

Snow Bunting

Plectrophenax nivalis

Category A

Scarce passage migrant, mainly in autumn, has overwintered.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998; Holling et al. 2019):

The breeding distribution is circumpolar, extending from western and northern Fenno-Scandia, eastwards across northernmost Asia to Alaska, northern Canada and Greenland. Its range extends further to the north in the Arctic than the Lapland Bunting. In Britain it is thinly but widely distributed throughout the Scottish Highlands, with around 80 breeding pairs. It is partially migratory to migratory, with many birds wintering far south of the breeding range. In Europe winters mostly in coastal areas and on inland plains.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

In Kent it is a regular winter visitor to coasts and a passage migrant in small numbers, but is rare inland.

It was formerly more numerous in the county, with Taylor *et al.* (1981) giving total wintering numbers as around 300 on average during their review period (1952 to 1976), with two particularly large influxes in the winters of 1959/60 (with a total of almost 700) and 1962/63 (with a total of over 800), whilst recent Kent Bird Reports have noted winter totals of less than 40.

The Snow 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 it would have been likely to have been recorded at the coast and so within the modern boundary. Furthermore, Ticehurst (1909) wrote that it was "an annual winter visitor in small numbers to the coast-line of Kent, and has been found at different times along its whole length".



Snow Bunting at Folkestone Harbour (Brian Harper)



Snow Bunting at Abbotscliffe (Ian Roberts)



Snow Bunting at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)

The first documented record involved three seen by Roger Norman at Nickolls Quarry on the 23rd March 1960, during a particularly large influx into the county, and was closely followed by a male seen by the same observer at the Dymchurch Redoubt on the 31st October 1960 (Norman 2006; 2007).

There were no further records until one was seen at Copt Point in November 1984, which was presumably a result of a lack of coverage as there have been almost annual records since 1987, when one was seen at Round Down on the particularly early date of the 27th September. The next record, one at Lydden Spout on the 6th April 1988, was also of note as there have been just two later sightings.

In January 1989 three were present on the golf course at the Hotel Imperial in Hythe in January 1989, whilst up to five (perhaps involving some of the same returning birds) were seen there in the winter of 1989/90. Up to three were present at the same site between the 1st and 15th December 1996, with one there on the 9th December 1997 but there have been no indications of birds wintering there since and the only subsequent sighting involved two seen briefly on the 24th November 2016.



Snow Bunting at Samphire Hoe (Paul Holt)



Snow Bunting at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)

The next instance of overwintering occurred at Abbotscliffe after a record influx in autumn 1998, which included a peak count of 16 on the 26th November. Seven lingered into early December, decreasing to two by the 10th December and with one remaining until the 22nd January 1999.



Snow Bunting at Folkestone Harbour (Tony Poole)



Snow Bunting at Folkestone Harbour (Ian Roberts)

At Samphire Hoe it overwintered on several occasions from 2001/02, when up to five were present from the 25th December 2001 to at least the 11th January 2002. It was not noted in 2002/03, but the following winter saw up to three present from the 3rd December 2003 to at least the 24th January 2004, whilst one was seen on the 27th September 2004, with two from the 10th October into early November, and also on one date in late November and on two dates in January 2005, with singles on two dates in March 2005. Later that year two were present between the 26th and 30th November but were not noted subsequently. The final winter record involved one on the 23rd December 2007. Autumn migrants have been logged in several subsequent years, including a late bird on the 8th December 2014, but there have been no further signs of overwintering.

As Smith (no date) noted “before 2006, this species could be seen in the winter months on the sea wall feeding on seeds of rock sea lavender. But in recent years the records show that this bird has become rare at Samphire Hoe and the only records are of birds passing over”.

The only subsequent instance of overwintering involved a single bird seen at Folkestone Harbour from the 21st December 2021 to the 9th January 2022.

Overall distribution

Figure 1 shows the distribution of all records of Snow Bunting by tetrad, with records in 11 tetrads (35 %).



Figure 1: Distribution of all Snow Bunting records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The earliest arrivals have been noted on the 27th September: singles at Round Down in 1987 and at Samphire Hoe in 2004 (both mentioned above) and there have only been two records in the first half of October: one at Abbotscliffe on the 10th October 1992 and two at Samphire Hoe from the 10th October 2004. Arrival is more typically in the second half of October or in November, although can continue into December. Counts in October have not exceeded two, with larger numbers having only occurred from November. In addition to the wintering counts listed above, three were present in stubble at Abbotscliffe on the 24th November 2010 and three flew west there on the 23rd November 2020.



Snow Bunting at Folkestone Harbour (Ross Newham)



Snow Bunting at Folkestone Harbour (Rich Bonser)

Excluding overwintering birds, spring records have comprised just six records (two of which were mentioned above):

Three at Nickolls Quarry on the 23rd March 1960
One at Lydden Spout on the 6th April 1988
One at Abbotscliffe on the 25th April 1993
One at the Dymchurch Redoubt on the 10th March 1996
One at Abbotscliffe on the 27th April 1997
One at Copt Point on the 13th March 2005



Snow Bunting at Hythe (Ian Roberts)



Snow Bunting at Folkestone Harbour (Elliot Ranford)



Snow Bunting at Folkestone Harbour (Brian Harper)



Snow Bunting at Folkestone Harbour (Brian Harper)

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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](#).

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Snow Bunting at Folkestone Harbour (Elliot Ranford)