

Bittern

Botaurus stellaris

Category A

Very rare vagrant.

6 records,
6 birds

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

A widespread but generally uncommon breeding species across much of the middle and southern latitudes in Europe, eastwards across Asia to Japan and south to northern China. Some population appear to be resident and other dispersive or partially migratory, and to some extent as a response to cold weather.

Kent status (KOS 2022):

It is an uncommon winter visitor but with increasing records in spring and summer. A few pairs have bred in the county since 2010.

Clements *et al.* (2015) thought that the Bittern had probably bred in Kent before the nineteenth century but became extinct due to a combination of marshland drainage and hunting pressure. Ticehurst (1909) however was unable to find any evidence of breeding in Kent and just regarded this species as quite a widespread winter visitor. Harrison (1953) noted unconfirmed breeding in the county from the mid-1930s, with the first confirmation of nesting in 1947. Taylor *et al.* (1981) considered that Bitterns had probably bred annually in the Stour Valley since the 1950s, with a peak of ten pairs in 1962, but just one or two by 1976, after which it did not nest again in Kent until 2010, when a pair bred in newly created habitat at Dungeness. Reed-bed restoration in the Stour Valley led to recolonisation there at a similar time and two pairs bred at both sites in 2012 (Clements *et al.*).

It has continued to become re-established in the county, and in 2018 there were up to four nests at Dungeness, three birds booming in the Stour Valley and possible breeding reports from four sites in north Kent. Away from the breeding sites it is an uncommon winter visitor (KOS 2021). At a national level it has also been increasing, with up to 226 booming males and up to 80 nests found in 2019, a record total for the 13th successive years (Eaton *et al.* 2021).

It was first recorded locally in 1956 when one was found dead at Hythe on the 25th February and reported to Dr James Harrison. Nearly forty years elapsed before the first reported live individual, when an angler at Nickolls Quarry “provided an excellent description” to Roger Norman of one present on the 30th to 31st March 1995. Anglers again described singles, perhaps the same individual, at Nickolls Quarry on the 26th February and between the 7th and 15th April 2004 (Norman 2007).

The most recent records have involved one seen by Paul Trodd as it flew east over the Willop Outfall on the 10th December 2010 and one seen by Roger Norman at the Stonereach Bridge, near Botolph’s Bridge on the 8th February 2012.

The records by year are shown in figure 1.

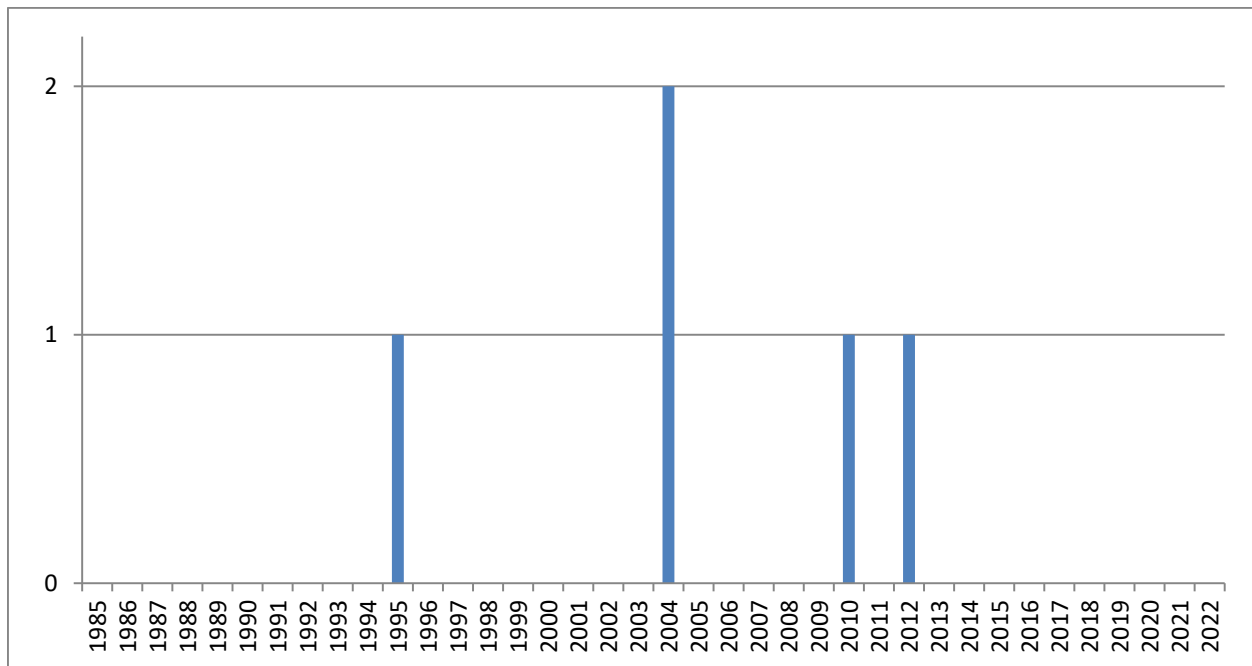


Figure 1: Bittern records at Folkestone and Hythe

The records by week are given in figure 2.

