

Western Subalpine/Eastern Subalpine/Moltoni's Warbler

Curruca iberiae/cantillans/subalpina

Very rare vagrant.

1 record, 1 bird

World/British distribution (Svensson 2013):

The "Subalpine" Warbler was regarded as a single species until very recently, with Svensson proposing that it would be better treated as three separate species: Western Subalpine Warbler (which breeds in France, Iberia, north-west Italy and north-west Africa), Moltoni's Warbler (which breeds in the western Mediterranean islands and northern Italy) and Eastern Subalpine Warbler (which breeds in southern Italy, south-east Europe and western Turkey). All three species winter in Africa.

Moltoni's Warbler was formally recognised and added to the British List by the BOURC in 2015 (BOURC 2015), with Eastern Subalpine Warbler added the following year (BOURC 2016). All three species are known to occur in Britain as vagrants, with DNA analysis confirming the first British specimens of Moltoni's Warbler from St Kilda in June 1894, of Eastern Subalpine Warbler from Fair Isle in May 1908 and of Western Subalpine Warbler from the Isle of May in May 1924 (Collinson *et al.* 2014).

Kent status (KOS no date):

Very rare vagrant. Only one occurrence in Kent has been accepted to species level: an Eastern Subalpine Warbler at Dungeness on the 1st May 2004. The other 18 records which occurred between 1976 and 2009 are under review by the British Birds Rarities Committee (BBRC) and Western Subalpine Warbler has currently been removed from the county list.

British (BBRC) records to end 2021: 12 Moltoni's, 25 Western, 117 Eastern and 752 currently under review

Kent (KOS) records to end 2021: 1 Eastern and 18 currently under review

Three of the four Subalpine Warblers that occurred in Britain prior to 1950 have subsequently been identified to species level by DNA analysis and (as described above) belonged to each of the three newly split species. It continued to be very rare in Britain in the 1950s (with nine records) before gradually increasing in frequency, with means of 2 per annum in the 1960s, 5 per annum in the 1970s, 16 per annum in the 1980s, 19 per annum in the 1990s and 20 per annum in the first half of the 2000s, before it was removed from the list of species which the BBRC considered to be national rarities at the end of 2005 (BBRC no date, Fraser *et al.* 2007).

It returned to the list of species that the BBRC consider from 2019 as the committee began to assess records against the new species' criteria and to re-assess records that were not assigned to form (Holt *et al.* 2021). As Stoddart (2021) stated, "the identification challenges posed by this species group are considerable, and knowledge has advanced in fits and starts", whilst French (2020) set out the criteria that the BBRC now required for acceptance: "submissions of males in spring to contain two of the following criteria: details of the underparts coloration, an unambiguous tail pattern (with the pattern of the second-outermost tail feather photographed) or call (either well described or sound-recorded). For females and all birds in autumn, submissions should include both the tail pattern and the call".

Stoddart noted that "given these new acceptance criteria, it is inevitable that many past records of 'Subalpine Warbler' will be referred to the Western Subalpine/Eastern Subalpine/Moltoni's Warbler species group". Indeed, only 17% of British records have currently been assigned to species.

The only area record, a male found by Ian Roberts at Samphire Hoe on the 19th April 2006, also remains unassigned as the tail pattern was not seen (or photographed) and it was not heard to call.

The Subalpine Warbler complex is primarily a spring vagrant to Kent, with 83% of county records having occurred between the 13th April and 17th June and the other three in autumn, with singles in September, October and November.

The record by year is shown in figure 1.

