

Long-eared Owl

Asio otus

Category A

Rare passage migrant, has bred 19 records on at least one occasion.

Breeds widely throughout Europe and Asia. The more northern, Fenno-Scandian, populations are mainly migratory, moving south-west to south in autumn, some as far as Spain, southern France and Italy.

These mainly migratory populations are subject to fluctuation linked to rodent numbers, with oscillations in breeding numbers and clutch sizes related to the density of vole populations. As a consequence, the numbers of autumn migrants are much larger in some years than in others (Snow & Perrins, 1998).



Long-eared Owl at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)

Clements et al (2015) remarked that “until recently Long-eared Owls were thinly and patchily distributed over much of Kent but ... they have now retreated to the north of the county, mainly the Hoo Peninsula and the Wantsum Marshes, and can now be considered to be rare in Kent”, with probably between five and ten pairs nesting in most years. Since 2010 the species has been monitored by the Rare Breeding Bird Panel and Holling *et al* (2017) considered it to be the most under-recorded species in the most recent report due to its nocturnal and secretive habits.

It is also a passage migrant and winter visitor to Kent in variable but usually small numbers (KOS, 2020).

The species 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 mile radius from Folkestone town hall. This range extends further inland than the current Folkestone and Hythe area and so this does not provide conclusive evidence of its occurrence here.

The first documented record locally is of one seen by Bob Scott at Folkestone in April 1969, with another reported in Folkestone Warren in April 1983, and a further 17 since 1990, including four in 2016, as shown in figure 1.

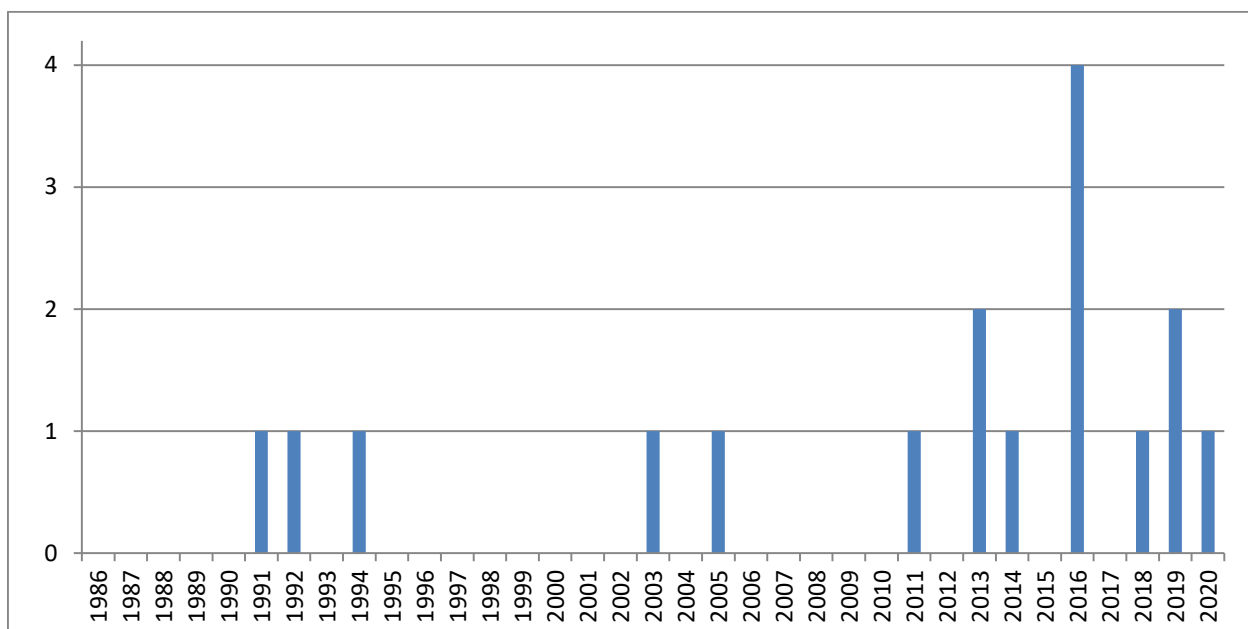


Figure 1: Long-eared Owl records at Folkestone and Hythe since 1985

Whilst most records clearly relate to spring or autumn migrants, there is an intriguing report of one seen by range wardens on Hythe Ranges on some evenings in May 1992, and Roger Norman flushed single owls (either this species or Tawny) from dense scrub during breeding surveys in 1991 and 1995. Workmen on the Ranges however report finding a Tawny Owl nest in 1992, so either Long-eared or Tawny Owl could have been involved.

Three of the more recent records were seen nearby at Nickolls Quarry in late May 2013, hunting near the Hythe Redoubt in June 2016 and at Nickolls Quarry again in June 2019 and March 2020. It had been considered possible that this secretive species did perhaps occasionally breed locally and in May 2019 a nest with two chicks was discovered at another site (details are not disclosed to avoid potential disturbance), with the pair again present in early 2020.

Apart from the May and June records mentioned above (one of which was undated), there have been six sightings in spring between the 18th March (week 11) and 24th April (week 17), six in autumn, between the 17th October (week 42) and 15th November (week 46), and one in January as shown in figure 2.

