

Red-backed Shrike

Lanius collurio

Category A

Formerly bred, now a very rare vagrant.

14 records since 1980

Breeds across much of Europe but has almost disappeared from Britain (not breeding annually), and has contracted its range in Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark and Iberia. Elsewhere its numbers have greatly reduced in many areas, without an apparent reduction in range. The decline is thought to probably be due to loss and fragmentation of habitat resulting from afforestation and agricultural intensification, with increased use of pesticides causing loss of food resources, and climatic change. Winters in eastern tropical and southern Africa (Snow & Perrins 1998).



Red-backed Shrike at Hythe Roughs (Ian Roberts)

The species was included in Knight and Tolpitt's "List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood" (1871). This list covered an area of six mile radius from Folkestone town hall. Whilst this range extends further inland than the current Folkestone and Hythe area, the species was clearly present locally in the days when it was common in the county.

Harrison (1953) states that "this bird is, of course, a common enough summer, but it is, as was indicated by Ticehurst (1909), very subject to considerable variations over the years. However despite this known fluctuation of its strength, there is much evidence that, compared with thirty or forty years ago, it has definitely decreased. Its prevalence is, as I see it, somewhat paralleled by the case of the Wryneck, which has also become somewhat local".

He continues that "the early writers noticed this tendency, and Ticehurst quotes Hammond as regarding it as rather less numerous in the east of the county even in 1892. Major G. E. Took expresses the opinion that it is gradually ceasing to be a breeding species in south-east Kent, stating that, in the years 1912 to 1922, the bird was found in every suitable area". Locally it was known to have bred in the bushes at Hythe Ranges in the 1920s and probably 1930s.

Taylor *et al.* (1981) charted the decline through the 1950s and states that by the late 1960s it had ceased to breed regularly, with the two last pairs doing so in 1974. It mentions that "during this period the breeding areas were widely distributed over most of the traditional haunts, from Hythe in the south to Dover..." It appears that the favoured breeding sites were south facing bushy slopes, chalk pits and extensive young larch plantations.

Pairs were still known to breed at Hythe until 1952 and at Seabrook (with a pair regularly using the area behind the former East Kent bus depot near Hospital Hill) until 1953 and a juvenile in the old pit at Nickolls Quarry in early August 1951 might have been locally bred (possibly at Hythe Ranges). At Folkestone a pair bred near the Warren in 1956, fledging three young, and a pair which bred in the Creteway Down area in 1959 is the last mention of nesting locally.

At the end of the *Birds of Kent* review period (1976) it was still an annual passage migrant in small numbers, though scarce in spring, but is now only a scarce migrant in the county (KOS, 2020).

There do not appear to be any documented local records from the 1960s or 1970s, but a male was seen in Folkestone Warren on the 5th May 1980 and the 1990s produced five records, two in spring and three in autumn, including singles in both seasons in 1997. There were just three singles in the following twenty years before 2020 produced four sightings, the highest total since the cessation of breeding and only the second year in modern times to produce records in spring and autumn.

The records by year since 1980 are shown in figure 1.