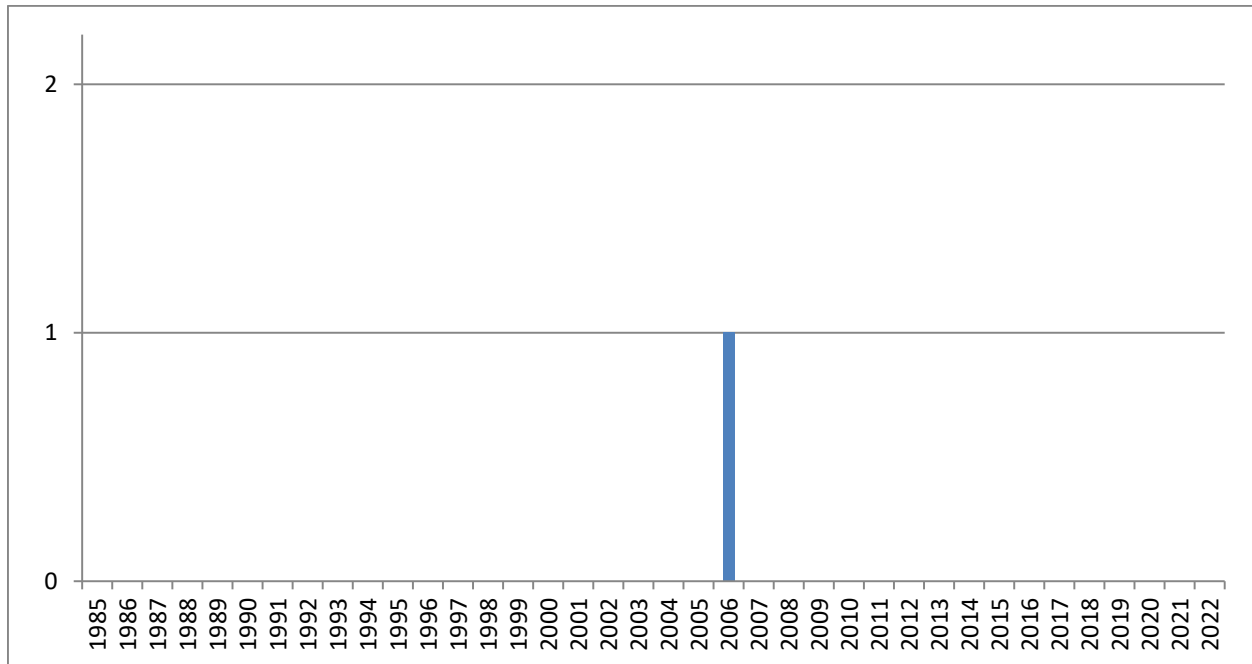


Figure 1: Western Subalpine/Eastern Subalpine/Moltoni's Warbler records at Folkestone and Hythe

The record by week is given in figure 2.

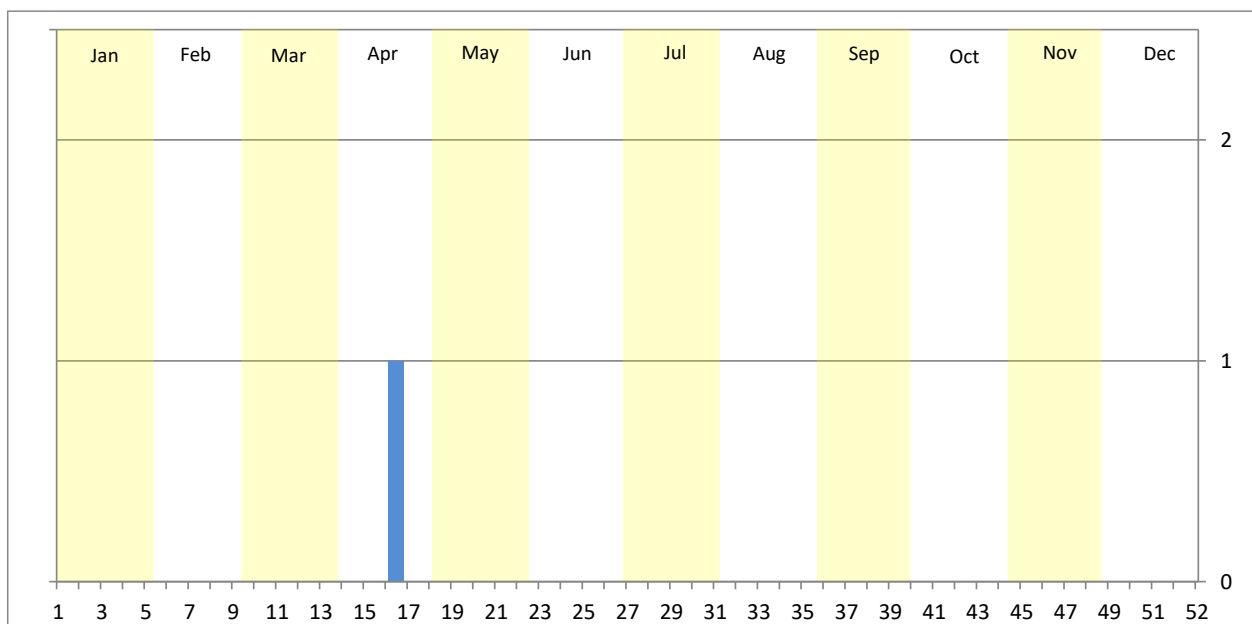


Figure 2: Western Subalpine/Eastern Subalpine/Moltoni's Warbler records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Figure 3 shows the location of the record by tetrad.

