

Spotted Flycatcher

Muscicapa striata Category A

Formerly a breeding summer visitor, now only a passage migrant, more frequent in autumn.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

A widespread summer visitor across Europe and Asia eastwards to Transbaykalia, and south to Iran and the western Himalayas. Winters in sub-Saharan Africa, with the majority wintering south of the Equator.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

In Kent it is a widespread but declining breeding summer visitor and passage migrant.



Spotted Flycatcher at Saltwood Castle (Brian Harper)

The Spotted Flycatcher 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 “evenly distributed in single pairs throughout the county, though naturally most numerous in the more wooded districts”. He remarked that it was “specially common in large parks that abound in old timber, and is often found in gardens in close proximity to human habitation, not infrequently making its nest amongst ivy or other creepers against the walls of the house”. There can be little doubt that it was to be found locally.

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 Spotted Flycatcher at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was not confirmed but there was probable breeding in one tetrad and possible breeding in three more. 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%)	9	(29%)	3	(10%)
Probable/Confirmed	8	(26%)	6	(19%)	1	(3%)
Total	8	(26%)	15	(48%)	4	(13%)
Change			+7	(+88%)	+11	(-73%)

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	+88%	-73%	-50%
Kent	+17%	-51%	-43%

Balmer *et al.* (2013) considered that the abundance change map shown in the latest national atlas was amongst the most consistently negative map of any species, with declines in tetrad occupancy throughout most of England, Wales and eastern Scotland since the previous atlas. In population terms these decreases amounted to a 50% decline during 1995 to 2010, part of an 88% decline recorded since 1970. Moderate declines have also been evident across Europe.

The reduced survival of first-year birds is thought to be the main demographic factor behind the decline. The Spotted Flycatcher is one of several long-distance migrants wintering in the humid zone of West Africa that are currently in steep population decline, suggesting that there decreases have a common cause, acting on migration or on the wintering grounds.

Clements *et al.* (2015) reported on a 51% decrease in occupied tetrads across the county since the second Kent atlas and referred to a 63% decline in population across south-east England between 1995 and 2010. Locally it had been lost from 73% of occupied tetrads between the second and third atlas periods. Figure 2 (reproduced from Clements *et al.*) shows the extent of the decline (indicated by red dots) across the county as well as the local area (highlighted by the red box). Note that its former range mainly comprised woods adjacent to the canal and to the north, being absent from Romney Marsh and urban areas.

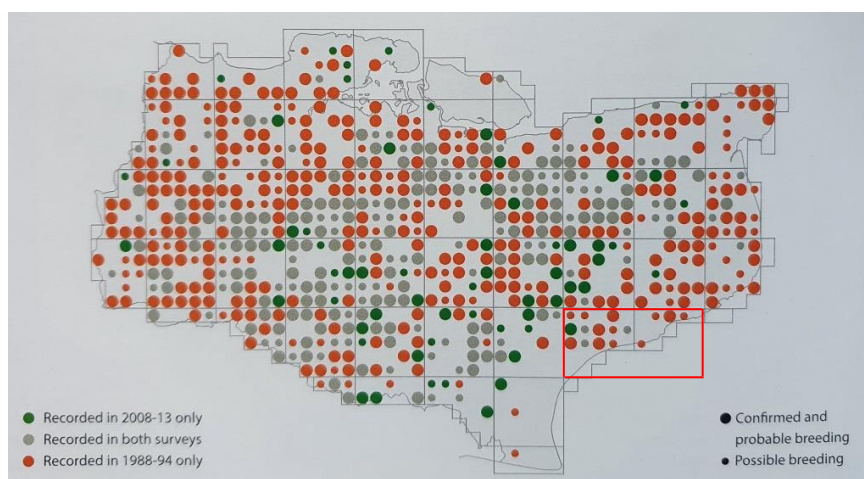


Figure 2: Breeding distribution of Spotted Flycatcher in Kent in the 2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas

It was last thought to have probably bred in 2009 at Westenhanger Castle, although birds were seen in suitable nesting habitat in the next two years (at West Hythe in mid-May 2010, at Pond Hill Road in late May 2011 and at Westenhanger Castle in early June 2011) and a juvenile was seen at Beachborough Park on the 27th June 2016 (which would have been a very early date for a migrant and it followed a sighting of two there on the 6th May, although there were no subsequent sightings they perhaps nested undetected there or at a nearby site), until a nest was found at Bartholomew's Wood in early June 2022, and fledged young were seen later in the month.

Overall distribution

Figure 3 shows the distribution of all records of Spotted Flycatcher by tetrad, with records in 24 tetrads (77%).

