

# Tree Sparrow

*Passer montanus*

Category A

Declining passage migrant. No longer breeds and now scarce in winter.

*World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):*

Breeds across most of Europe and Asia, eastwards to Sakhalin Island and Japan. Introduced in North America and Australasia. Mainly sedentary, especially in the west of its range, with only a small proportion undertaking relatively short-distance migration. Larger scale autumn movements occur on occasion, with irregular numbers and pattern suggesting irruptive nature.



Tree Sparrow at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)

*Kent status (KOS 2021):*

In Kent it is a local and declining resident breeding species, passage migrant and winter visitor.

The Tree Sparrow 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) considered it to be common and generally distributed across the county so there can be little doubt that it was to be found locally, although it was "somewhat rare" and "extremely local" in summer.

Harrison (1953) documented a considerable colonisation during the first half of the twentieth century and Taylor *et al.* (1981) considered that there was little doubt that the breeding range had continued to expand between 1952 and 1976 and thought that there were few places in the county where it would not ultimately breed successfully, apart from the truly urban areas.

In the first county atlas (1967-1973) the Tree Sparrow occupied 65% of local tetrads but this had decreased to 32% by the second atlas (1988-1994), a 50% decline. Henderson & Hodge (1998) commented on the decline of this species, which had begun in the mid-1970s and continued to the early 1990s, and which was possibly more severe in the south-east. They considered that the decline "may well be due in part to the now widespread use of herbicides in weed control on farmland". Figure 1 (reproduced from Henderson & Hodge) shows the extent of the decline (indicated by white circles) across the county as well as the local area (highlighted by the red box), between the first and second county atlases.

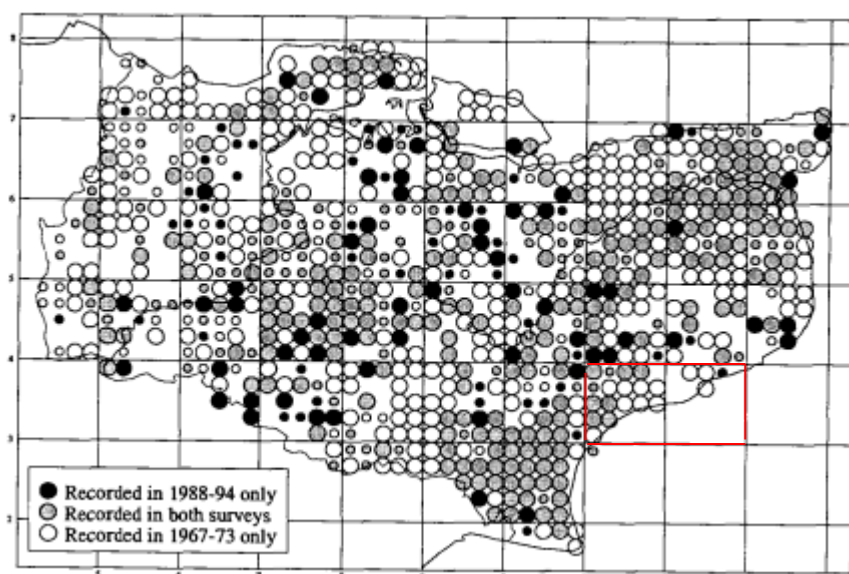


Figure 1: Breeding distribution of Tree Sparrow in Kent in the 1988-94 BTO/KOS Atlas

Clements *et al.* (2015) reported that by the time of the third county atlas (2007-2013) the population was thought to only be at around 3% to 4% of previous levels. There had been some signs of recovery elsewhere in England but this had not been seen in Kent. Clements *et al.* considered that the causes of the decline were largely unknown but likely to be linked to changes in farming practice and winter survival rates. They considered that “outlying colonies may persist with winter feeding and the provision of nest boxes, but the prospects for re-colonisation look poor”.

Figure 2 (reproduced from Clements *et al.*) shows the further extent of the decline at the time of the third atlas (indicated by red dots) across the county as well as the local area (highlighted by the red box). There were no instances of suspected breeding locally and very few across the county away from the Romney and Walland Marshes. It probably last bred locally in the late 1990s.

