

Water Rail

Rallus aquaticus

Category A

Winter visitor and passage migrant.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Widespread across much of Europe discontinuously eastwards across central Asia and southern Siberia to the Pacific. Southern and western populations are largely sedentary but those in the north and east move to ice-free waters.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

In Kent it is an uncommon but under-recorded breeding species, a regular passage migrant and a possibly increasing winter visitor.



Water Rail at Seabrook (Brian Harper)

The Water Rail 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) stated that it "may be found in any tolerably moist situation throughout the county, such as osier-beds, stream-sides, water-meadows and boggy or water-holding pits in the woods", so there can be little doubt that it was to be found locally.

Overall distribution

Figure 1 shows the distribution of all records of Water Rail by tetrad, with records in 17 tetrads (55%).

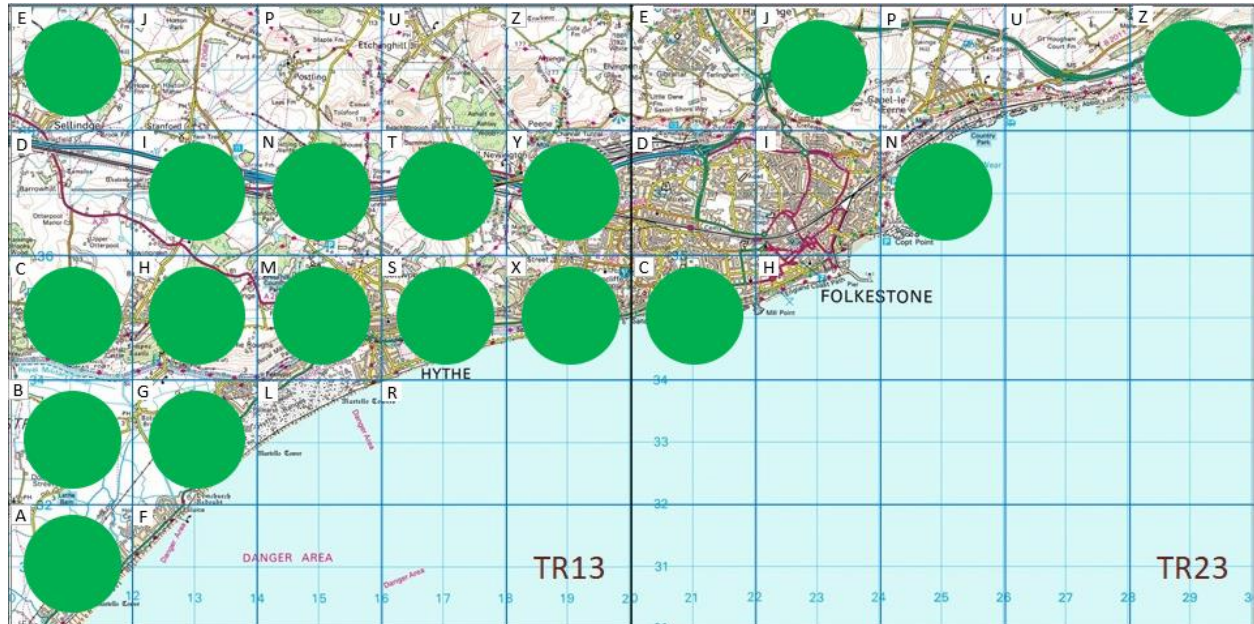


Figure 1: Distribution of all Water Rail records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The first autumn arrivals are usually noted in the second half of September but there have been earlier records at Nickolls Quarry on the 2nd (in 1999), at Samphire Hoe on the 7th (in 2010) and at Nickolls Quarry on the 11th (in 1957).

The local strongholds are the Royal Military Canal between the Aldergate Bridge and Seabrook, where an estimated 10 to 12 birds regularly winter, and the Botolph's Bridge/Nickolls Quarry, with an estimated further 5 or 6. Due to the difficulty in observing this species, this may well represent an under-estimate of the local population and it is also possible that the numbers may fluctuate from year to year, with hard weather also having an effect in some winters.

Water Rails can occupy very small bodies of water and there may be wintering areas that not been discovered, particularly as some may only be used temporarily. The small pond at Gibbin's Brook (TR13 E) attracted one in January 2020, up to two have been noted regularly at Beachborough Lakes (TR13 T) since late 2016, one or two have been noted occasionally at Holy Well (TR23 J) since 2010 and one was seen at a farm pond between Newington and Peene (TR13 Y) in 2022.

Several sites have either become unsuitable or appear to no longer be in favour. It was noted as "regular" in the Biggin's Wood area (TR23 D) from 1982 until 1988 when construction works for the Channel Tunnel began and the lake at Horn Street (TR13 X) attracted at least one between 1993 and 2002 before it silted up.

The pond in Folkestone Warren (TR23 N) held up to five in the 1982/83 winter but then only singles occasionally until 1993, whilst the ponds at Samphire regularly held wintering birds between 2003 and 2016 (with a peak of four in the 2007/08 winter) but there has only been one sighting since (in October 2019).