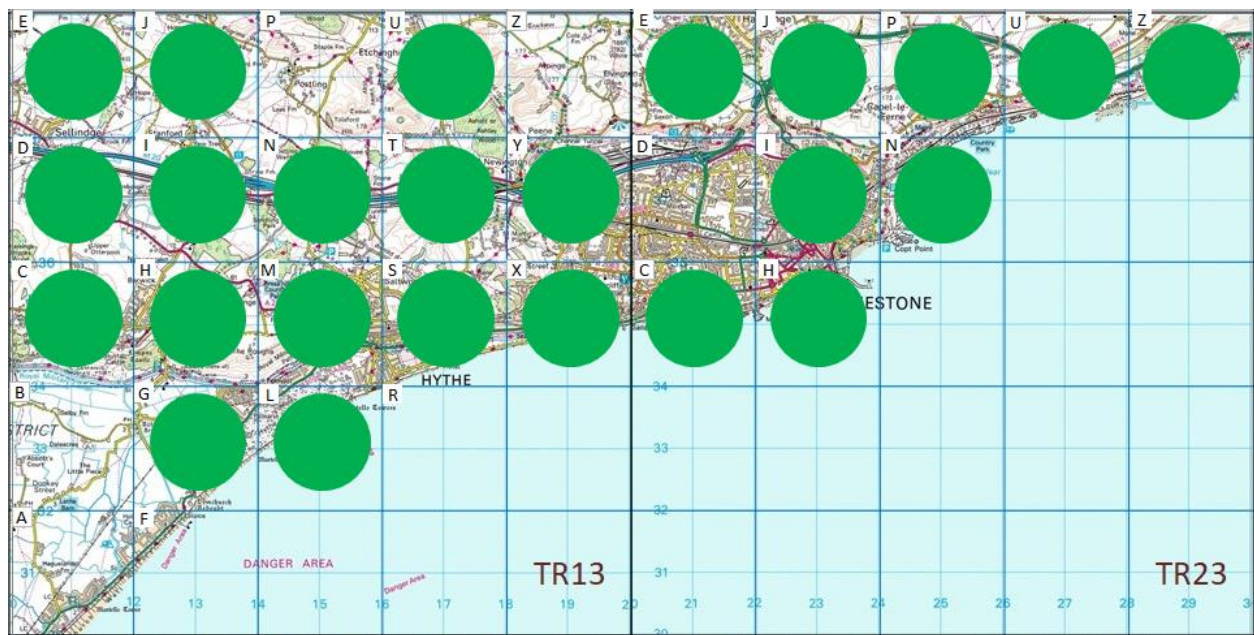


Figure 3: Distribution of all Spotted Flycatcher records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

An exceptionally early individual was seen at Seabrook by Dave Musson on the 19th April 1961, whilst there were two at Folkestone on the 28th April of the same year. The only other April sighting involved one at Folkestone on the 27th April 1996 and it is scarce in the first week of May, although there was a particularly early count of seven at West Hythe on the 2nd May 1983. In more recent years early May records have comprised singles at Abbotscliffe and Samphire Hoe on the 2nd May 2012, one near Rock Cottage on the Botolph's Bridge Road on the 5th May 2021 and one at Capel Battery on the 6th May 2003. Arrivals have more usually occurred during second or third week of May, with a mean arrival date over the most recent decade of 13th May.



Spotted Flycatcher at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)



Spotted Flycatcher at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)

Some indication of its former abundance was provided by Neil Frampton, recounting his coverage of the Royal Military Canal between the Aldergate Bridge and Hythe between 1980 and 1985, where he found that "spring passage is fairly light throughout May", with a maximum of three on the 24th May 1985, "but autumn passage is heavier and continues through until the end of September", with a peak of 15 on the 28th August 1984.

In recent years it has still been recorded annually in spring (apart from 2020 when none were seen), but the other four of the last five years have all produced just single sightings. Spring records away from breeding sites generally related to ones or twos but five were at Abbotscliffe on the 13th May 1992 and three were at Capel-le-Ferne Café on the 19th May 1998, Capel Battery on the 24th May 1998 and Samphire Hoe on the 25th May 2008.



Spotted Flycatcher at Capel Battery (Dale Gibson)



Spotted Flycatcher at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)

It has continued to be seen regularly in autumn but annual variation is high. The most recent decade has produced an average of 15 bird/days per annum, but with a maximum of 45 in 2018 and a minimum of three in 2021. Counts of five or more have been noteworthy since 1990, having been noted as follows:

- 6 at Capel Battery on the 5th September 1992
- 6 at Capel Battery on the 14th September 1992
- 13 at Church Hougham on the 2nd September 1996 (with 12 the next day)
- 6 at Church Hougham on the 28th July 1998
- 5 at Church Hougham on the 1st September 2015
- 5 at Creteway Down on the 1st to 2nd September 2015
- 8 in the Casebourne Wood/Paraker Wood area on the 2nd September 2018

The mean departure date over the most recent decade has been the 24th September and stragglers occasionally linger into the first week of October, with the only later sighting involving one at Church Hougham on the 11th October 1999.



Spotted Flycatcher at Abbotscliffe (Ian Roberts)



Spotted Flycatcher at Abbotscliffe (Ian Roberts)

Click [here](#) to listen to a local audio recording of one calling at Bartholomew's Wood on the 21st June 2022 (Ian Roberts).

References

Balmer, D., Gillings, S., Caffrey, B., Swann, B., Downie, I & Fuller, R. 2013. *Bird Atlas 2007-11: The Breeding and Wintering Birds of Britain and Ireland*. British Trust for Ornithology.

Clements, R., Orchard, M., McCanch, N. & Wood, S. 2015. *Kent Breeding Bird Atlas 2008-13*. Kent Ornithological Society.

Henderson, A. & Hodge, T. 1998. The Kent Breeding Bird Atlas 1988-94. *Kent Bird Report 1996*: 134-272.

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

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

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.



Spotted Flycatcher at Saltwood Castle (Brian Harper)



Spotted Flycatcher at Casebourne Wood (Brian Harper)