

Barn Owl

Tyto alba

Category A

Scarce breeding resident, passage migrant and winter visitor.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998; IOC 2020):

Widespread across central and southern Europe, in western Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Formerly part of a single taxon, birds from south-eastern Asia/Australasia and the Americas are now considered to be separate species (Eastern Barn Owl and American Barn Owl). The Western Barn Owl is basically resident, though young birds especially make dispersals which are more extensive in some years than others.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

It is a scarce resident in Kent and also a passage migrant and winter visitor in small numbers.

The Barn Owl was included in Knight and Tolputt's "List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood" (1871). This list covered an area of six miles radius from Folkestone town hall, therefore extending further inland than the current Folkestone and Hythe area, so this does not provide conclusive evidence of its occurrence here. However, Ticehurst (1909) considered it to be "resident and fairly common in Kent, being distributed throughout the county", though "more numerous in the well-wooded districts", however "no locality is without a pair or two", so there can be little doubt that it was to be found locally.

Harrison (1953) had the impression that it had decreased throughout Kent, with a particular scarcity on Romney Marsh. Taylor *et al.* (1981) reported on a particularly bleak period for the Barn Owl, noting a decline "due to a combination of loss of habitat, changes in agriculture leading to a decrease in food and breeding sites, disturbance and the effects of agricultural chemicals", the latter of which had driven a sudden decline in the late 1950s/early 1960s, leading to an all-time low of just two pairs reported breeding in the county in 1962, following which "the severe winter of 1962/63 probably aggravated an already hazardous situation further". They also noted that the increasing levels of motor traffic posed another major hazard, with dead birds being increasingly noted on the county's roads.

Since then, however there has been a slow and steady recovery, which Clements *et al.* (2015) suggest is "perhaps due to the increased provision of nest-boxes and milder winters leading to higher winter survival", and gave an estimated figure of between 100 and 200 pairs breeding in Kent. As well as being a scarce resident, it is also a passage migrant and winter visitor in small numbers in Kent (KOS 2020).



Barn Owl at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)



Barn Owl at Botolph's Bridge (Andrew Lapworth)



Barn Owl at Nickolls Quarry (Ian Roberts)

The first documented records date from the 1950s, when Roger Norman began regularly watching the area that is now known as Nickolls Quarry. During 1950 to 1953 he found several dead Barn Owls under telegraph wires on the north side of the gravel pit (close to the current sailing club building) but the only live example was seen hunting over the old airfield at dawn on the 25th March 1959 (Norman 2007). He also saw one hunting over Hythe Ranges on the 17th March 1960 (Norman 2006).



Barn Owl at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)



Barn Owl at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)

Earlier in 1960 H. Schreiber trapped and ringed four individuals of the dark-breasted continental form *T. a. guttata* during a period of “very hard weather” in mid-January (and this continues to be the only local record of this subspecies). During the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s there were scattered records and breeding was reported at Sandling Park in 1971. With increased coverage in more recent years, coinciding with the recovery in population, it has been recorded almost annually since 1990.



Barn Owl at Nickolls Quarry (Ian Roberts)

It has most frequently been noted at Nickolls Quarry or in the surrounding locality. Roger Norman noted that “in the winters 1994/95 to 1996/97 a bird, presumably the same one, roosted in the cement mixing plant at the works and (again presumably) was an individual that he “found moribund” there on the 25th December 1996. He went on to describe how “another was already hunting in the area by the 5th January 1997 and was seen until the 21st March”.

There were only two records there however in the following seven years (in February 1999 and October 2011), before it was twice noted in November 2004. One was seen regularly at Nickolls Quarry over at least a four-week period in April/early May 2006 prompting suspicion of local breeding however, aside from a report from West Hythe in December 2008, it was not noted again in this part of the Romney Marsh until one was seen hunting at Botolph's Bridge and Nickolls Quarry on several dates in February 2010, with it or another in December 2010.

