

Lapland Bunting

Calcarius lapponicus

Category A

Scarce passage migrant, mainly in autumn, occasionally overwinters.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998; Spencer et al. 1991; Holling et al. 2013):

Breeding distribution is circumpolar, extending from western and northern Fenno-Scandia, eastwards across northernmost Asia to Alaska, northern Canada and Greenland. Some European breeders move south-west to winter in north-west Europe, but most move south-east to southern Russia and the Ukraine. Greenland birds move south-west to North America and south-east to north-west Europe, so birds wintering in north-west Europe originate from both Fenno-Scandia and Greenland.



Lapland Bunting at Abbotscliffe (Dale Gibson)

Up to 11 pairs bred in Scotland between 1977 and 1980 but there have only been occasional summer records of single birds since. The winter distribution in Britain is confined almost entirely to the east coast, from eastern Scotland south to Kent.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

In Kent it is a scarce winter visitor and passage migrant to coasts, particularly in autumn. It is usually recorded in small numbers but with occasional winter flocks. It is rare inland.

The Lapland Bunting was not included in Knight and Tolputt's "List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood" (1871) and Ticehurst (1909) regarded it as "a somewhat rare migrant, at any rate to a greater part of the county", noting that "the only district where it occurs with any regularity is the high ground about Dover", where "a few had been taken by the bird-catchers there annually", but made no specific references to the local area.

Harrison (1953) noted little change in status, but Taylor *et al.* (1981) found it to be a regular winter visitor to the county in small numbers and thought that it "was undoubtedly overlooked before observers learnt to recognise its flight call". They noted an "exceptional influx" in the winter 1956/57, when over 200 birds were logged, and several smaller influxes in the 1960s, but by the end of their review period (1976) winter totals were typically in single figures.

The Kent Bird Report for 2018 charted a marked increase in autumn and winter numbers between the mid-1970s and mid-1990s, noting that "there were many more during the seventeen years from 1977/78 than before or since". Numbers increased to a peak in the mid to late 1980s, when there were totals in excess of 200 in three consecutive years. However, an equally unexpected decrease followed and since 2000/01 annual totals in the county have only exceeded 50 in three years. Numbers in recent years appear to have been particularly low, with the latest county reports (for 2018 and 2019) describing them as "poor" and "dismal".

The first local record involved one seen by Rob Lee at Copt Point on the 10th October 1984, with another seen by Murray Orchard at the same site on the 8th November 1987. The Kent Bird Report for 1989 recorded 14 at "Lydden Spout" on the 30th January 1989, with ten there on the 16th February, which was presumably the area that later observers referred to as Abbotscliffe, where systematic coverage from 1991 revealed it to be an almost annual passage migrant to 2012, with birds remaining to overwinter in some years.

The earliest autumn arrivals involved singles at Abbotscliffe on the 11th September 2019 and the 13th September 2010, with ones and twos in the second half of September in numerous years, and a peak of three there on the 19th September 2010. Most October sightings have also involved ones and twos, with five at Abbotscliffe on the 20th October 1991, four there the following day, three there on the 19th October 2010 and eight there on the 24th October 2010.

In addition to the sightings in 1989, there have been winter records or birds making prolonged stays at Abbotscliffe in the following years:

One on the 25th December 1991

Up to 15 between the 26th December 1992 and end January 1993

Up to three between the 1st and 15th December 1996

Up to three between the 1st and 27th November 2010

As Snow & Perrins noted, many birds appear to move on in late winter, and there have been no local records later than the 16th February, whilst the only spring sighting comprised one at Abbotscliffe on the 15th April 1993. Figure 1 shows the number of Lapland Buntings recorded at Folkestone and Hythe since the first sighting in 1984 (with any obvious duplication from long-staying birds having been removed).

