

Pallid Harrier

Circus macrourus

Category A

Very rare vagrant.

1 record

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds from Ukraine eastwards through Russia to c.100°E and south to Kazakhstan and north-west China. Occasionally breeds in Finland. Winters throughout much of east and central Africa, and the Indian subcontinent.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

Rare vagrant.

British (BBRC) records to end 2020: 129

Kent (KOS) records to end 2020: 6

Pallid Harrier at Abbotscliffe (Elliot Ranford)

It was an exceptionally rare vagrant to Britain prior to 1993, with just three having been recorded, before that year saw an influx of five. A further two followed before 2001 saw the start of a remarkable change in status, with records in all but one year since including an arrival of 29 in 2011. There have been six accepted records in Kent to the end of 2020, with the first in 2002, further sightings in 2011 and 2015, and three in 2016. Singles were seen in April and August, with four in September (BBRC no date; Holt *et al.* 2021; KOS no date).

The only local record involved a juvenile that was seen at Abbotscliffe by Elliot Ranford for around 30-40 minutes on the 23rd October 2021. It had caught a Starling but after persistent disturbance from corvids it headed off to the north.

The record by year is shown in figure 1.

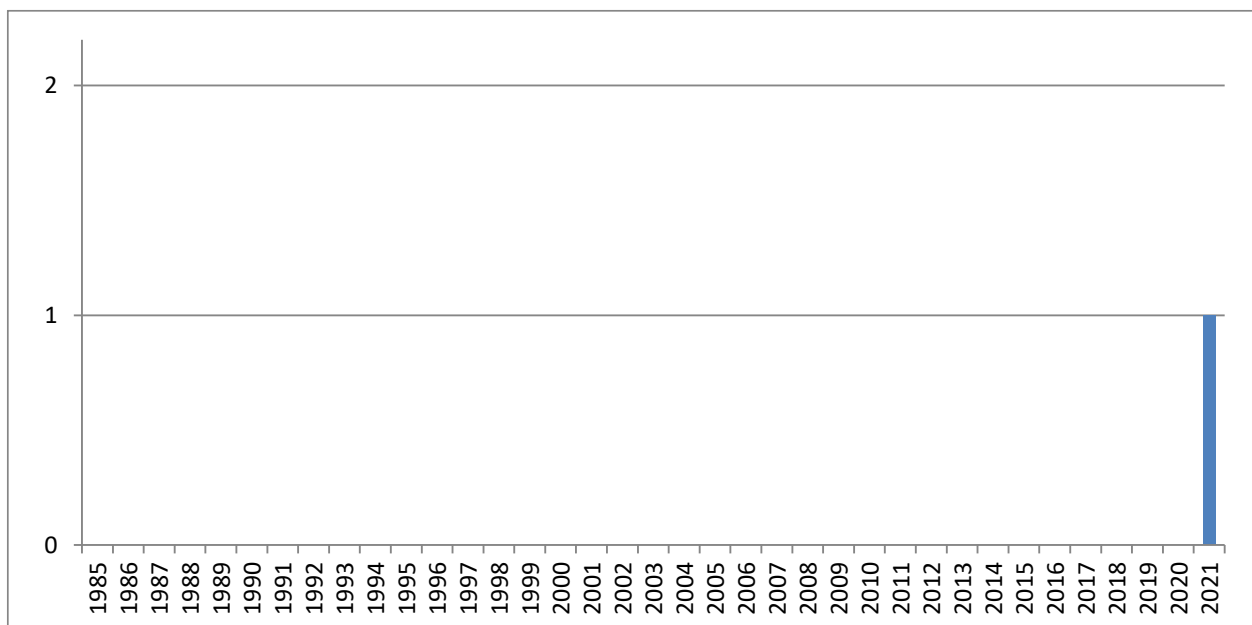


Figure 1: Pallid Harrier records at Folkestone and Hythe

The record by week is given in figure 2.

