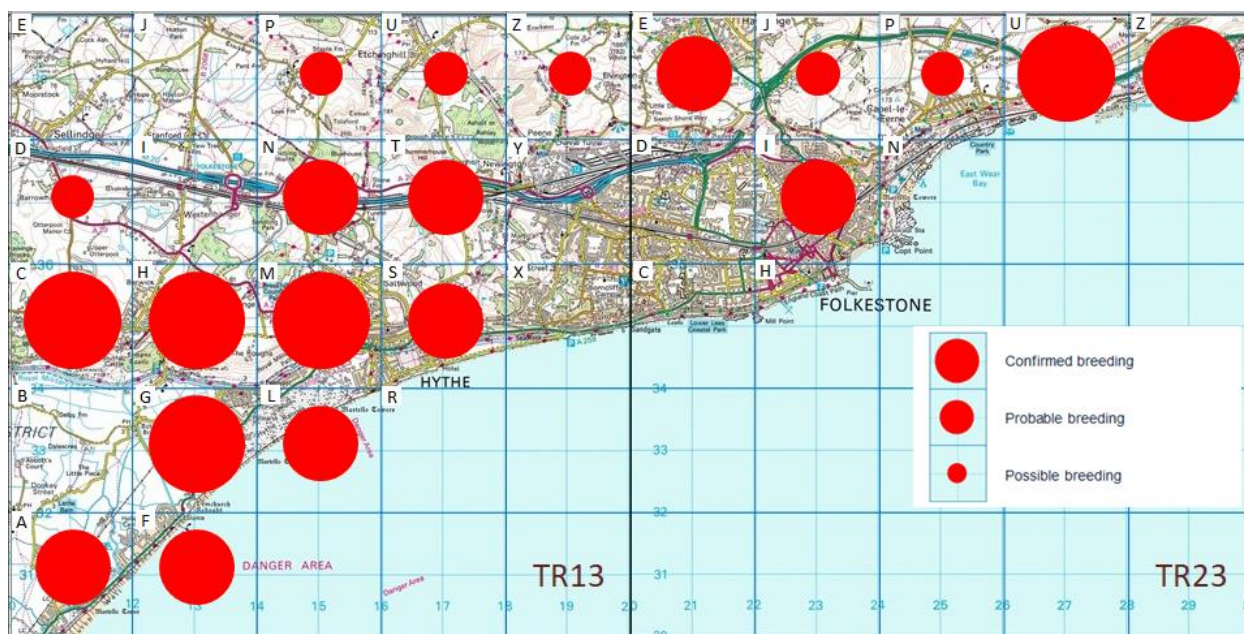


Figure 1: Breeding distribution of Meadow Pipit at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was confirmed in six tetrads, with probable breeding in eight more and possible breeding in six 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%)	5	(16%)	6	(19%)
Probable/Confirmed	24	(77%)	14	(45%)	14	(45%)
Total	25	(81%)	19	(61%)	20	(65%)
Change			-6	(-24%)	+1	(+5%)

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	-24%	+5%	-20%
Kent	+10%	-22%	-14%

The national BTO Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) trend has shown a decline since the 1970s, accompanied by a range contraction from lowland England, and Clements *et al.* (2015) thought that this may be linked to problems in their wintering grounds and loss of marginal land in south-east England. Henderson & Hodge considered that it was in decline at the time of the second county atlas although this showed a 10% increase in the number of occupied tetrads, which they attributed to improved coverage in fringe areas slightly away from the coast and in the west of the county. Clements *et al.* stated that the results of the third county atlas showed “a serious reduction in occupied tetrads” of 22%.

Locally it was noted in all tetrads in the first atlas with the exception of three coastal tetrads where no suitable habitat existed (TR13 R, TR23 C and TR23 H) and three tetrads along the North Downs (TR23 J, TR23 P and TR23 U). Whilst the former three tetrads remain unsuitable, the latter three have been occupied in both atlases since, suggesting an improvement in coverage, whilst the losses since the first atlas would appear to be real.

