

# Corn Bunting

*Emberiza calandra*

Category A

Declining resident, probably still breeding in most years.

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

Breeds across middle and lower latitudes in Europe south to north Africa and eastwards to Iran, Kazakhstan and north-west China. Resident to partially migratory, wintering chiefly within the breeding range. It has undergone a widespread decline across many countries.

*Kent status (KOS 2021):*

In Kent it is a reasonably widespread but decreasing resident.



Corn Bunting at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)

The Corn Bunting 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) noted that it was distributed "round the whole seaboard" of the county, where "it is found in scattered pairs, and breeds in arable fields adjoining the marsh-lands", becoming "less and less numerous as the land rises, so that it is absent at no great distance from the coast, except on the chalk". He remarked that it was "perhaps more numerous than anywhere else ... on the Downs themselves about Dover and Folkestone".

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

Breeding was confirmed in one tetrad, with probable breeding in three more and possible breeding in two 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	0	(0%)	3	(10%)	2	(6%)
Probable/Confirmed	8	(26%)	7	(23%)	4	(13%)
Total	8	(26%)	10	(33%)	6	(19%)
Change			+2	(+25%)	-4	(-40%)

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	+25%	-40%	-25%
Kent	+26%	-46%	-33%

Harrison (1953) found a “good deal of evidence” to show that the species had increased and extended its range inland during the first half of the twentieth century as more land was given over to arable farming. Taylor *et al.* noted that during their review period (1952-1976) “there seems to have been little change in Corn Bunting distribution”, with it breeding “predominately on the coastal lowlands, with a thin distribution along the Downs”.

Henderson & Hodge reported that at a national level “changes in agricultural practices have adversely affected numbers, which have declined by 70% since the 1970s”, with a greater use of agrochemicals, autumn sowing and earlier harvesting, combined with more efficient storage of grain, considered to be the most likely factors.

Despite the national decline the population in Kent appeared to be largely stable by the time of the second county atlas, which Clements *et al.* (2015) suggested may have been due to the proximity of milder, coastal areas such as grazing marshes for winter foraging. There had even been an apparent increase in range since the first atlas period (with an increase in occupied tetrads of 26% in Kent and 25% locally), although this rise, which was noted “particularly bordering the North Downs escarpment... between Ashford and Folkestone”, was “possibly the result of improved coverage”.



Corn Buntings at Abbotscliffe (Ian Roberts)



Corn Bunting at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)

Balmer *et al.* (2013) documented a prolonged and continuing decrease at a national level, with a 90% reduction in population between 1970 and 2010, whilst Clements *et al.* noted that this was now also evident across south-east England (with a BTO Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) trend of -63% between 1995 and 2012) and within Kent, where there was “clear evidence of a serious decline” (with a 46% decrease in occupied tetrads in Kent and 40% locally) by the time of the third atlas. They noted that it “disappeared from much of the Downs and large gaps have started to appear in the stronghold areas of the Romney and Walland Marshes”.



In the third atlas breeding was only confirmed from Abbotscliffe (TR23 U), with probable breeding on the Downs in TR23 P and TR23 Z, and on Romney Marsh in TR13 G, with possible breeding on the marsh in TR13 A and TR13 B. Since the previous atlases it had disappeared from TR13 E, TR13 H, TR13 I, TR13 J, TR13 Y, TR13 Z, TR23 E and TR23 J (as shown by the blue dots in figure 2).



Figure 2: Current and former breeding distribution of Corn Bunting at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

In recent years a male has held territory in the Donkey Street with up to two territorial males at Abbotscliffe, and breeding may have occurred at both sites.

### Overall distribution

Figure 3 shows the distribution of all records of Corn Bunting by tetrad, with records in 16 tetrads (52%).

