

Baillon's Crake

<i>Porzana pusilla</i>	Category A
Very rare vagrant.	2 records, 2 birds

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

A scarce breeding species across central and southern Europe, but the distribution is scattered and imperfectly known. The main winter quarters of European breeders are in sub-Saharan Africa. To the east it breeds in warm temperate Asia east to Japan, wintering in the Indian subcontinent and south-east Asia. Other races breed in southern Africa and Australasia.

Kent status (KOS 2022):

It is a rare vagrant to the county.

British (BBRC) records to end 2021: 96

Kent (KOS) records to end 2021: 8

Ticehurst (1909) considered that this species must be regarded as one of the rarest of the autumn migrants, having only been obtained on four occasions in the county, whilst speculating that "as with all the smaller Rails, it is possible that the Baillon's Crake may be of more frequent than would appear from the records".

He mentions, although discredits, an early local claim that "at Stevens' Auction Rooms, in Covent Garden, was sold on April 24th, 1861, 'the superb and unique collection of British birds' eggs, belonging to the museum of a late celebrated physician.' Lot 374 comprised the following: – 'Baillon's Crake. Two, Warren, near Folkestone, taken by a coastguard in 1834, who kept the bird partially skinned'. These eggs were apparently purchased by the late Rev. R. Harvey, as they figure with the same history in Lot 211 of the sale of his collection in the same auction rooms on 9th December, 1869. The latter circumstance has been lately referred to in the Natural History columns of the *Field* (December 22nd, 1906) as evidence of Baillon's Crake having bred in Kent". "The editor was apparently unaware, however, of the source whence Harvey obtained the eggs, and though it is not inconceivable that this species may have bred in Kent, and Folkestone Warren is not an impossible location, the inclusion of these eggs in the collection sold in 1861 does not add to their authenticity, and of their supposed origin I do not believe a word".

A subsequent claim from 1870 he did however consider to have been substantiated and this formed the first area and third county record. Charles Gordon (1871) documented this occurrence: "last month [October 1870] Baillon's Crake, three Grey Phalaropes and the Common Cormorant were taken in the Hythe Canal by Mr. F. Young". This is no doubt the reason for its inclusion in Knight & Tolputt's "List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood" (1871).

Harrison (1953) thought that it may nest in the "thick reed-beds of the marshes in east Kent" and felt certain that an adult male that he examined having been shot at Cottington, near Deal in May 1943 must have been one of a breeding pair (on account of its fully developed gonads). It is an interesting coincidence that this was the same site as provided the first two county records, in 1850.

It was certainly more frequently encountered in the country prior to 1950 as nearly 80% of the British records up to 2010 were from this period (BBRC no date), whilst Taylor et al. (1981) were unable to provide any county records during their review period (1952-76).

However, there are signs of a recent change in status, with as many national records (16) having occurred in the last ten years as in the 60 years to 2011, whilst Ausden *et al.* (2013) described how in the summer of 2012, at least six, and perhaps as many as 11, were heard singing in apparently suitable breeding habitat at a minimum of three locations (one in Somerset and two in Wales) in Britain, having been detected primarily during coordinated surveys aimed at locating Spotted Crakes. It seems obvious to speculate that summering or breeding Baillon's Crakes in Britain may have been overlooked prior to this, however there is evidence that 2012 may have seen an exceptional influx.

The nearest regularly breeding Baillon's Crakes are in southern and eastern Europe where the unusually dry conditions in spring 2012, particularly in southern Spain, may have encouraged migrating Baillon's Crakes to continue north in search of more suitable habitat. Very wet conditions in England and Wales in spring 2012 meant that many marshes were, at least initially, potentially more suitable for settlement than normal (Holling *et al.* 2014). Elsewhere in north-west Europe in 2012 an exceptional 32 to 39 Baillon's Crake territories were recorded in eight provinces in the Netherlands (mainly in the north and west), the highest number in recent history (Ausden *et al.*).

Holling *et al.* noted that the only entry for Baillon's Crake in the Rare Breeding Birds Panel reports prior to 2012 was in 2001, when a singing male took up residence in Kent (at Oare Marshes) for 11 days in late June/July, although there was also a comparable record of one in song in 1999, also in Kent (at Grove Ferry), for 44 days in June/July. A further singing male was noted at Oare Marshes for two days in May 2014, whilst the only modern local record occurred in 2018, when Steve Tomlinson saw one at Beachborough Lakes on the 21st and 22nd March.

The modern record by year is shown in figure 1.