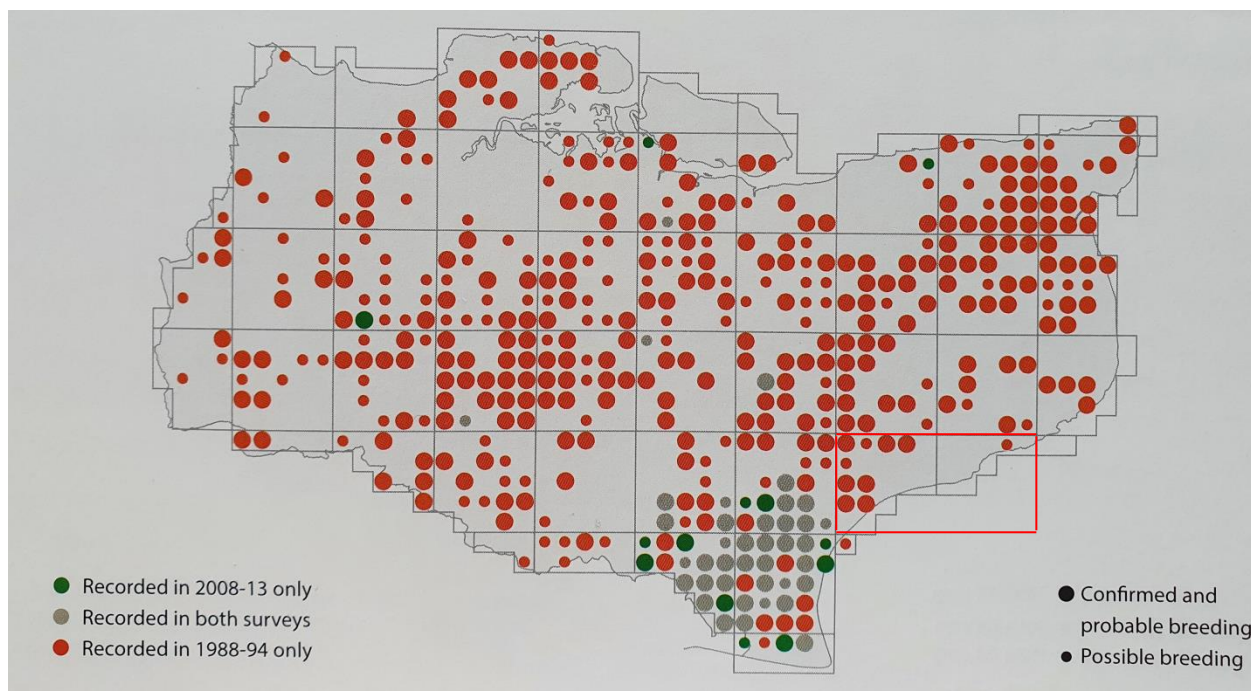


Figure 2: Breeding distribution of Tree Sparrow in Kent in the 2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas

The table below confirms how the species has declined since the first county atlas. The confirmed and probable breeding categories have been combined to account for differing definitions of these in the first atlas.

Breeding atlases	1967 - 1973		1988 - 1994		2007 - 2013	
Possible	1	(3%)	3	(10%)	0	(0%)
Probable/Confirmed	19	(61%)	7	(23%)	0	(0%)
Total	20	(65%)	10	(32%)	0	(0%)



Tree Sparrow at Botolph's Bridge (Ian Roberts)



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There are few records relating to local breeding population levels but Rowland (1968) considered it to be “abundant round the farmlands” of the Folkestone district and Neil Frampton estimated that about 30 breeding pairs occupied the West Hythe area in the early 1980s, where the “main colony is situated in old trees and bushes between the Roman fort remains and the canal”.

### Overall distribution

Figure 3 shows the distribution of all records of Tree Sparrow by tetrad, with records in 25 tetrads (81%).

