

Marsh Warbler

Acrocephalus palustris

Category A

Rare summer visitor and passage migrant. 22 records

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds in temperate Europe from France to central Fennoscandia, east to the Caucasus and Turkey, and Russia and Siberia east to the Ob River. Winters in equatorial eastern and south-eastern Africa.

Kent status (KOS 2022):

In Kent it is a rare summer visitor and passage migrant that has declined as a breeding species.



Marsh Warbler at site E (Brian Harper)

Ticehurst (1909) described how this species was first found to be nesting in Kent in 1905 but thought that it might have previously been overlooked. During the following seventy years one to three singing males were observed in the county in most years. A population increase began around 1975 and built to a peak of 26 singing males and a minimum of 16 territories by 1994. The expansion involved several centres, but the largest was in east Kent. Sadly, the Kentish population then suffered a decline and by 2000 the county total had decreased to 14 singing males, with around seven by 2005 and just a single bird by 2008 (Clements *et al.* 2015).

Elsewhere in Britain Marsh Warblers suffered from a similar collapse. A population of up to 180 pairs was centred around Worcestershire for much of the twentieth century, but had declined to less than ten pairs by 1987, with small numbers persisting until 1998. The reasons for the decline are uncertain but Bell *et al.* (2021) considered that factors may have included habitat fragmentation and loss, natural succession in vegetation rendering some sites less suitable, human disturbance (including egg-collecting), low breeding productivity, the relative isolation of the population limiting opportunities for immigration and turnover (in contrast to situation in mainland Europe) and conditions on the wintering grounds which may have affected this small, marginal population, even though the species is stable across its European range. Clements *et al.* also cited egg-collecting as a factor that “probably caused its decline” in Kent, “although vegetational succession may have also contributed”.

As Bell *et al.* described, away from Kent and the Worcestershire there were scattered breeding records concentrated in central and southern Britain (with relatively few coastal records) until the late 1990s, however since 1999 breeding records have been “overwhelmingly from the east coast of England and in Orkney and Shetland”. Bell *et al.* considered that the recent breeding in northern England and Scotland reflected a northward movement that was consistent with a changing climate and compared this to several other species in Britain that have shown changes in abundance and distribution, predominately moving northwards.

The current pattern of occurrence of the Marsh Warbler in Britain is that a small number tend to appear on the east coast in late May or early June and some (less than ten pairs on average) remain to breed in areas of rank vegetation (Holling *et al.* 2019). It is also a scarce passage migrant in autumn and the annual average total is around 50 birds (White & Kehoe 2019). Numbers fluctuate considerably and may be related to weather conditions, with Holling *et al.* (2011) stating that “prolonged easterly winds in May might have been responsible” for the relatively high numbers that bred in 2009.

Breeding Marsh Warblers were first discovered in the Folkestone and Hythe area in 1987 though may have been present prior to this and remained locally established with breeding in most years until 2006. The population appeared to be transitory in nature, using sites for a few years before ceasing to occupy them, even though they appeared to remain suitable. In total four sites were occupied during this period, two of them simultaneously in 1991 when the local population peaked at 8-9 singing males. There have been just five records since.

The number of singing males present in each year is shown by figure 1.