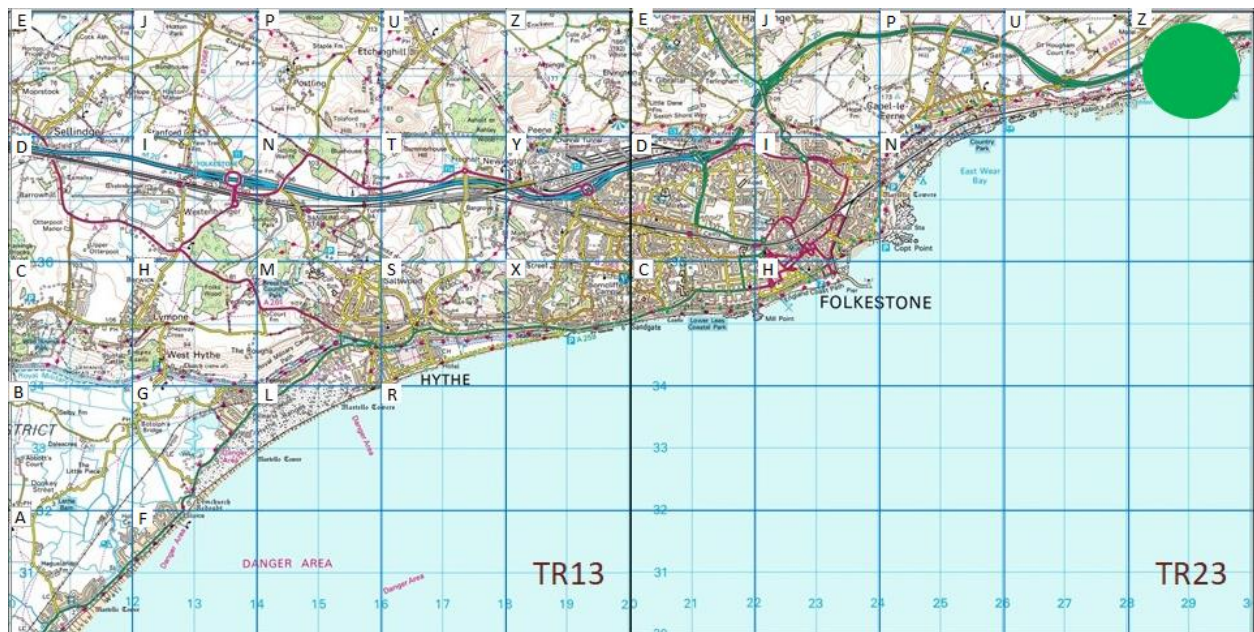


Figure 3: Distribution of all Western Subalpine/Eastern Subalpine/Moltoni's Warbler records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Confirmation of the only area record of the species group is as follows:

2006 Samphire Hoe, male, 19th April (I. A. Roberts)

An account of the first area record is given below.

"Subalpine Warbler" at Samphire Hoe 19th April 2006

By Ian Roberts

Weather conditions:

High pressure and clear weather over the Balearics and Spain would have encouraged a northward movement of migrants only to be met by a long frontal system stretching from west of Britain right across north/central Europe, which was slowly moving south. The meteorological chart as at midnight on the 19th April 2006 is shown below.