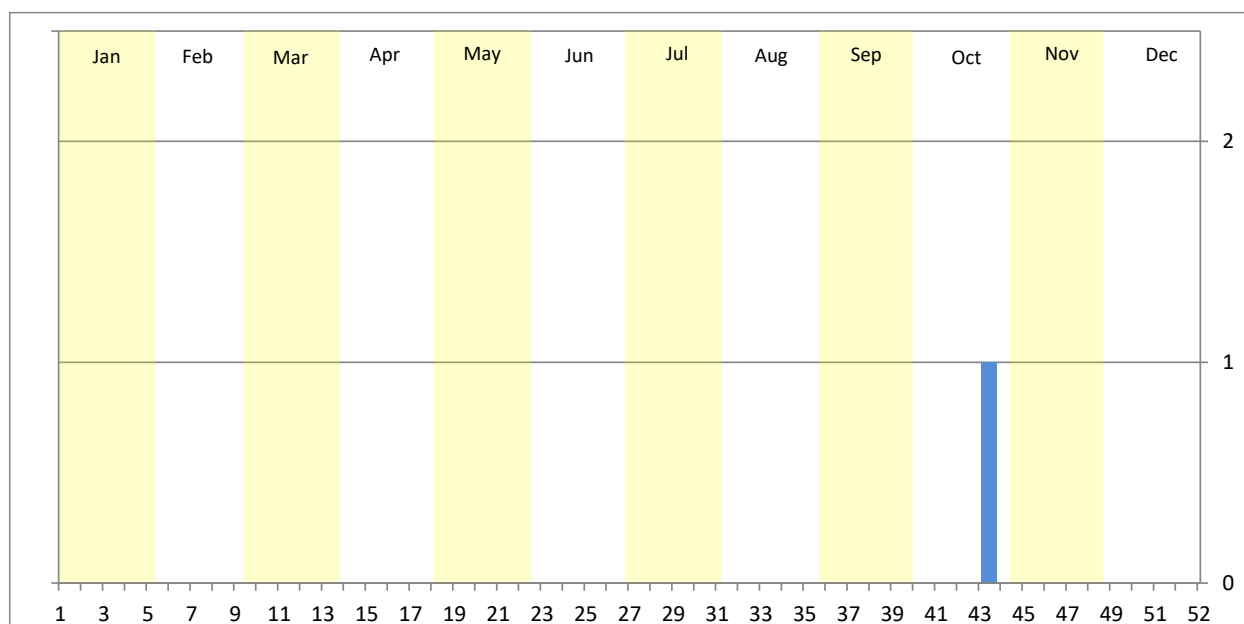


Figure 2: Pallid Harrier records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Figure 3 shows the location of the record by tetrad.