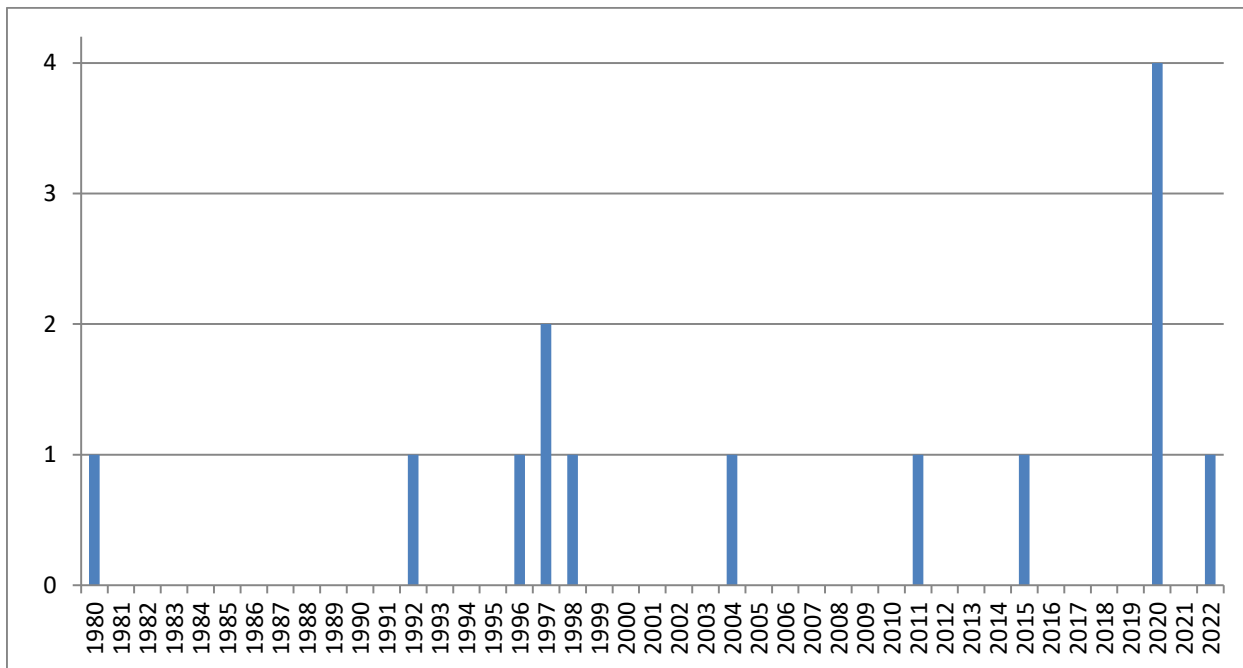


Figure 1: Red-backed Shrike records at Folkestone and Hythe since 1980

The records by week are given in figure 2.

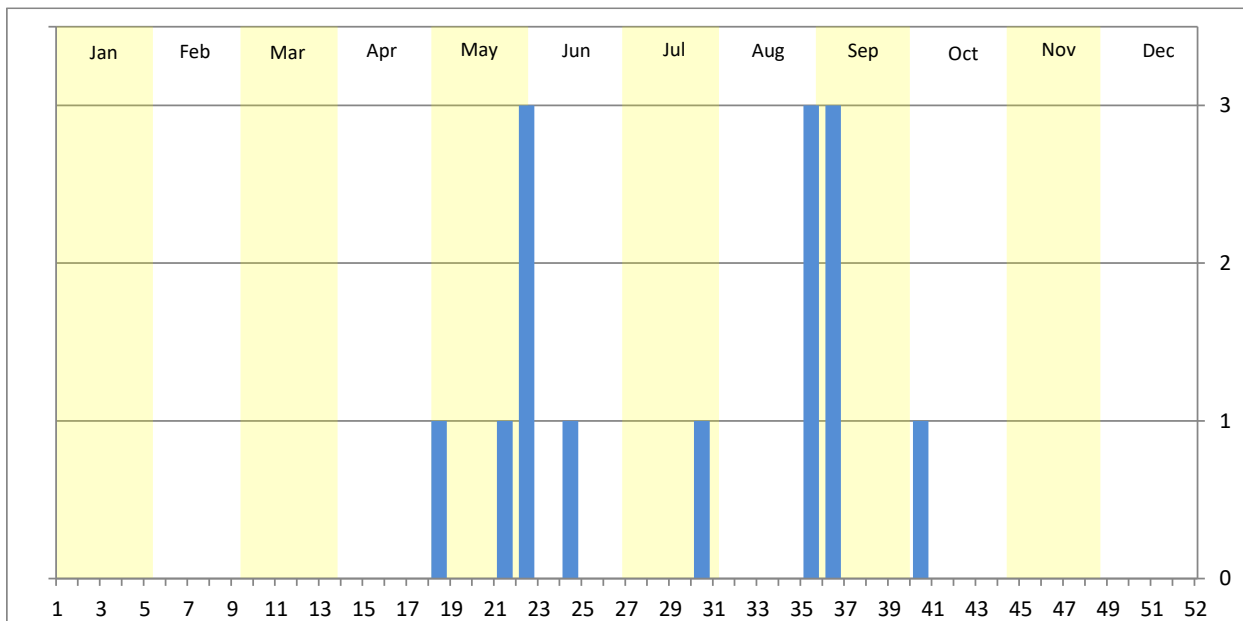


Figure 2: Red-backed Shrike records at Folkestone and Hythe since 1980 by week

Figure 3 shows the distribution of records by tetrad.