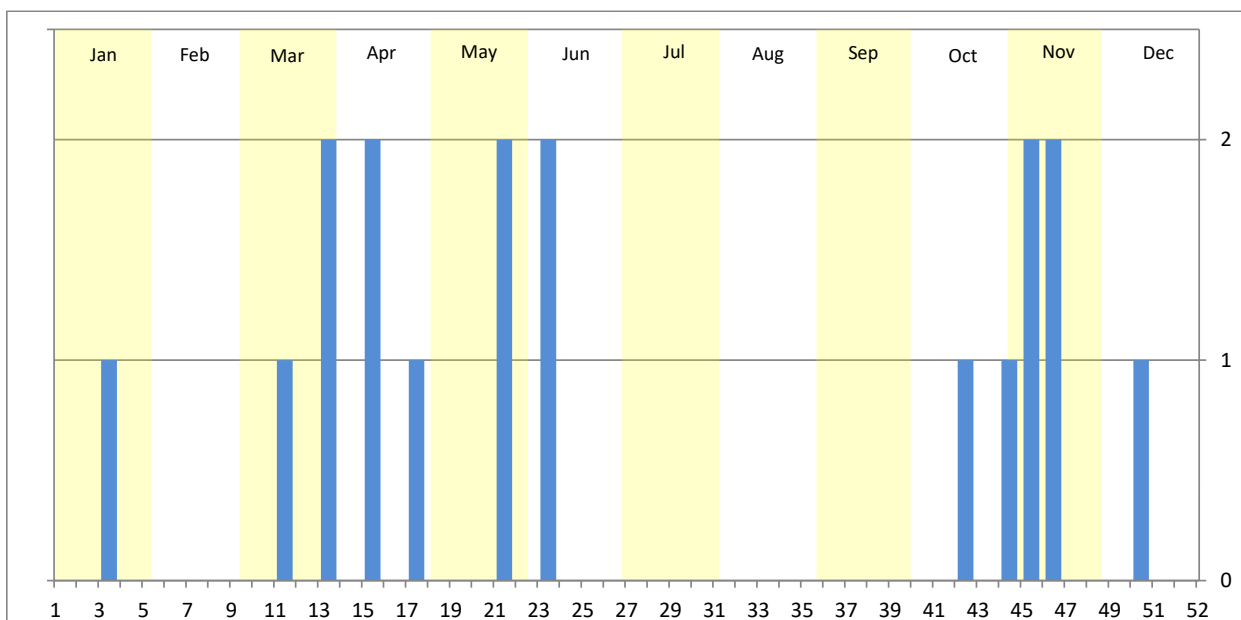


Figure 2: Long-eared Owl records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

The record from Nickolls Quarry in May 2013, falling within the survey period for the most recent Kent Atlas, gave rise to a status of possible breeding, as demonstrated in figure 3.



Figure 3: Breeding distribution of Long-eared Owl at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Figure 4 shows the distribution of all records by tetrad.



Figure 4: Distribution of all Long-eared Owl records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

There has been a cluster of records at Nickolls Quarry and the surrounding area, whilst most other records relate to migrants at coastal sites.



Long-eared Owl at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)



Long-eared Owl at Samphire Hoe (Paul Howe)

The full list of records is as follows:

- 1969** Folkestone, one, 15th April (R. E. Scott)
- 1983** Folkestone Warren, one, 24th April (R. Heselden, R. Hollingsworth, P. Howe)
- 1984** Folkestone Warren, one, 18th March (J. Chantler, P. Chantler, N. Jarman)
- 1991** Copt Point, one, 5th November (D. A. Gibson)
- 1992** Hythe Ranges, one, reported on May evenings (per R. K. Norman)
- 2003** Samphire Hoe, one, 29th October, photographed (P. Holt, I. A. Roberts *et al*)
- 2005** Samphire Hoe, one, 7th November, photographed (P. Holt)
- 2011** Abbotscliffe, one, 15th November (M. Kennett)
- 2013** Cheriton, one, 17th January, photographed (D. Clarke)
- 2013** Nickolls Quarry, one, 22nd May, photographed (B. Harper, I. A. Roberts)
- 2014** Folkestone Downs (Creteway Down), one, 17th October (M. Varley)
- 2016** Botolph's Bridge, one, 30th March, photographed (I. A. Roberts, J. Tomsett, B. Harper *et al*)
- 2016** Near Hythe Redoubt, one, 4th June (A. South)

2016 Samphire Hoe, one, 11th November, photographed (per P. Holt)

2016 Postling Wents, one, 9th December (Stephanie Lea)

2018 Samphire Hoe, one, 10th April, photographed (P. Smith, P. Holt, M. Kennett *et al*)

2019 Undisclosed site, pair bred, fledging two young, May, photographed (observers names withheld). Pair present again in 2020 but breeding not confirmed

2019 Nickolls Quarry, one, 4th June (B. Harper, I. A. Roberts)

2020 Nickolls Quarry, one, 27th March (I. A. Roberts)

References

Clements, R., Orchard, M., McCanch, N. & Wood, S. 2015. *Kent Breeding Bird Atlas 2008-13*. Kent Ornithological Society

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Knight, V. and Tolputt, F., 1871. List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood, *Folkestone Natural History Society Annual Report*, 1871

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Long-eared Owls at an undisclosed site – the first confirmed breeding record (Ian Roberts)

Acknowledgements

The tetrad map images were produced from the Ordnance Survey [Get-a-map service](#) and are reproduced with kind permission of [Ordnance Survey](#).



Long-eared Owl at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)