

Whinchat

Saxicola rubetra

Category A

Formerly bred but now a passage migrant, mainly in autumn.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds across much of Europe, although absent from some more southern areas, eastwards across Siberia in a narrowing band to 98°E. In Britain it has shown a marked decrease in lowland areas. Migrates to tropical Africa, but with occasional winter records in the Mediterranean basin and western seaboard of Europe north to Britain.



Whinchat at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)

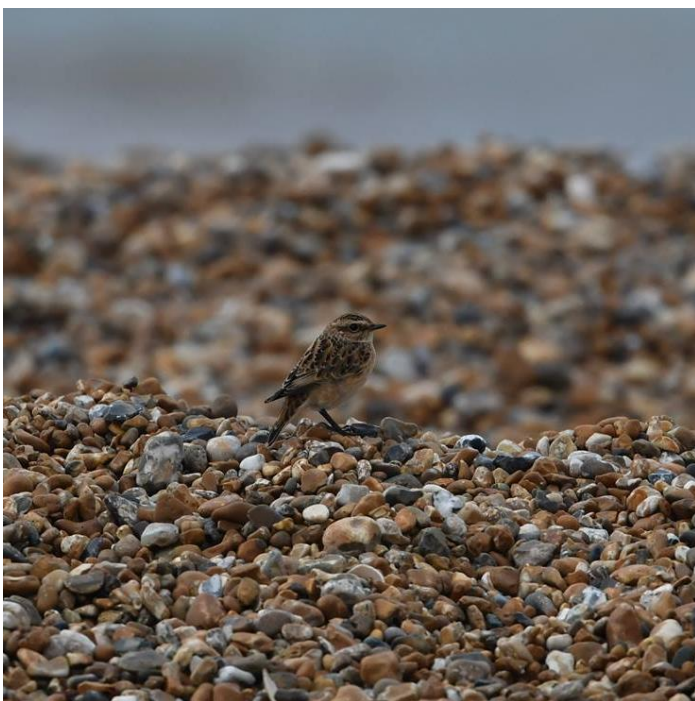
Kent status (KOS 2021):

In Kent it is a widespread but declining passage migrant that is more frequent in autumn.

The Whinchat 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) listed a number of localities at which it nested in the county, including "along the top of the Folkestone and Dover cliffs", where "it is sparingly distributed", and "thence along the North Downs and the higher ground in east Kent generally it is to be found in suitable spots in isolated pairs".

Harrison (1953) recorded an increase in the number of breeding records in the county, with an even more widespread distribution, but Taylor *et al.* (1981) considered that there had "clearly been a decline in recent years", with only one instance of probable nesting by the last year of their review period (1976), whilst "since 1952 nearly all the breeding records have come from lowland marshes". They concluded that its "position as a breeding species must now be very tenuous. This sadly proved to be prescient and the only subsequent records of successful breeding in the county involved single pairs near Lydd in 1984 and at Cliffe in 1990.

It therefore appears to have disappeared as a breeding species locally sometime in the first half of the twentieth century, although there were isolated records of a breeding pair at Folkestone in 1962 and a possible breeding pair at Folkestone Warren in late May 1977.



Whinchat at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)



Whinchat at Crete Road East (Brian Harper)

Overall distribution

Figure 1 shows the distribution of all records of Whinchat by tetrad, with records in 15 tetrads (48%). Although records have been widespread, with sightings in almost half of the local tetrads, most records are from the higher ground to the east of Folkestone, with Abbotscliffe being a particularly favoured locality.



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

The earliest arrivals have involved singles at Samphire Hoe on the 11th April 2011 and 13th April 2007, and at Capel Battery on the 22nd April 1993. All other spring records have occurred between the last week of April and mid-May, apart from late singles at Crete Road East on the 17th May 2014, Samphire Hoe on the 19th May 2004 and Nickolls Quarry on the 25th May 1991, and a pair at Abbotscliffe on the 28th May 2015.

All sightings in April have involved singles, apart from a pair at Samphire Hoe on the 26th April 2013 and an exceptional total of seven at the cliffs (one at Capel Battery and six at Abbotscliffe) on the 27th April 1997. Records in May have comprised ones or twos, apart from counts of three at Abbotscliffe on the 3rd, 5th and 13th May 1992.



Whinchat at Abbotscliffe (Ian Roberts)



Whinchat at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)

Spring passage totals have declined since the 1990s (when there was an average of 3.8 bird/days per annum) but have been largely consistent over the most recent two decades, with an average of 1.2 bird/days per annum in the 2000s and 1.3 per annum in the 2010s. There have been five blank years in the last 20, with all other years producing one or two, with the exception of 2009, when six bird/days (involving at least four individuals) were logged between the 9th and 14th May.

The earliest returning birds were noted at Abbotscliffe on the 24th July 2020 and 25th July 2021, with the main passage occurring between early August and mid-October.



Whinchat at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)



Whinchat at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)

Autumn passage totals have declined since the 1990s (when there was an average of 157 bird/days per annum) but have been largely consistent over the most recent two decades, with an average of 62 bird/days per annum in the 2000s and 60 per annum in the 2010s.

However annual variability has been higher than in spring, with just 26 bird/days in 2017 but a peak of 137 bird/days in 2004, although birds often remain for longer in autumn so bird/day totals may include some long-staying individuals.



Whinchat at Samphire Hoe (Dave Clarke)



Whinchat at Samphire Hoe (Mike Linklater)

The largest counts date from the 1990s, when there were peaks of 38 at the cliffs on the 19th September 1992, 37 there on the 2nd September 1993, 28 there on the 4th September 1995 and 27 there on the 3rd September 1996. There have been no counts of 20 or more since, whilst the only double-figure counts in the last two decades have been as follows:

- Up to 19 at Abbotscliffe between the 8th and 12th September 2004
- 10 at Abbotscliffe on the 7th September 2005
- 15 at Abbotscliffe on the 28th August 2010
- 10 at Abbotscliffe on the 1st September 2014
- 11 at Botolph's Bridge on the 6th September 2021

The only sightings after the third week of October have involved one at Abbotscliffe on the 23rd October 1992, one there on the 29th October 1993, two at Folkestone on the 9th November 1980 and one at Capel Battery on the 19th November 2009.

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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Whinchat at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)



Whinchat at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)