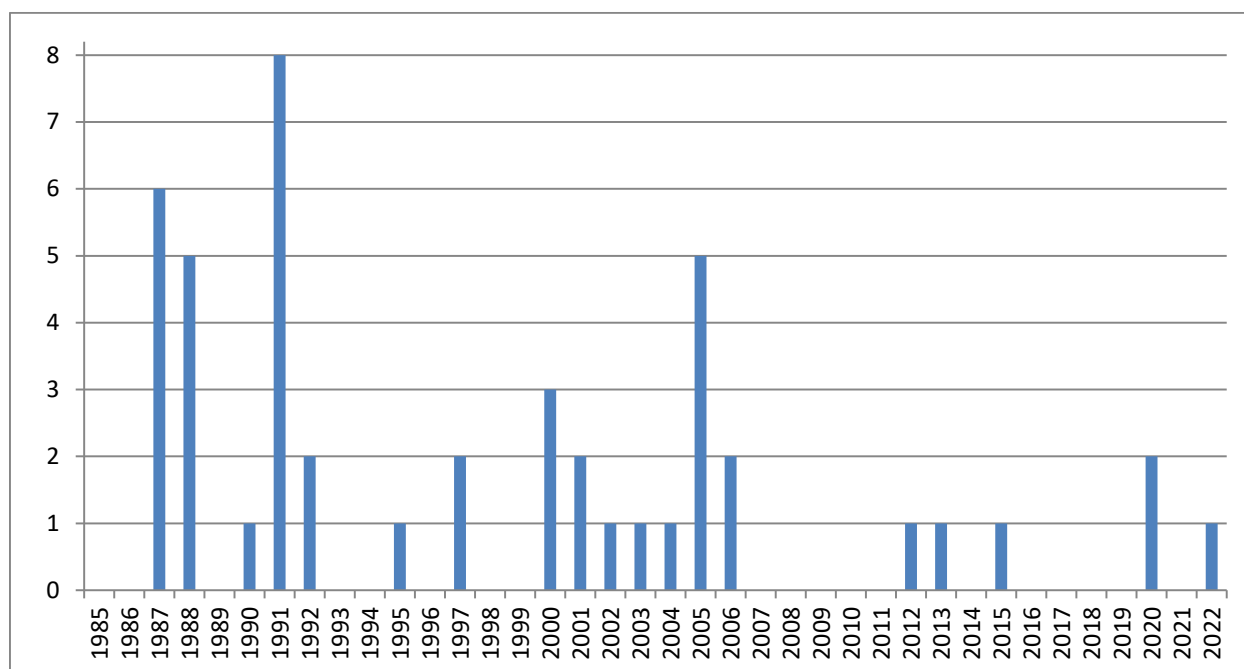


Figure 1: Singing male Marsh Warblers at Folkestone and Hythe

First arrival dates have typically been in late May or early June (with a peak in week 22), but exceptionally as early as the 17th May (in 1990), and it appears that arrivals can continue well into June, as shown in figure 2.

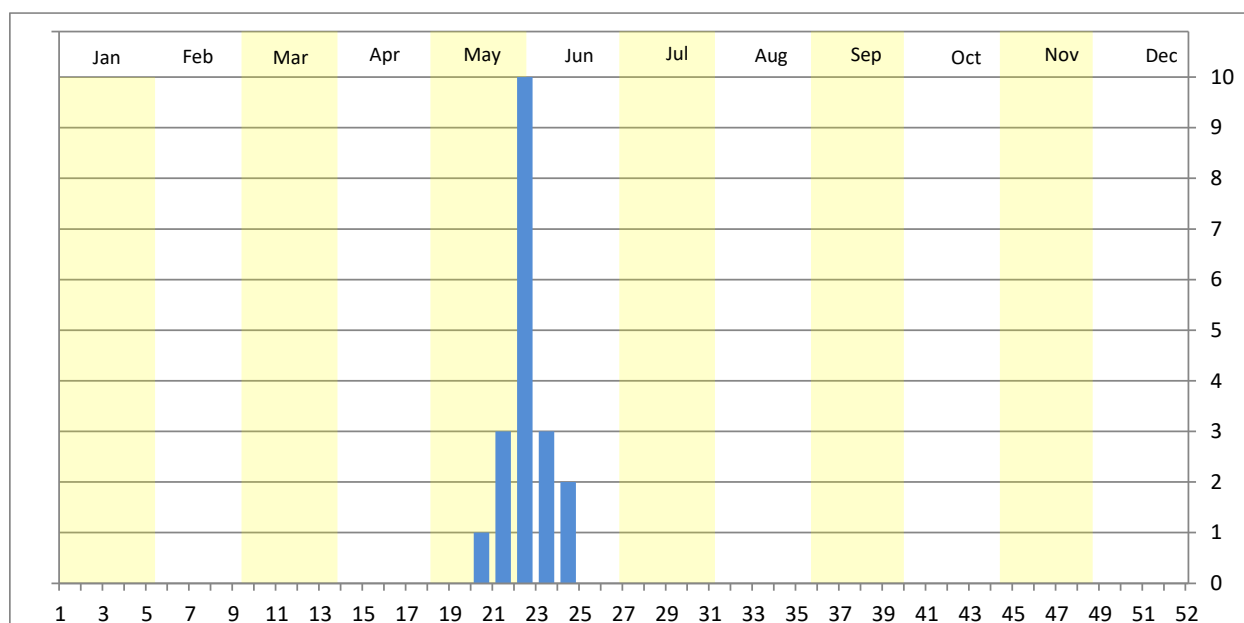


Figure 2: Marsh Warbler first arrival dates at Folkestone and Hythe by week

The sites used by Marsh Warblers are not publicised to reduce the risks from egg collectors or disturbance from birdwatchers, and so are not detailed here in case they are ever occupied again. No map has therefore been provided.