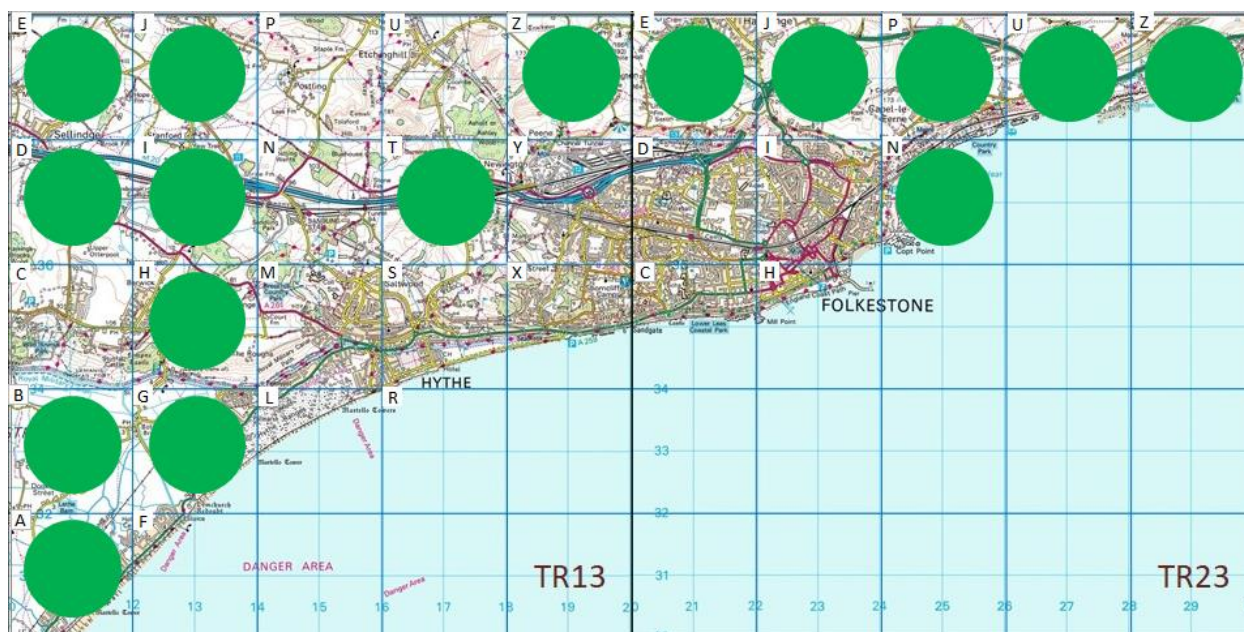


Figure 3: Distribution of all Corn Bunting records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

There are few records that provide any indication of former breeding abundance but winter counts in the 1990s give some idea of the numbers that were present locally. These included sightings of up to 40 at Abbotscliffe in the 1991/92 winter, a peak of 61 there on the 21<sup>st</sup> April 1995, at least 30 near Daleacres on Lower Wall Road in January 1996 and a flock of around 100 at Capel-le-Ferne in December 1996.



A count of 23 at Botolph's Bridge on the 12<sup>th</sup> November 1999 was the last double-figure count to be recorded until there was some recovery of numbers in the Romney Marsh area from 2016, which would appear to have resulted from proactive agricultural practices. There were 11 at Botolph's Bridge on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 2016, increasing to 30 by the 23<sup>rd</sup> January, with 20 remaining into February 2016. This was followed by a remarkable count of 60 at the Willop Basin on the 13<sup>th</sup> November 2016 but there were only small numbers thereafter, until double-figure counts were again logged in the three most recent winters, with peaks in the 2019/20 winter of 16 at the Willop Sewage Works on the 4<sup>th</sup> January, in the 2020/21 winter of 13 at Botolph's Bridge on the 1<sup>st</sup> March 2021 and in the 2021/22 winter of 60 on the 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2022.



Corn Bunting at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)



Corn Bunting at Beachborough Lakes (Steve Tomlinson)

As Taylor *et al.* noted “there is little evidence to suggest that the Corn Bunting is anything other than a resident” in Kent and thought that birds “seen on the coast during spring and autumn may simply be caught up in the movements of other passerines”, which may explain a number of records of up to three at the cliffs logged during counts of visual migration. Despite the proximity to the breeding site at Abbotscliffe, there have been just two records at Samphire Hoe: singles on the 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2008 and 9<sup>th</sup> December 2020.



Corn Bunting at Abbotscliffe (Ian Roberts)



Corn Bunting at the Willop Sewage Works (Ian Roberts)

Click [here](#) to listen to a local audio recording of one singing at Donkey Street on the 6<sup>th</sup> May 2022 (Ian Roberts).

## References

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Corn Bunting at Donkey Street (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.



Corn Bunting at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)



Corn Bunting at Abbotscliffe (Paul Edmondson)