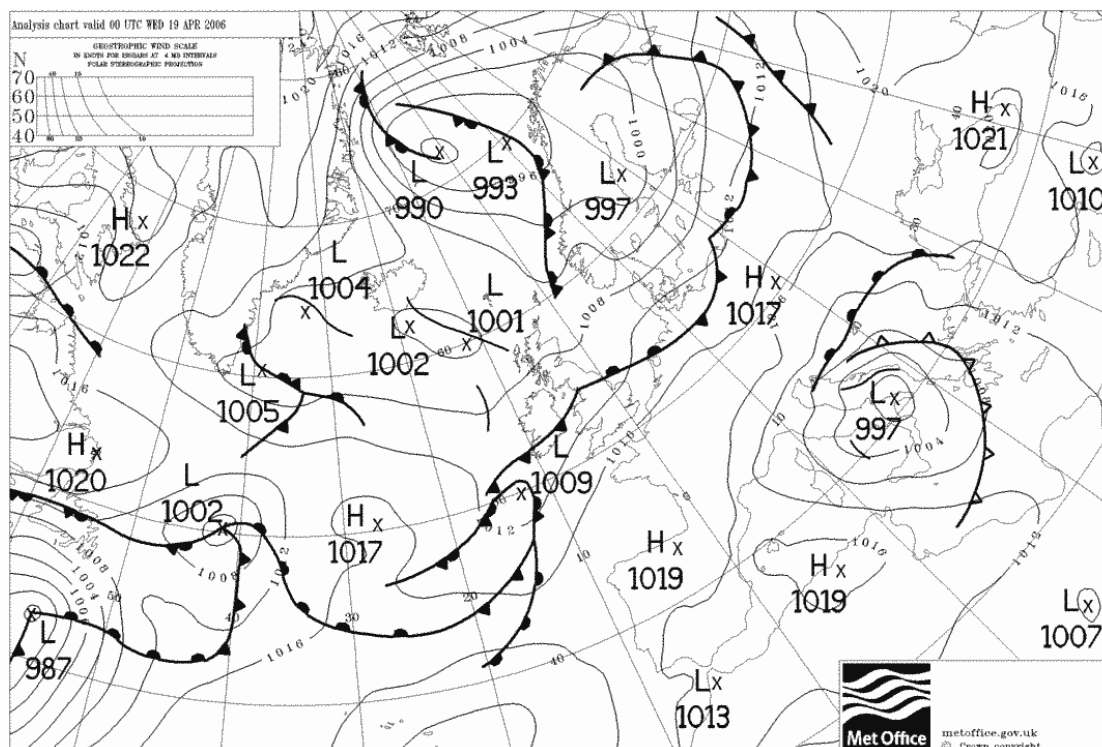
Circumstances of the find:

With a moderate south-westerly wind blowing and low cloud shrouding the cliffs, seawatching seemed the only viable option on the morning of the 19th April. I arrived at Samphire Hoe at 06:35 and gave the sea about 1 hour 20 minutes, which was at least an hour more than it deserved - as only 2 Arctic Skuas and 150 Common Scoter had passed by. I could stand no more but had 45 minutes to kill before work so decided to give the bushes a quick look. I headed along the railway line towards the eastern end of the site which I thought may be more sheltered from the breeze.

From some low bushes I flushed a redstart sp. which flew into buddleia by the railway. I assumed it was a Common Redstart (which it turned out to be) as Black Redstarts rarely get into the bushes but, as it would have been new for the year and Black Redstarts were present on site, I wanted to make sure. I chased it around for a few minutes but it was elusive. As I was searching, a Willow Warbler popped up in a buddleia close by (c.25-30 feet away), and as I was looking at it I noticed another movement nearby. I focused on that and was completely stunned. For a few moments I couldn't place it, as the bird I was looking at didn't fit anything I was expecting to see: the body was blue-grey above and red below - a Dartford Warbler?

That seemed unlikely as it wasn't the habitat or time of year I would have expected for Dartford Warbler, and then I saw the head, and the white sub-moustachial stripes, and it all became clear: a SUBALPINE WARBLER!

It sat for a few seconds before moving around in the buddleia and shifting a few bushes to the west over the next few minutes, and I got a few more views of it, although the initial view was probably the closest. I got the news out but unfortunately I lost track of its movements and couldn't re-find it. Several people turned up though the day but it wasn't seen again, despite an improvement in the weather, although a pair of Ravens provided some compensation.



Description of the bird:

Size and shape: Perhaps slightly larger than nearby Willow Warbler and similar to Whitethroat in shape and size (though slightly more compact?)

Upperparts: head and upperparts a bluish-grey, wing feathers slightly darker. Appeared to have a red eye (eyering?). Tail not as long as Dartford. Tail pattern not discernible with the views available.

Underparts: a bright orangey-red and quite evenly-coloured underneath. Throat without any whitish spotting. Prominent whitish sub-moustachial stripes.

Bare parts: bill appeared greyish but leg colour not noted.

Voice: unfortunately not heard to call or sing.

Comments on the record:

At the time of the sighting, Subalpine Warbler was known as just a single species and had been removed from the list of those considered by the BBRC, so was assessed, and accepted, by the KOS rarities committee and published in the Kent Bird Report for that year (KOS 2009).

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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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