There is only one confirmed record of a migrant bird in autumn – at West Hythe on the 18th September 1994 – however it has been suspected on the cliffs on a couple of occasions (for example at Abbotscliffe on the 9th August 1998) but the identification could not be confirmed. It is a difficult species to identify in autumn without good and prolonged views.

Click [here](#) to listen to a local audio recording of one singing at site E in early June 2015 (Ian Roberts).

Click [here](#) to listen to a local audio recording of one singing at site E on the 22nd May 2020 (Ian Roberts), which also includes a singing Cetti's Warbler.

The full list of records is as follows:

- 1987** Site A, pair present from 30th May and bred, with additional singing male in June and a total of six males singing in July (S. McMinn, I. A. Roberts, *et al.*)
- 1988** Site A, pair present from 29th May and probably bred (still present in mid-August), with five reported in late May (I. A. Roberts)
- 1990** Site A, one singing male from 17th May, with two birds present in July (D. A. Gibson, I. A. Roberts)
- 1991** Site A, two to three singing males (D. A. Gibson, I. A. Roberts)
- 1991** Site B, six singing males (I. A. Roberts)
- 1992** Site B, one singing male from 26th May, with two singing males from 30th May (I. A. Roberts, J. P. Siddle)
- 1994** West Hythe, one, 18th September (K. Shepherd)
- 1995** Site C, pair present from early June and bred, raising 3-4 young (D. A. Gibson, I. A. Roberts)
- 1997** Site C, pair present from 28th May and bred successfully, possibly a second singing male present on a single date (D. A. Gibson, I. A. Roberts)
- 2000** Site D, one singing male from 4th June, with second singing male from 19th June and a third from 23rd June (D. A. Gibson, I. A. Roberts)
- 2001** Site D, one singing male from at least 28th May (possibly as early as 22nd May), pair present from 29th May and probably bred, with an additional singing male present on 3 or 4 dates (S. Busuttil, R. K. Norman, I. A. Roberts *et al.*)
- 2002** Site D, one singing male from 12th June (R. K. Norman, I. A. Roberts)
- 2003** Site D, one singing male from 30th May (I. A. Roberts)
- 2004** Site D, one singing male from 4th June (R. K. Norman, I. A. Roberts)
- 2005** Site D, one singing male from 31st May, pair present from 8th June and bred successfully, two additional singing males in June held territory, and were possibly paired (J. Chantler, R. K. Norman, I. A. Roberts)
- 2005** Site E, one singing male, 2nd June, with probably a different singing male on the 4th to 5th June (R. K. Norman, I. A. Roberts)
- 2006** Site D, one singing male from 25th May, held territory and was possibly paired, additional male on 20th June (R. K. Norman, I. A. Roberts)
- 2012** Site F, one singing male held territory from 5th to 25th June, though not thought to be paired, photographed (I. A. Roberts *et al.*)
- 2013** Site G, one singing male, 17th to 20th June (M. Kennett, I. A. Roberts)
- 2015** Site E, one singing male, about 1st to 19th June, sound-recorded (I. A. Roberts, B. Harper)
- 2020** Site E, one singing male, 21st May to 14th June, with additional singing male on 1st and 2nd June, photographed, sound-recorded (I. A. Roberts, B. Harper, R. K. Norman)
- 2022** Abbotscliffe, one singing male, 1st June (M. D. Kennett)

References

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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.



Marsh Warbler at site F (Paul Edmondson)



Marsh Warbler at site F (Ian Roberts)



Marsh Warbler at site E (Brian Harper)



Marsh Warbler at site E (Brian Harper)



Marsh Warbler at site A (Dale Gibson)



Marsh Warbler at site E (Ian Roberts)



Marsh Warbler at site E (Brian Harper)