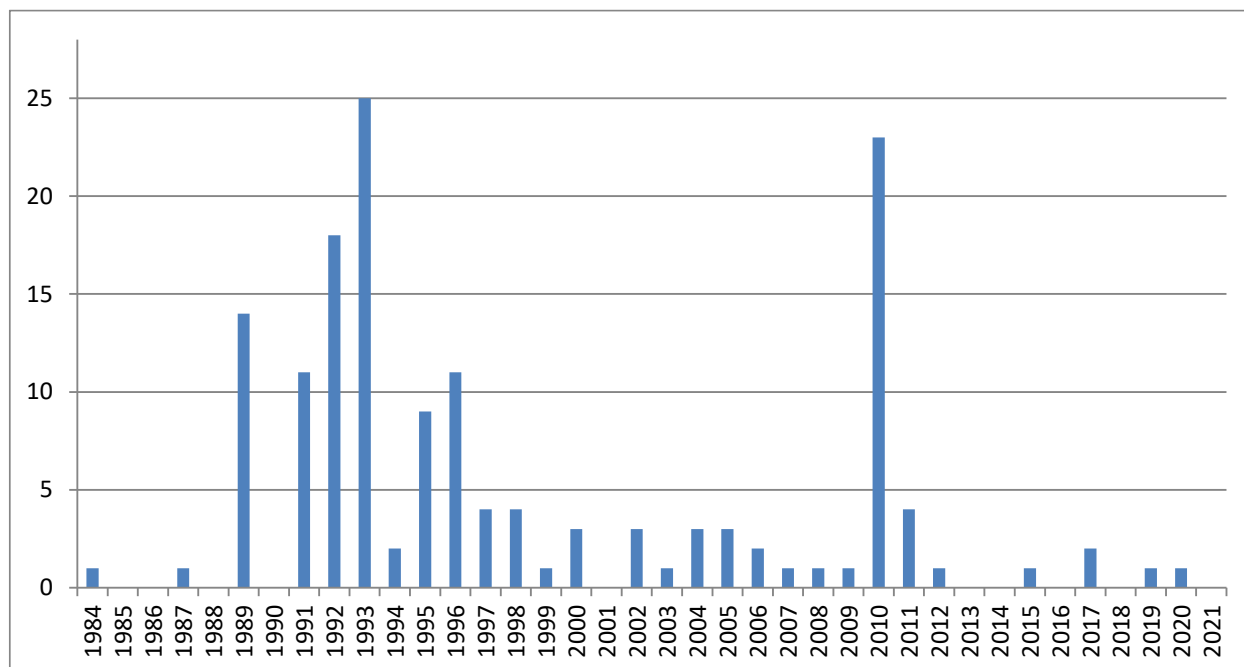


Figure 1: Number of Lapland Buntings recorded at Folkestone and Hythe

Overall distribution

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of Lapland Bunting by tetrad, with records in 6 tetrads (19%).

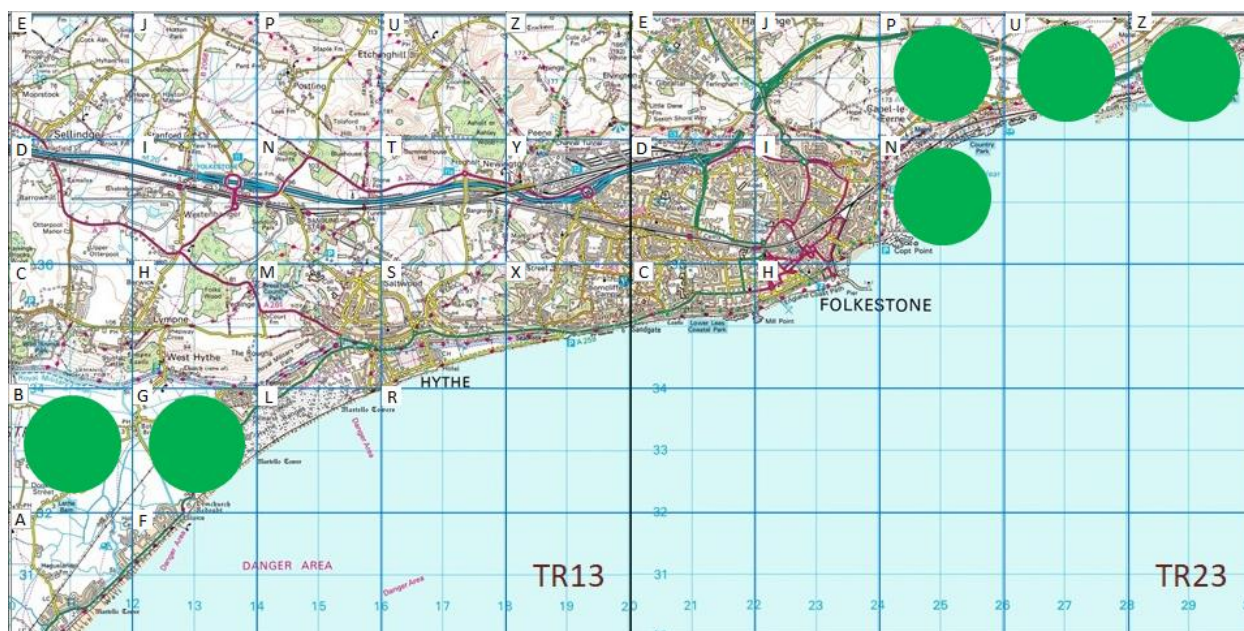


Figure 2: Distribution of all Lapland Bunting records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Most sightings away from Abbotscliffe have involved migrants logged at other sites along the cliffs, with singles noted at Samphire Hoe on seven dates between the 12th October and 16th November, two at Church Hougham on the 6th October 1998 and one flying east at Capel Battery on the 13th October 2007. One seen in fields along Cauldham Lane at Capel-le-Ferne on the 16th February 2009 suggested that it may occasionally overwinter inland on the Downs.

On the Romney Marsh, there have been three records at Nickolls Quarry: singles on the 6th December 1995, 16th November 1999 and 16th December 2006, one at Donkey Street on the 17th November 2017 and one reported at West Hythe on the 10th January 2020, whilst one flew north-west over Hythe Ranges on the 5th November 2002 (Norman 2006; 2007).

In line with the decrease in the county it has become scarcer in recent years, with only five records since it ceased to be recorded annually in 2012.



Lapland Bunting at Abbotscliffe (Dale Gibson)

References

Harrison, J. M. 1953. *The Birds of Kent*. Witherby, London.

Holling, M. & the Rare Breeding Birds Panel 2013. Rare breeding birds in the UK in 2011. *British Birds* 106: 496-554.

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

Norman, R. K. 2006. Some observations of birds on Hythe Ranges since 1950. <https://folkestonebirds.com/where-to-watch> (see "Further Information" section).

Norman, R. K. 2007. The Birds of Palmarsh Gravel Pit. <https://folkestonebirds.com/where-to-watch> (see "Further Information" section).

Snow, D. & Perrins, C.M. 1998. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Oxford University Press.

Spencer, R. & the Rare Breeding Birds Panel 1991. Rare breeding birds in the United Kingdom in 1989. *British Birds* 84: 349-370.

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](#).

I am indebted to Andrew Henderson and Tim Hodge for providing access to the Kent Ornithological Society archives.



Lapland Buntings at Abbotscliffe (Dale Gibson)