The contraction in occupancy along the Downs is marked, with losses in five tetrads (TR13 E, TR13 I, TR13 J, TR13 Y and TR23 D) and a reduction from “probable or confirmed” breeding in previous atlases to “possible” breeding in six others. The losses from TR13 Y and TR23 D could be attributed due to habitat changes, including the development of the Channel Tunnel Terminal, but the others seem likely to reflect a reduction in population. Rowland (1968) wrote that in the “Natural History of Folkestone”, that “Meadow Pipits are the common birds of the chalk plateau of the Downs”, in contrast to the position today.

At Samphire Hoe the breeding population was monitored annually between 1999 and 2018 using the Common Bird Survey (CBC) methodology (BTO 2019). Figure 2 shows the number of breeding territories present at Samphire Hoe between 1999 and 2018.

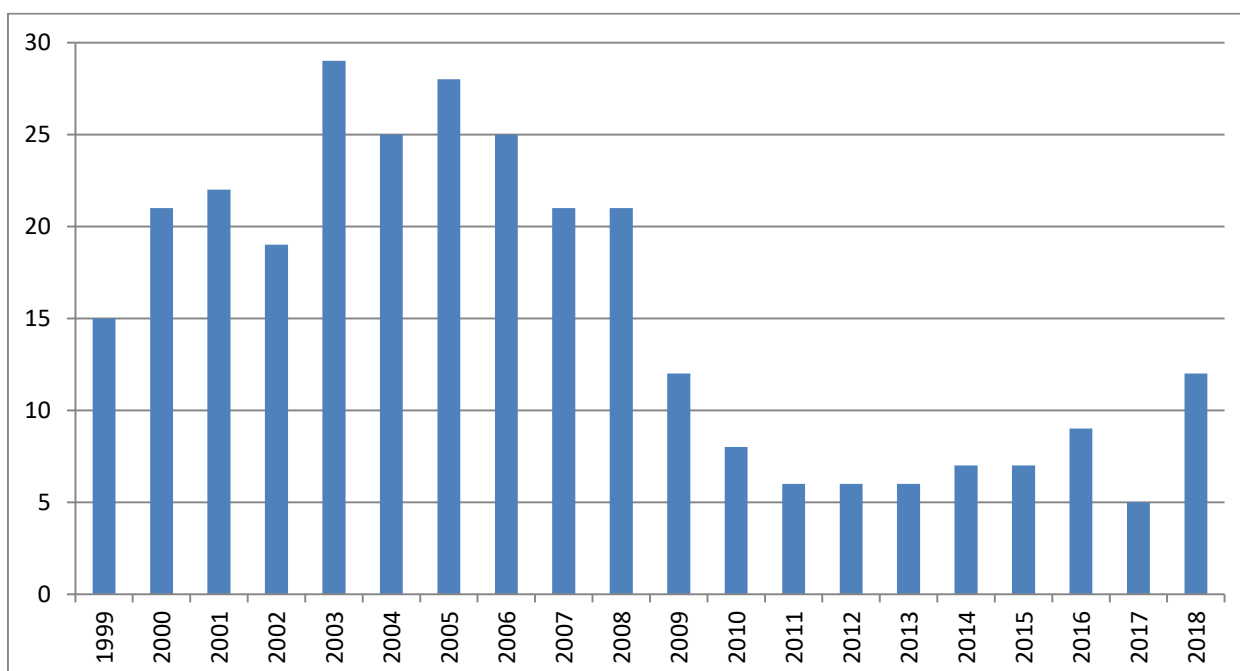


Figure 2: Number of Meadow Pipit territories at Samphire Hoe between 1999 and 2018



Meadow Pipits were quick to colonise the newly created habitat at Samphire Hoe and the population increased steadily to a peak of 29 territories in 2003 but then declined gradually from the mid-2000s to a level that now appears to be relatively stable at an average of around 7 to 8 pairs. Smith (no date) commented that "the reasons for this are unclear, but one possible cause could have been the introduction of free-range grazing at Samphire Hoe", or a combination of this and natural succession of the habitat to scrub that grazing has been introduced to manage.