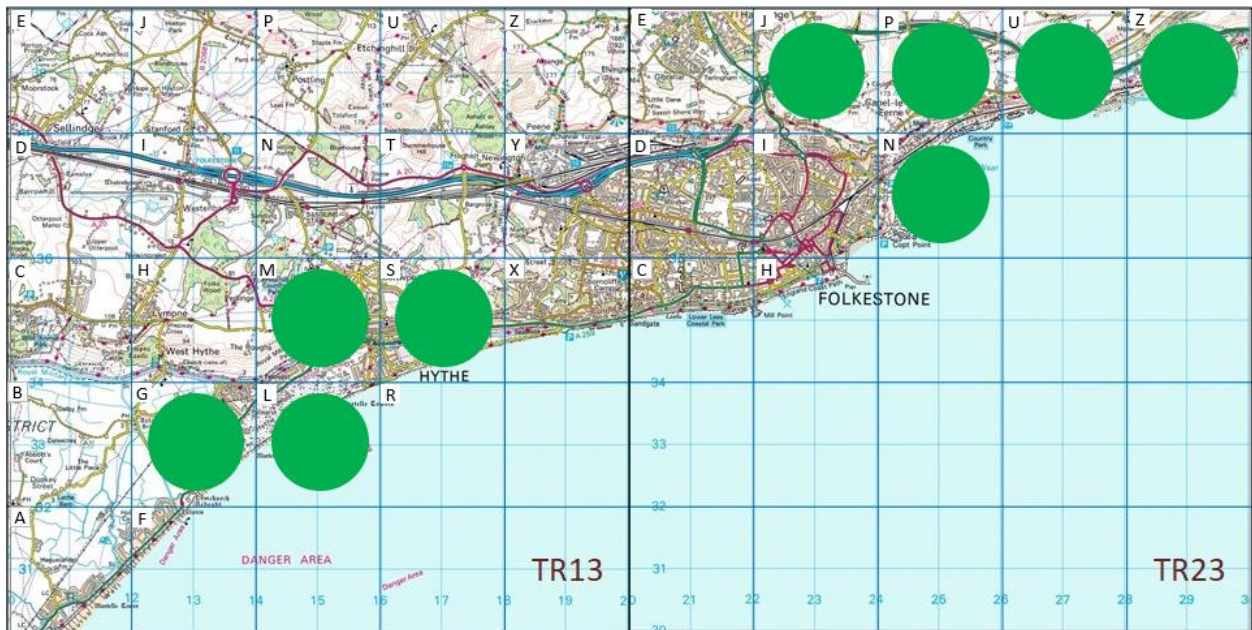


Figure 3: Distribution of all Red-backed Shrike records at Folkestone and Hythe since 1980 by tetrad

The full list of records since 1980 is as follows:

- 1980** Folkestone Warren, male, 5th May (R. G. W. Heselden)
- 1992** Capel Battery, male, 30th May (J. A. Gibson)
- 1996** Capel Battery, immature/female, 1st to 3rd September (D. A. Gibson, I. A. Roberts)
- 1997** Church Hougham, one, 29th May (M. D. Kennett)
- 1997** Abbotscliffe, first-winter, 31st August to 1st September (D. A. Gibson, I. A. Roberts)
- 1998** Capel Battery, first-winter, 4th October (D. A. Gibson, J. A. Gibson, I. A. Roberts)
- 2004** Abbotscliffe, female, 26th July (I. A. Roberts)
- 2011** Hythe, adult male, in garden near St. Leonard's Church briefly then flew east, 4th September (A. Lean)
- 2015** Samphire Hoe, one, 14th June (reported)
- 2020** Samphire Hoe, female, 25th May, photographed (P. Holt)
- 2020** Hythe Ranges, male, 30th May, photographed (B. Harper, I. A. Roberts, J. King)
- 2020** Abbotscliffe, first-winter, 31st August to 2nd September, photographed (P. Edmondson, I. A. Roberts, M. D. Kennett *et al*)
- 2020** Capel Battery, first-winter, 7th September, photographed (D. A. Gibson)
- 2022** Hythe Ranges, one, 3rd September (S. McMinn)

References

- Harrison, J. M. 1953. *The Birds of Kent*. Witherby, London.
- Kent Ornithological Society (KOS). 1953-2021. Kent Bird Reports. Kent Ornithological Society.
- Knight, V. & Tolputt, F. 1871. List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood. *Fourth Annual Report of the Folkestone Natural History Society*. Available at: www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/46103
- Snow, D. & Perrins, C.M. 1998. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, D., Davenport, D. & Flegg, J. 1981. *Birds of Kent*. Kent Ornithological Society.
- Ticehurst, N. F. 1909. *A History of the Birds of Kent*. Witherby, London.

Acknowledgements

The tetrad map images were produced from the Ordnance Survey [Get-a-map service](#) and are reproduced with kind permission of [Ordnance Survey](#).



Red-backed Shrike at Abbotscliffe (Ian Roberts)