One was noted on several occasions at Botolph's Bridge and Nickolls Quarry in May and June 2012 (and breeding again suspected) but it was found dead on the A259 on the 26th June and there were no further sightings until another bird frequented the Botolph's Bridge/Donkey Street/Nickolls Quarry area in February and March 2013. There were frequent sightings in the Botolph's Bridge/Donkey Street area from early February until at least mid-June 2015, with a pair noted on the 2nd April, and The Little Piece on Donkey Street was a favoured roosting site, where breeding seems quite likely to have occurred. There has been a series of sightings since from various sites on the local section of the Romney Marsh since (including the Aldergate Bridge, Abbot's Court Farm, Selby Farm, Lower Wall Road, Donkey Street, Botolph's Bridge, Hythe Ranges and Nickolls Quarry) and it seems certain to be a regular, though scarce, breeding species here.

Elsewhere there has been a cluster of records in the TR13 T area (Bargrove Wood/Summerhouse Hill/Beachborough Lakes) or sites close by in adjacent tetrads (Sene Farm, Newington, Beachborough Park), with annual sightings in recent years suggesting that at least one pair breed in this area.

There have also been slightly more infrequent, but almost annual, sightings from the Capel-le-Ferne/Abbotscliffe area which would also appear to have suitable habitat to support a breeding pair, and a few scattered records from other localities.

Breeding atlas distribution

Figure 1 shows the breeding distribution by tetrad based on the results of the 2007-13 BTO/KOS atlas fieldwork.

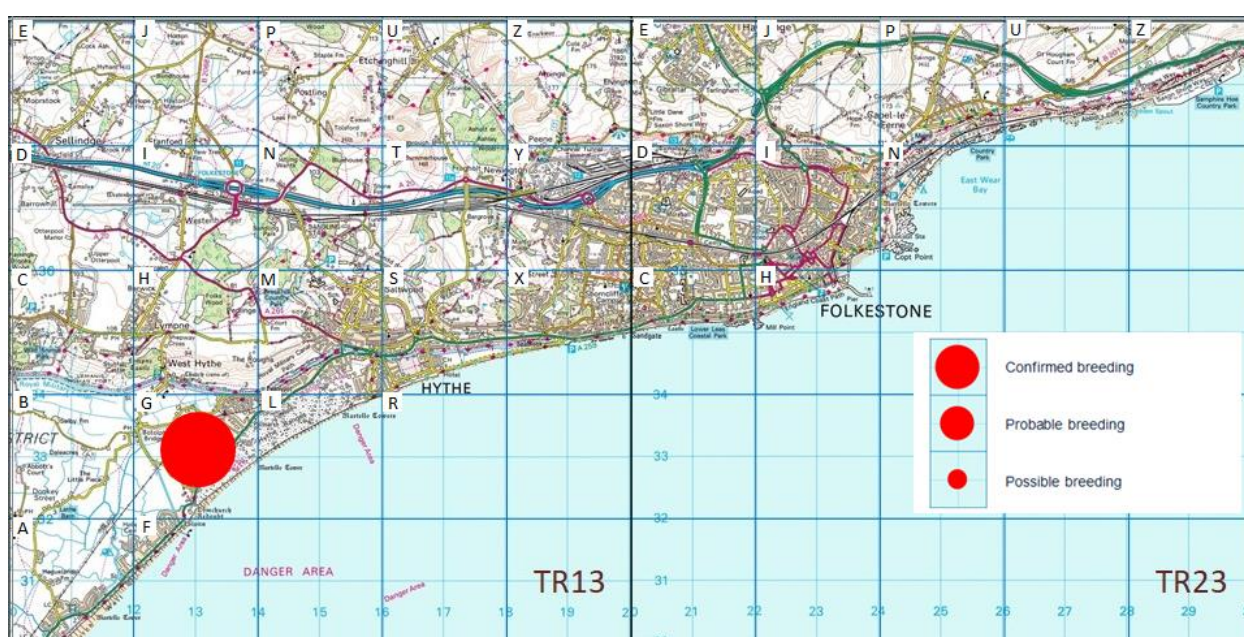


Figure 1: Breeding distribution of Barn Owl at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Probable breeding was recorded in one tetrad (TR13 G) during the most recent atlas. The table below shows how this compares to previous atlases (Taylor *et al.* 1981; Henderson & Hodge 1998). The confirmed and probable breeding categories have been combined to account for differing definitions of these in the first atlas.