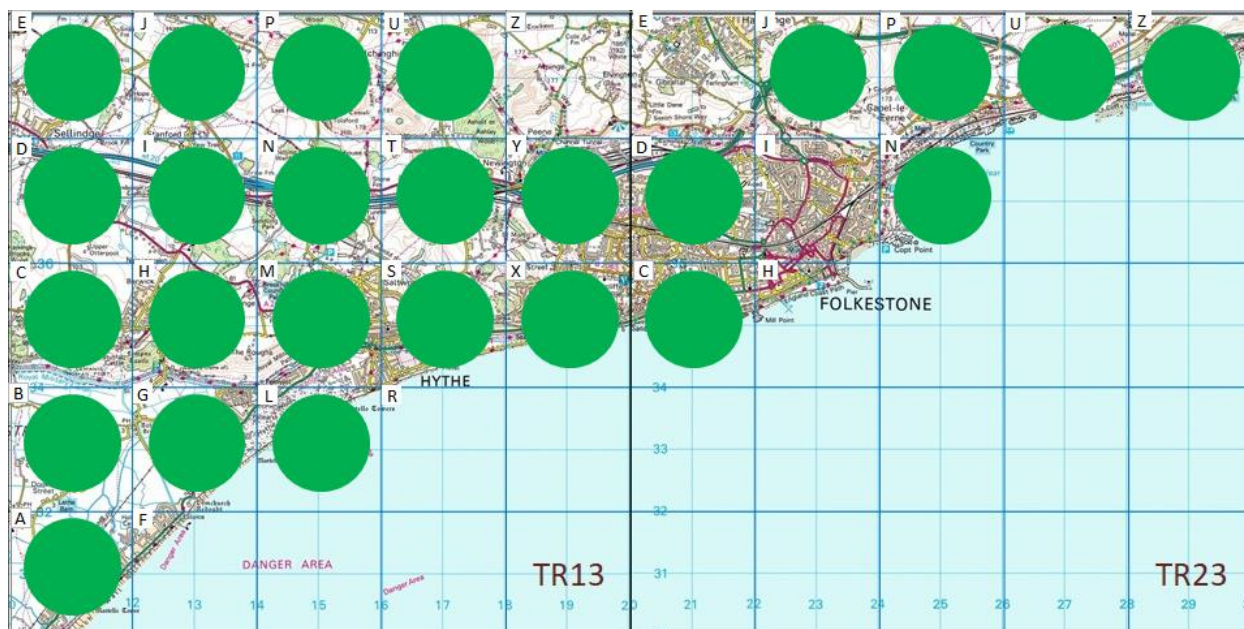


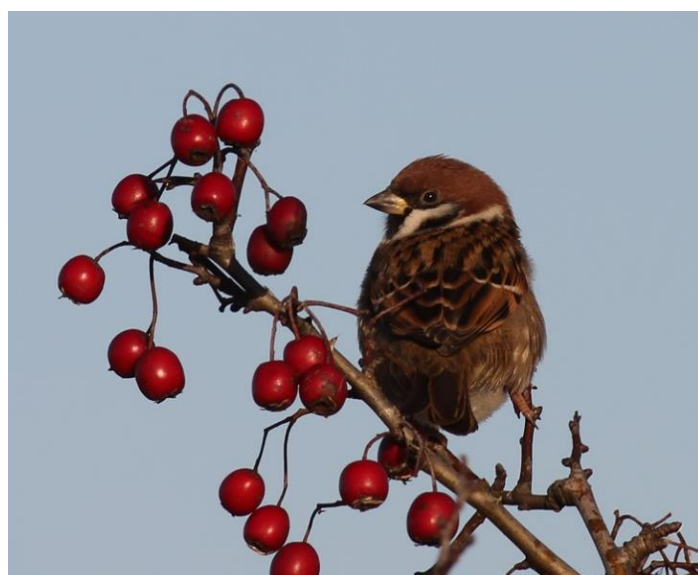
Figure 3: Distribution of all Tree Sparrow records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Taylor *et al* stated that diurnal movements may be observed at various points around the coast, particularly in autumn, with peak numbers invariably occurring between early October and early November. Locally, Roger Norman noted several movements in the late 1950s/early 1960s, when a north-westerly passage “was noted on three dates at Hythe Ranges in October 1957 (with a maximum of 60 birds)”, “small groups totaling 100 flew east across the Nickolls Quarry area” on the 4<sup>th</sup> October 1957 and “constant parties were moving west over Hythe Ranges between 08:00 and 09:00” on the 8<sup>th</sup> October 1961 (Norman 2006; 2007).

At a similar time, Dave Musson observed 105 flying west at Folkestone on the 13<sup>th</sup> October 1960, whilst 150 flew west there in 30 minutes on the 5<sup>th</sup> November of that year.



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In the 1980s, a total of 110 flew west at Copt Point on the 20<sup>th</sup> October 1983 and an exceptional count of 661 flew west there on the 21<sup>st</sup> October 1984 (with similar numbers noted at St. Margaret's Bay and Dungeness on the same day). The only subsequent movement in excess of 50 involved a total of 70 seen flying west at the cliffs on the 24<sup>th</sup> October 1994.

Counts of note in more recent years have involved 30 flying south at Abbotscliffe on the 18<sup>th</sup> October 1997, 39 arriving in off the sea at Capel-le-Ferne Café on the 24<sup>th</sup> October 2003, 16 flying west at Samphire Hoe on the 15<sup>th</sup> October 2005, 18 flying east at Capel-le-Ferne Café on the 18<sup>th</sup> October 2007 and 11 flying east at Abbotscliffe on the 16<sup>th</sup> October 2010 (the last double-figure movement to date). Autumn passage is no longer annual, but a total of 14 passage birds were logged in 2020.



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Winter counts included up to 100 in a kale field at Palmarsh in the late 1950s, whilst up to 130 were in the fields at Abbotscliffe in early 1993, with 50 there in February 1994. Up to 32 were noted at Nickolls Quarry in December 1995, with 25 at Botolph's Bridge in December 1997 and 37 at Nickolls Quarry in December 1998, whilst counts of up to 20 or so were still recorded until 2006.

Winter records became very scarce between 2007 and 2014, but up to 20 frequented the Willop Sewer area between January and March 2015, and up to 50 were in the Botolph's Bridge area between October 2015 and February 2016. Following winters saw numbers reduced to ones and twos, but up to 12 were present in the Donkey Street area in October 2021 (with nine remaining into January 2022), and four at Abbotscliffe in December 2022, so it is still persisting locally.

Taylor *et al.* made mention of a smaller spring passage from late March to late May, but there was little evidence of this locally apart from in 1958, when Roger Norman noted 112 flying east at Hythe Ranges on the 30<sup>th</sup> March and 50 flying east there on the 16<sup>th</sup> April. In more recent years, one flew in off the sea at Abbotscliffe on the 19<sup>th</sup> May 1992, one flew east at Copt Point on the 21<sup>st</sup> March 1997, two arrived flew in off the sea at Capel Battery on the 25<sup>th</sup> March 1997, three flew east at Nickolls Quarry on the 15<sup>th</sup> March 1998, one flew east at Capel-le-Ferne Café on the 25<sup>th</sup> March 2004 and one flew west at Capel Battery on the 11<sup>th</sup> April 2009.





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### ***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](#).

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