

# Feral Pigeon

*Columba livia*

Category C4

Breeding resident.

*World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998; Massimino et al. 2017):*

A widespread resident across much of Europe and the rest of the world. Feral Pigeons are almost ubiquitous in Britain, nesting in rural as well as urban habitats, and avoiding only the highest ground. No distinction can realistically be drawn between feral birds of domestic origin and true wild-type Rock Doves, although birds of wild-type plumage still predominate on some more-remote Scottish islands. In field conditions, it is often not possible to distinguish between pure native Rock Doves, wild-nesting Feral Pigeons, semi-captive dovecote breeders, and passing racing pigeons.

*Kent status (KOS 2021):*

Widespread resident, particularly in association with human habitation. Largely ignored so population changes difficult to assess.



Feral Pigeon at Folkestone Pier (Brian Harper)

Knight & Tolputt made no mention of the Feral Pigeon in their “List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood” (1871) but did include the Rock Dove. 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 it seems likely that the reference either related to wild Rock Doves on the cliffs between Folkestone and Dover or to their feral counterparts that would no doubt have been present in the more urbanized areas like Folkestone and Hythe towns.

Balston *et al.* (1907) stated that the Rock Dove was seldom seen in Kent and that it was “supposed that they used to breed in the higher cliffs between Dover and St. Margaret’s Bay, but the Peregrine no doubt put a stop to their existence in that locality”. Ticehurst (1909) thought it “exceedingly improbable, with a large town in close proximity, that there ever was a pure wild race of Rock-Doves there”. He did not consider the Feral Pigeon worthy of inclusion in his “A History of the Birds of Kent”, although from his comment it is clear that they were well-established.



Feral Pigeon at Hythe Ranges (Ian Roberts)



Feral Pigeon at Samphire Hoe (Ian Roberts)

Harrison (1953) again chose to ignore the Feral Pigeon in his “the Birds of Kent” and only included the Rock Dove within square brackets in his county list based on the statement from Balston *et al.* However, he considered that its disappearance was “as much, indeed to a far greater extent, probably due to the Rock Dove’s promiscuity with the tame pigeons” which frequented the same habitat.

### Breeding atlas distribution

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

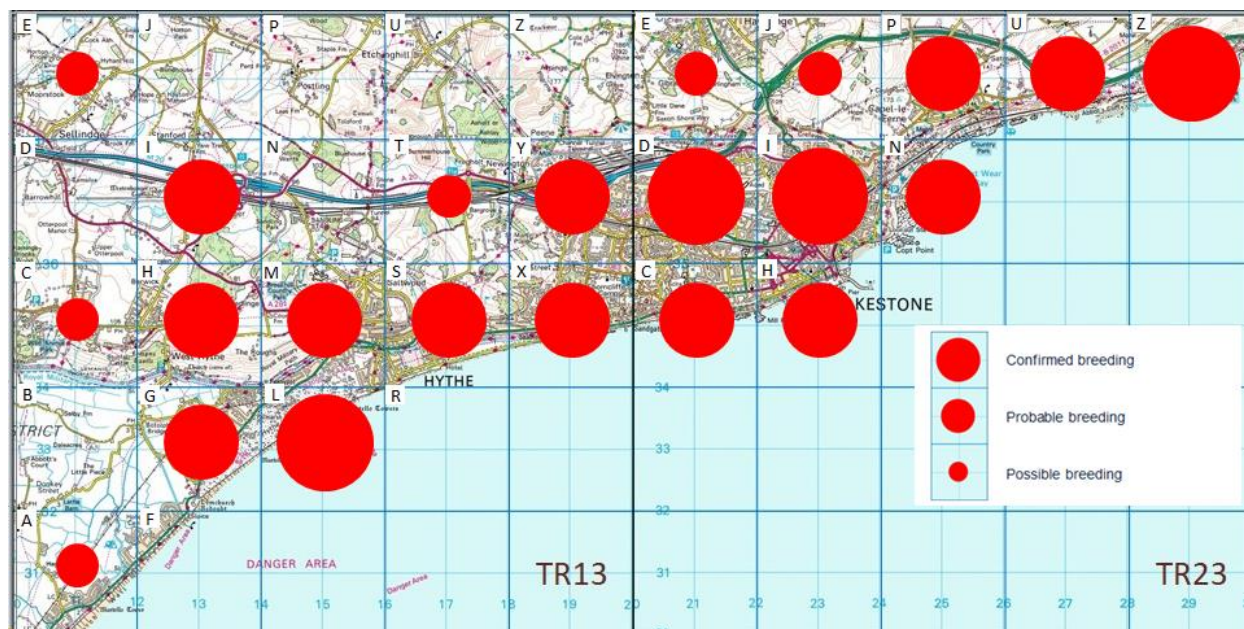


Figure 1: Breeding distribution of Feral Pigeon at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was confirmed in 4 tetrads, with probable breeding in 12 more and possible breeding in 6 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	-	-	5	(16%)	6	(19%)
Probable/Confirmed	-	-	15	(48%)	16	(52%)
Total	-	-	20	(65%)	22	(71%)
Change			--	(--%)	+2	(+10%)

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	--%	+10%	--%
Kent	--%	+20%	--%

Taylor *et al.* continued to neglect the Feral Pigeon and it was not included in their “Birds of Kent”, nor did it feature in the first county atlas although it was clearly common and widespread. By the time of the second atlas the county population was estimated at around 5,000 breeding pairs.

The latest atlas results suggest that it is largely stable or possibly increasing in its distribution and has a clear bias towards urban areas and larger villages locally, which mirrors the county position (Clements *et al.* 2015).



## Overall distribution

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of Feral Pigeon by tetrad, with records in 31 tetrads (100%).