At its peak the Samphire Hoe population reached a density of 64 territories per km<sup>2</sup> before decreasing to a current level of around 16 territories per km<sup>2</sup>. Henderson & Hodge gave a mean farmland density calculated at 1.6 pairs per km<sup>2</sup> in the second county atlas, so even at current levels the site holds a comparatively high density of territories.

Declines have been noted at other sites. At Hythe Roughts there were 16 territories in the early 1990s but only two territories in recent years, at Hythe Ranges there were up to five pairs in the early 1990s but only one in recent years and at Nickolls Quarry there were at least five pairs in 1995, decreasing to two in 2007, with none in recent years.



Meadow Pipit at Samphire Hoe (Paul Holt)



Meadow Pipit at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)



Meadow Pipit at Hythe Roughts (Brian Harper)



Meadow Pipit at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)

## Overall distribution

Figure 3 shows the distribution of all records of Meadow Pipit by tetrad, with records in 31 tetrads (100%).

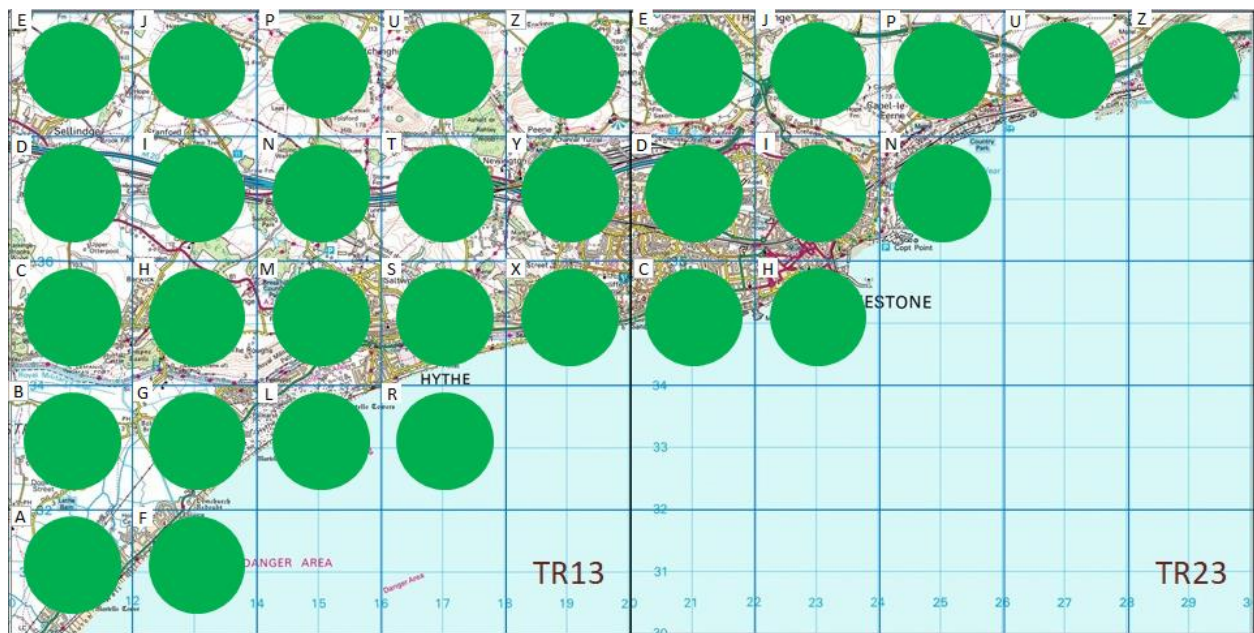


Figure 3: Distribution of all Meadow Pipit records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

In autumn numbers increase during August, with a peak of 150 at Abbotscliffe on the 31<sup>st</sup> August 1992, and peak in the second half of September, with counts of 400 or more noted with some frequency at the cliffs in the 1990s:

500 at Abbotscliffe on the 20<sup>th</sup> September 1992  
 542 west at Abbotscliffe on the 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1993  
 404 east at Abbotscliffe on the 20<sup>th</sup> September 1995  
 430 east at Abbotscliffe on the 21<sup>st</sup> September 1995  
 800 at Abbotscliffe on the 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1995  
 433 west at Abbotscliffe on the 20<sup>th</sup> September 1996  
 747 east at Abbotscliffe on the 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1996  
 2,135 west at Abbotscliffe on the 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1996  
 720 east at Capel Battery on the 25<sup>th</sup> September 1997  
 529 (229 east + 300) at Abbotscliffe on the 27<sup>th</sup> September 1997  
 550 (400 east + 150) at Abbotscliffe on the 28<sup>th</sup> September 1997  
 2,200 west at Abbotscliffe on the 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1999  
 986 out/west at Abbotscliffe on the 26<sup>th</sup> September 1999  
 959 (494 out/west + 465) at Abbotscliffe on the 17<sup>th</sup> September 2000  
 519 (369 west + 150) at Abbotscliffe on the 30<sup>th</sup> September 2000

There has only been one count over 400 since, but totals of 300 or more have been noted on a few occasions:

300 at Abbotscliffe on the 28<sup>th</sup> September 2001  
 300 at Abbotscliffe on the 16<sup>th</sup> September 2004  
 350 east at Abbotscliffe on the 25<sup>th</sup> September 2006  
 310 at Capel Battery on the 29<sup>th</sup> September 2007  
 350 (250 east + 100) at Samphire Hoe on the 19<sup>th</sup> September 2014  
 360 at Samphire Hoe on the 20<sup>th</sup> September 2014  
 380 east at Abbotscliffe on the 17<sup>th</sup> September 2015  
 450 at Abbotscliffe on the 19<sup>th</sup> September 2016

Numbers dwindle quickly during October and there have only been five counts of 300 or more, all in the 1990s, with a peak count of 475 (195 west + 280) at Abbotscliffe on the 1<sup>st</sup> October 2000.

As Taylor *et al.* noted, during the winter months the population is at its lowest, with the small numbers widely scattered, with flocks of 30-50 occurring quite regularly, with up to 100 occasionally around the coast. Flocks of 50 or more have been logged locally on a number of occasions:

50 at Abbotscliffe on the 29<sup>th</sup> February 1992  
50 at Nickolls Quarry on the 29<sup>th</sup> December 1996  
50 at Nickolls Quarry on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> December 2006  
60 at Samphire Hoe on the 21<sup>st</sup> December 2010  
50 at Donkey Street on the 18<sup>th</sup> November 2017  
57 at Botolph's Bridge on the 20<sup>th</sup> January 2018  
172 at Donkey Street on the 10<sup>th</sup> February 2018  
149 at Beachborough Park on the 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2018  
100 at Donkey Street on the 20<sup>th</sup> January 2019  
66 at Beachborough Park on the 11<sup>th</sup> February 19  
81 at Beachborough Park on the 20<sup>th</sup> February 2019  
50 at the Willop Sewage Works on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 2020

In severe conditions small cold weather movements may occur but have only involved single figure counts.



Meadow Pipit at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)



Meadow Pipit at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)

Spring passage is most marked in late March and early April, when birds are usually seen flying in off the sea. Arrivals of 50 or more have been noted as follows:

158 in off the sea at Abbotscliffe on the 20<sup>th</sup> March 1994  
74 in off the sea at Abbotscliffe on the 26<sup>th</sup> March 1994  
69 in off the sea at Abbotscliffe on the 8<sup>th</sup> April 1996  
101 in off the sea at Abbotscliffe on the 20<sup>th</sup> March 1997  
100 in off the sea at Copt Point on the 17<sup>th</sup> March 2001  
58 in off the sea at Copt Point on the 24<sup>th</sup> March 2001  
82 in off the sea at Capel Battery on the 10<sup>th</sup> April 2004  
106 in off the sea at Capel-le-Ferne Café on the 19<sup>th</sup> March 2005  
80 west at Mill Point on the 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2015  
154 in off the sea at Abbotscliffe on the 6<sup>th</sup> April 2015  
71 in off the sea at Mill Point on the 20<sup>th</sup> March 2017



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Meadow Pipit at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)



Meadow Pipit at Aldington Road (Brian Harper)



## **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.



Meadow Pipit at Abbotscliffe (Ian Roberts)



Meadow Pipit at Samphire Hoe (Martin Collins)



Meadow Pipit at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)