Water Rail at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)



Water Rail at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)

Wintering birds have generally departed by mid-April, with a particularly late individual at Nickolls Quarry on the 1st May 2006, whilst one that was found dead on the beach at Hythe on the 7th May 2015 was not in a fresh condition and may have died some time before it washed ashore.



Water Rail at Seabrook (Brian Harper)

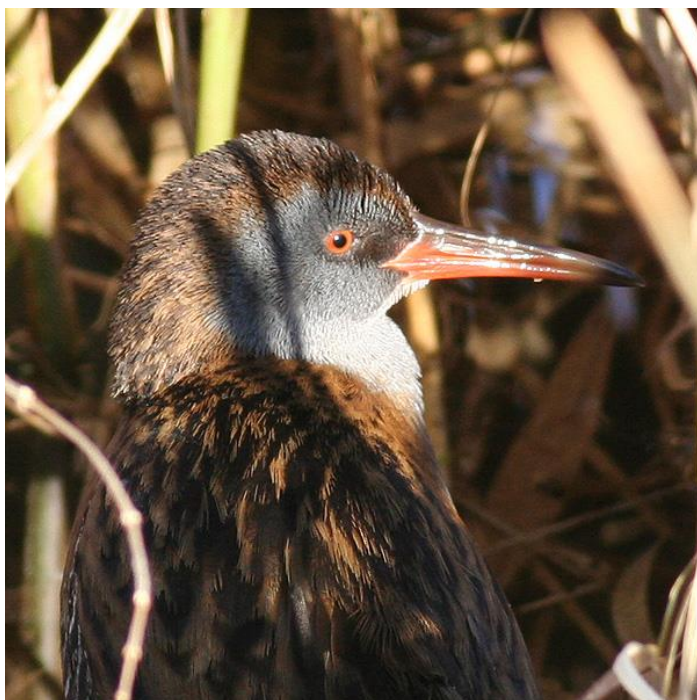


Water Rail at West Hythe (Brian Harper)

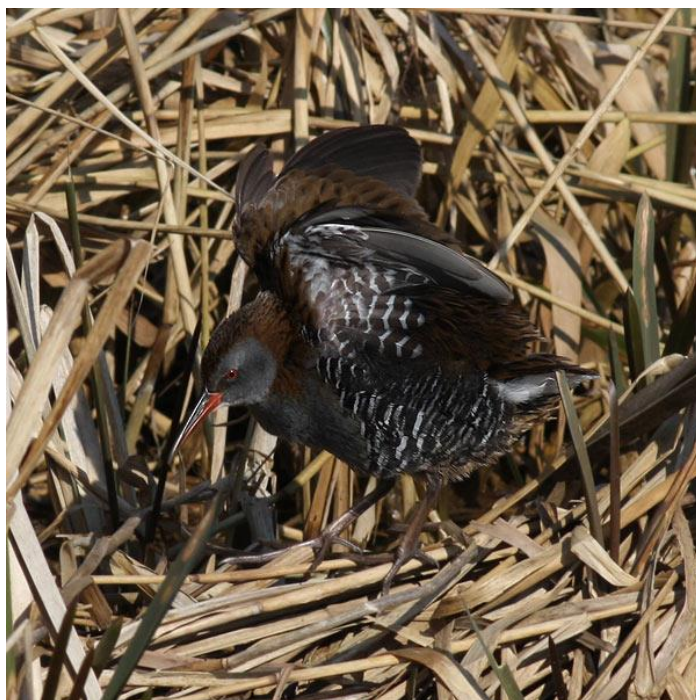
H. Schreiber stated that three to five pairs were present throughout the year at Sandling Park in 1958, with one or two pairs against present throughout in 1959, which is presumably the basis for the observation made by Taylor *et al.* (1981) that "up to four pairs have bred at Sandling Park". The only known sightings from this site since are singles on the 10th January 1973 and 18th October 1973, and it did not feature locally in the first breeding bird atlas (1967-73).

Henderson & Hodge (1998) noted possible breeding in five tetrads in the second county atlas (1988-94): TR13 C, TR13 G, TR13 H, TR13 T and TR13 X, but these may have related to birds present in what was considered to be suitable breeding habitat in April, prior to the departure of wintering birds. Based on intermittent observations between 1950 and 2000, Roger Norman had no cause to suspect that breeding had taken place at Nickolls Quarry (TR13 G) (Norman 2007). The only indication of breeding in recent years has involved one that was seen at Beachborough Lakes (TR13 T) on the 1st June and 6th July 2017 by Steve Tomlinson (with one also noted there on the 2nd May in the following year).

Click [here](#) to listen to a local audio recording of one calling at Nickolls Quarry on the 22nd December 2018 (Brian Harper) and [here](#) to listen to one calling at West Hythe on the 2nd January 2019 (Brian Harper).



Water Rail at Seabrook (Brian Harper)



Water Rail at Seabrook (Brian Harper)

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.