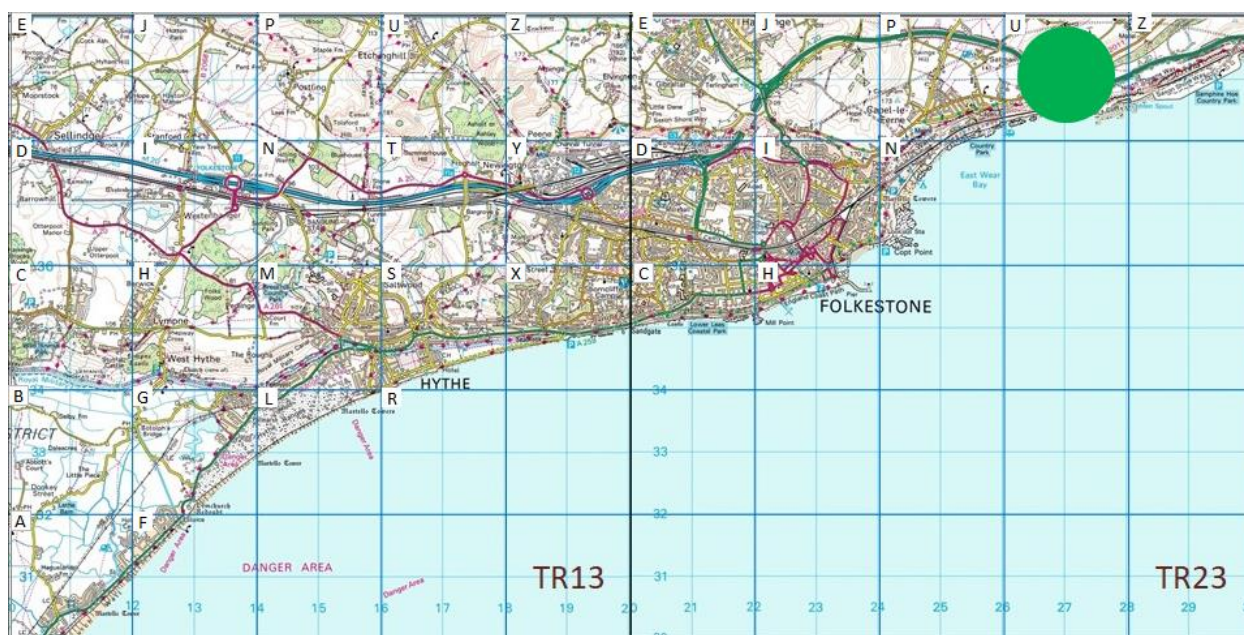


Figure 3: Distribution of all Pallid Harrier records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Confirmation of the only area record is as follows:

2021 Abbotscliffe, juvenile, 23rd October, photographed (E. Ranford).

An account of the first area record is given below.

Pallid Harrier at Abbotscliffe

23rd October 2021

By Elliot Ranford

Circumstances of the find:

During the late morning and early afternoon of the 23rd October, I was walking at Abbotscliffe, along with my in-law Alan Stewart. We were on a casual walk, hoping to see anything of interest that might be on the patch. The day started well with a Peregrine sighting, then a nice flock of Brambling dropped in briefly. As we continued our walk, we made our way into the field just off the footpath/cycle track, adjacent to the A20. As we approached the end of this field, and were close to re-joining the footpath, we inadvertently flushed a harrier, which was hunkered down in the long grass, beside some gorse. I immediately took a couple of photos as it flew away from us, which showed the bird to have caught a starling, and the white rump initially giving the assumption of hen harrier.

We waited patiently for 5/10 minutes, as the harrier had dropped into the gorse only 50m down the field. After some serious mobbing by corvids, the harrier again emerged from the gorse, and we were able to watch it quarter across the field for 15 minutes or so, and take some more images as well. Eventually, the mobbing caused the harrier to make its way across the A20, and circle the opposite field for a further 10-15 minutes. The harrier then headed inland towards Hougham, where it was lost to view.

On return from the field, I passed some photos on to Ian Roberts and Andy Luckhurst, who both confirmed the bird to be a juvenile Pallid Harrier. An exciting find for the local patch, as well as my own records!

Description of the bird (from photographs):

Size and shape: Similar to Montagu's Harrier in size and shape, being smaller and slimmer than Hen Harrier, with a long, narrow tail and long, narrow wings.

Head: Very striking, contrasting head pattern, with a thin, buff eyebrow and a whitish spot below the eye, which formed a concave angle. Prominent buff-orange collar sandwiched between the extensive dark brown ear-covert crescents and a distinctive thick, dark brown half-collar or 'boa' on the neck sides.

Upperparts: Largely dark-brown, relieved by an attractive spangling of golden feather tips, particularly across the median coverts. Rump white. Brownish-grey tail with darker bands.

Underparts: Breast, belly, vent and underwing coverts orangey-buff with no visible streaking. The underside of the primaries more contrasting than most juvenile Montagu's, with a bolder, though irregular pattern of light and dark bars, extending into the primary tips (which were not solidly dark like Montagu's). Secondaries appeared rather dark.



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References

- British Birds Rarities Committee (BBRC). Statistics. www.bbrc.org.uk/main-information/statistics (accessed 2022).
- Holt, C., French, P. & the Rarities Committee 2021. Report on rare birds in Great Britain in 2020. *British Birds* 114: 570-628.
- Kent Ornithological Society (KOS). 1953-2021. *Kent Bird Reports*. Kent Ornithological Society.
- Kent Ornithological Society (KOS). The Kent List. <https://kentos.org.uk/index.php/recording/the-kent-list> (accessed 2022).
- Snow, D. & Perrins, C.M. 1998. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Oxford University Press.

Acknowledgements

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