Breeding atlases	1967 - 1973		1988 - 1994		2007 - 2013	
Possible	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
Probable/Confirmed	1	(3%)	0	(0%)	1	(3%)
Total	1	(3%)	0	(0%)	1	(3%)
Change			-1	(-100%)	+1	(--%)

The table below shows the changes in tetrad occupancy across the three atlas periods.

Trends	First to second atlas (1967-73 to 1988-94)	Second to third atlas (1988-94 to 2007-13)	First to third atlas (1967-73 to 2007-13)
Local	-100%	--%	0%
Kent	-17%	+115%	+79%

As mentioned above, breeding was reported at Sandling Park (in TR13 N) in 1971, during the first atlas period. It is the case with all the owl species that there tends to be under-reporting due to their nocturnal nature.

Overall distribution

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of Barn Owl by tetrad, with records in 13 tetrads (42%).

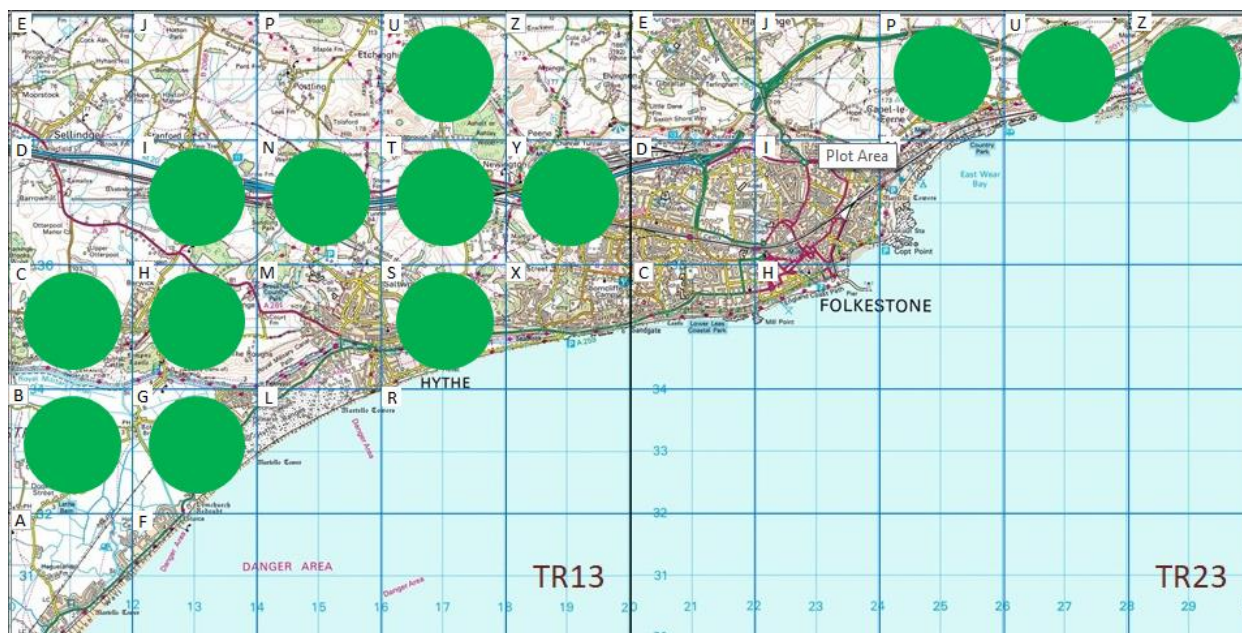


Figure 2: Distribution of all Barn Owl records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

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Barn Owl at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)



Barn Owl at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)

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.



Barn Owl at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)