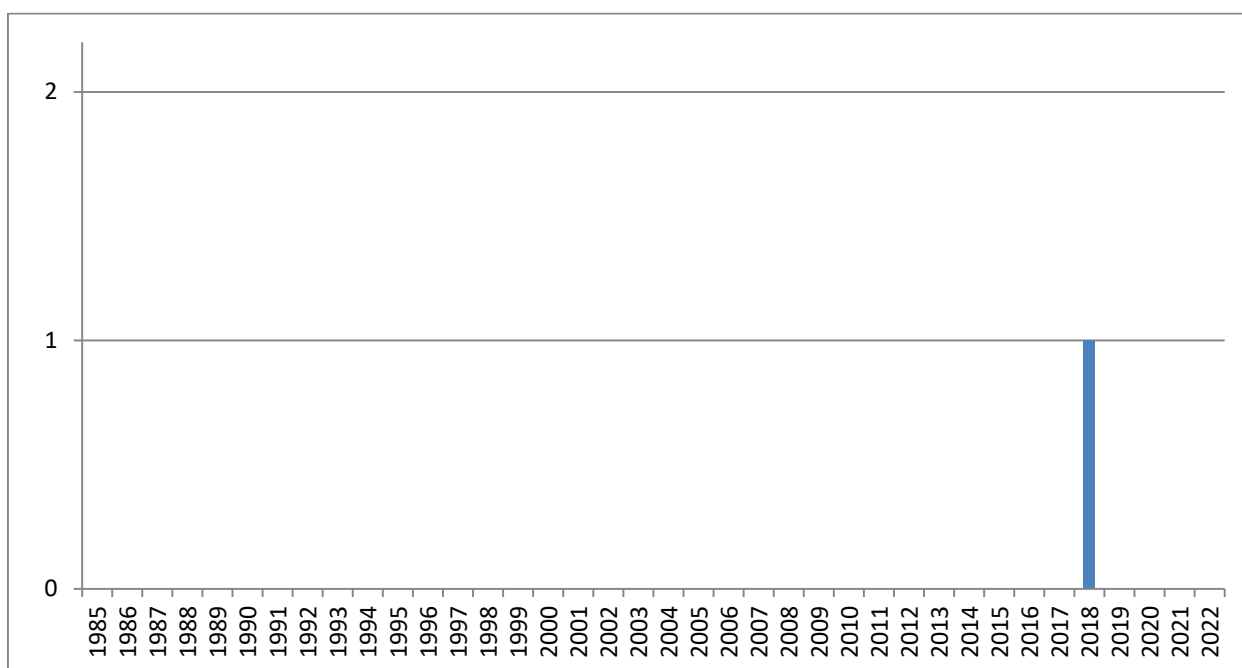


Figure 1: Baillon's Crake records at Folkestone and Hythe since 1985

The modern record by week is shown in figure 2. The early record was only given as "October".

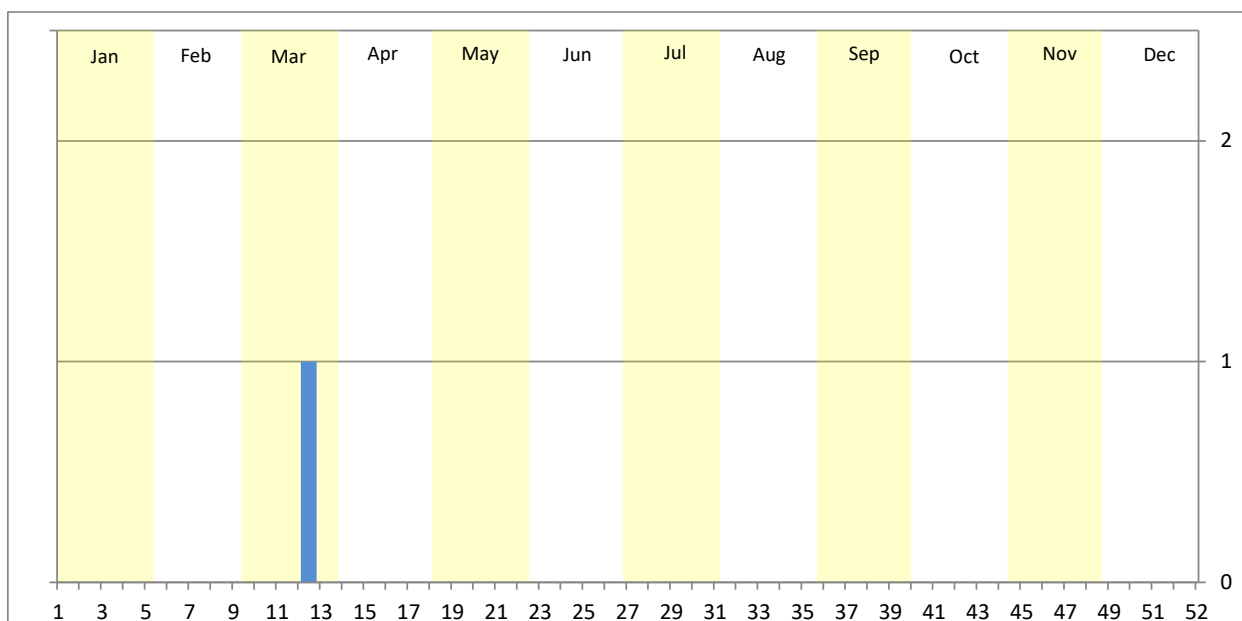


Figure 2: Baillon's Crake records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Figure 3 shows the location of the modern record by tetrad. The early record does not have enough detail to be mapped to tetrad level.



Figure 3: Distribution of all Baillon's Crake records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

A similar situation to that described in 2012 arose in 2019, when southern Spain again experienced drought conditions, and three singing birds were present at two sites in Britain (in Norfolk and Somerset) (Eaton *et al.* 2021), whilst France and the Netherlands experienced a large influx, which prompted Holt *et al.* (2020) to write “it is tempting to speculate that Baillon's Crake is on the verge of recolonising Britain – reflecting the situation in other parts of north-west Europe”, and climatic change could encourage this, in which case further local records could one day follow.

The full list of records is as follows:

1870 Hythe, one caught in the canal, October, exact date not known (F. Young)

2018 Beachborough Lakes, one, 21st to 22nd March 2018 (S. Tomlinson)

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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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