

Cirl Bunting

Emberiza cirlus

Category A

Formerly resident, now extinct.

2 records of 3 birds since 1950

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds across the south-west of Europe, from south-west England south through Iberia into North Africa, and south-east through Italy and the Balkans into Greece and Turkey. In Britain it was first recorded breeding in south Devon in 1800 and then spread through southern counties during the nineteenth century, reaching a peak in the 1930s. It then underwent a significant range contraction from the 1950s, with the main range confined to south Devon by the late 1980s, whilst a decline was also noted a similar time in northern France, the Low Countries and Germany. The decrease was attributed to climatic factors and especially to habitat and agricultural changes. Most populations are essentially sedentary.

Kent status (KOS 2022):

Formerly a local breeding species, now extinct and last reliably recorded in 1983.

It seems curious that Knight & Tolputt (1871) did not include the Cirl Bunting in their "List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood" as Ticehurst (1909) stated that the area in which the species is "perhaps most numerous is the chalk country about Folkestone and Dover. In the areas in which it breeds a few pairs may generally be found at no great distance from each other, and here they are locally more numerous than the Yellowhammer, which they to a large extent replace". Perhaps the species became established after Knight & Tolputt's list was published, as Jeffs *et al.* noted that the British population was at its peak between the late 1800s and the 1930s.

Ticehurst further commented that "in the south, Mr C. J. Alexander has found scattered pairs about Hythe and thence along the Royal Military Canal as far as Bonnington" (presumably throughout Hythe Roughts and the Lympne Escarpment, from his statement that it "is probably to be found throughout the [Royal Military Canal's] whole length, wherever it runs under the sand-cliffs that represent the old north bank of the Rother estuary").

It had probably already begun to decline by the time of Harrison (1953) as he was only able to provide a few recent breeding records in the county and made just one mention regarding its local status, whereby he considered an autumn record of one seen between Folkestone and Dover by Mr Howard Benthem on the 18th October 1916 to be noteworthy, although it is not known if this was within the local boundary.

Taylor *et al.* (1981) stated that the last known breeding in Kent occurred in 1958, at Bluebell Hill, but it appears to have persisted at a very low level as there were annual records in the county to 1967 and increasingly irregular sightings until the last at Conningbrook, near Ashford in 1983 (KOS no date).

It was during the review period of Taylor *et al.* that the only dated local records exist: a pair that frequented Coolinge Lane, Folkestone for several days at the end of July 1953 (Rowland, 1954) and a male seen in broom behind George Shannon's garden in Hythe on the 20th June 1954. At the time he was resident at "Selborne", 6 Cannongate Road, which is a property on the northern side of the road and which would have backed on to the Sene golf course (KOS 1955; A. Henderson pers. comm).

It has been the subject of conservation action in England since the late 1980s, when the species was in imminent danger of being lost. The most recent full survey in 2016 estimated the population at 1,079 breeding pairs, thus passing the 1,000-pair target set by the ambitious Cirl Bunting Recovery Project 25 years earlier. This represented an increase in the breeding population by 25% and in the number of occupied tetrads by 37% since the previous full survey 2009. The core part of the population remains in south Devon but there are increasing numbers in west Cornwall (following a successful reintroduction programme between 2006 and 2011) and in east Devon, and birds are starting to recolonise former areas in north Cornwall and north Devon (Holling *et al.* 2018; Jeffs *et al.* 2016). Perhaps one day it may spread back along the south coast to Kent.

The only dated records are as follows:

1953 Coolinge Lane, Folkestone, pair, “several days at the end of July” (per H. M. Rowland)

1954 Hythe, male, 20th June (G. Shannon)

Figure 1 shows the location of dated records by tetrad.



Figure 1: Distribution all dated Cirl Bunting records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

References

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Acknowledgements

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