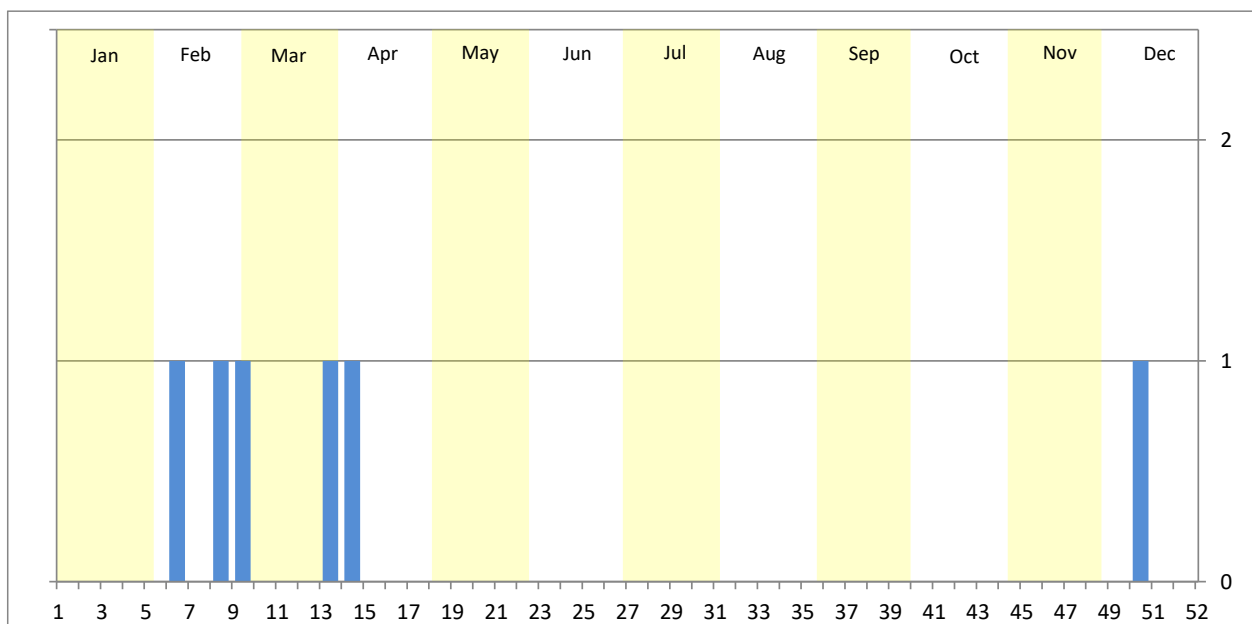


Figure 2: Bittern records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Figure 3 shows the location of records by tetrad.

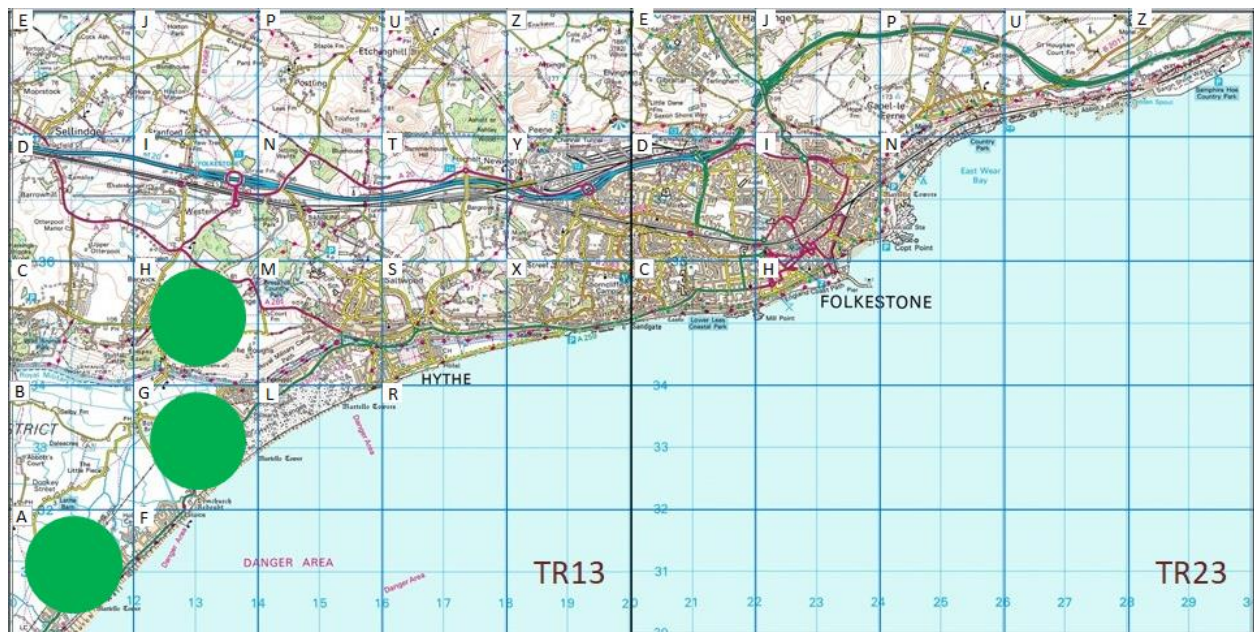


Figure 3: Distribution of all Bittern records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The full list of records is as follows:

- 1956** Hythe, found dead, 25th February (per J. M. Harrison)
- 1995** Nickolls Quarry, one, 30th to 31st March ("an excellent description provided by an angler" per R. K. Norman)
- 2004** Nickolls Quarry, one, 26th February (reported by a knowledgeable angler per R. K. Norman)
- 2004** Nickolls Quarry, one, 7th to 15th April (reported by a knowledgeable angler per R. K. Norman), possibly same as above
- 2010** Willop Outfall, one flew east, 10th December (P. Trodd)
- 2012** Botolph's Bridge, one near Stonereach Bridge, 8th February (R. K. Norman)

References

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- Harrison, J. M. 1953. *The Birds of Kent*. Witherby, London.
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Acknowledgements

The tetrad map images were produced from the Ordnance Survey [Get-a-map service](https://get-a-map.service) and are reproduced with kind permission of [Ordnance Survey](https://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk). I am indebted to Andrew Henderson and Tim Hodge for providing access to the Kent Ornithological Society archives.