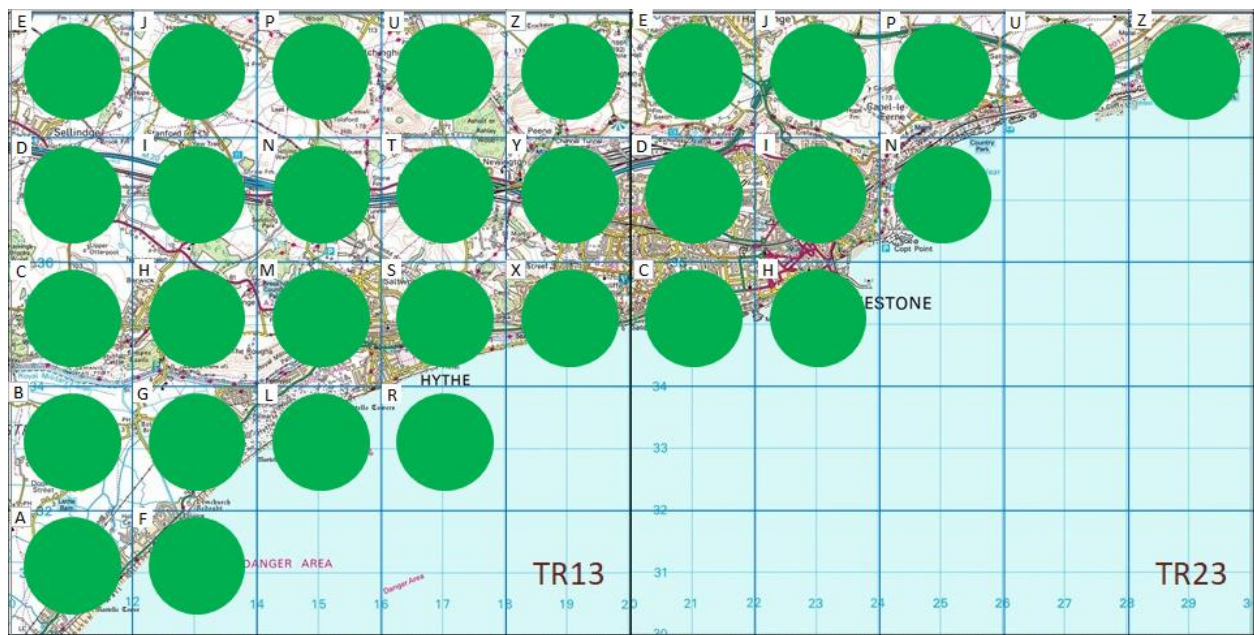


Figure 2: Distribution of all Feral Pigeon records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The indifference shown to this species by many observers leads to few counts being recorded, but it can be present in some abundance. It is most frequently associated with urban areas and is a common feature of the built-up areas of Hythe, Cheriton and Folkestone, where counts have included 55 at Radnor Park (Folkestone) in February 2016, 70 at Cheriton in November 2010, 75 in the churchyard at St. Mary and St. Eanswythe's (Folkestone) in January 2017 and 100 in Folkestone in November 2009.

It has long been known to breed at the Dymchurch Redoubt and in the Martello Towers on Hythe Ranges, where there was a peak count of 120 in May 2017.

The largest counts though have been made at more rural locations: in November 2020 a total of 140 were in the Hillhurst Farm area (near Westenhanger) and on the 9<sup>th</sup> November 2015 about 200 were seen being chased by a pair of Peregrines in the Hougham Valley (near the Plough Inn).

Birds continue to occupy the chalk cliffs which may once have held ancestral Rock Dove nests and congregate on the beach below Abbotscliffe, where there have been count of 65 in November 2006, 60 in May 2008 and 60 in March 2009.

Large numbers of racing pigeons can sometimes be seen passing though and a movement of c.4,800 east over Capel-le-Ferne on the 16<sup>th</sup> May 2006 appeared to be part of a pigeon race.

## References

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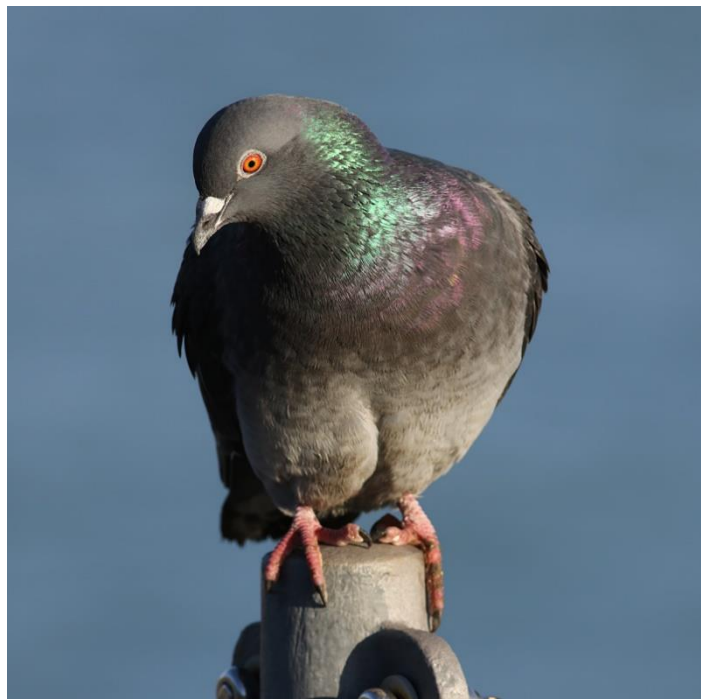
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### **Acknowledgements**

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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Feral Pigeon at Folkestone Pier (Brian Harper)



Feral Pigeon at Samphire Hoe (Ian Roberts)