

Blackcap

Sylvia atricapilla

Category A

Breeding summer visitor and passage migrant, with small but increasing numbers wintering.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

It is a widespread breeding summer visitor across most of Europe and Asia eastwards to the Ob valley in western Siberia. It exhibits a range of migration strategies: Mediterranean birds are chiefly resident, whilst northern and eastern birds are wholly migratory, moving the longest distance south to sub-Saharan Africa. Birds wintering in Britain are believed to originate from continental Europe.



Blackcap at West Hythe (Brian Harper)

Kent status (KOS 2021):

It is a widespread summer visitor and passage migrant in Kent and a winter visitor in small numbers.

The Blackcap 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) noted it to be present "throughout the wooded districts of the county" so there can be little doubt that was to be found locally. He also made mention of a set of eggs of the "somewhat rare red type" that were obtained near Hythe in June 1902.

Breeding atlas distribution

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

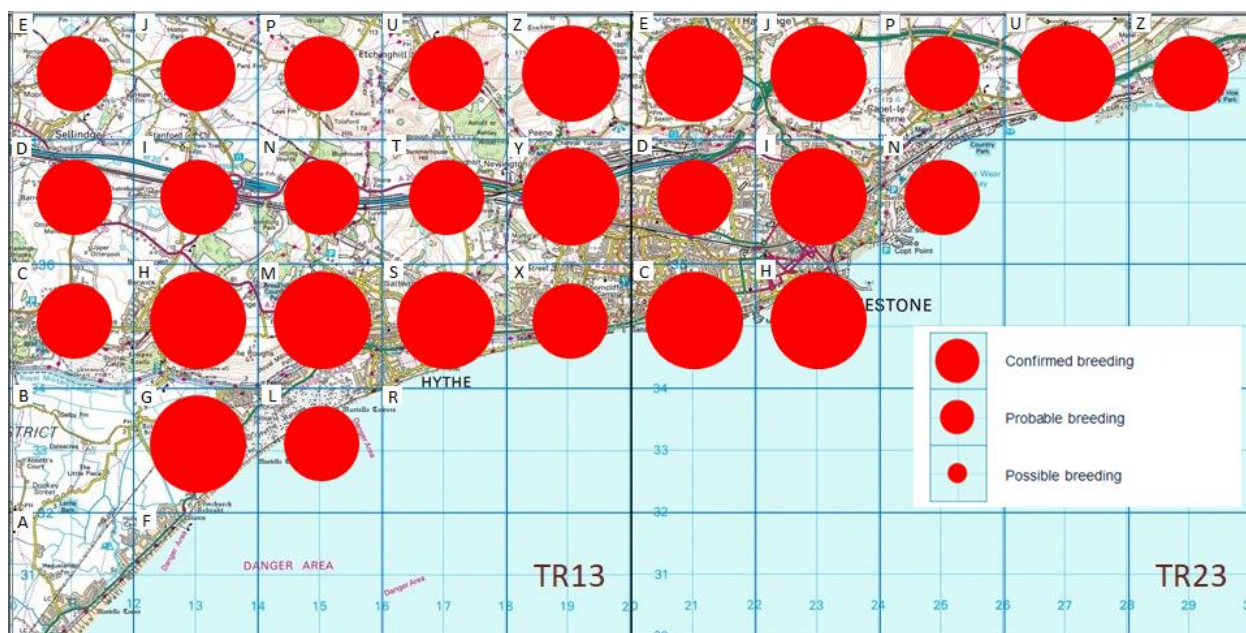


Figure 1: Breeding distribution of Blackcap at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was confirmed in 12 tetrads, with probable breeding in 15 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	1	(3%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
Probable/Confirmed	8	(26%)	25	(81%)	27	(87%)
Total	9	(29%)	25	(81%)	27	(87%)
Change			+16	(+178%)	+2	(+8%)

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	+178%	+8%	+200%
Kent	+47%	+12%	+65%

Blackcaps favour broad-leaved woodland and copses, typically nesting in brambles in the shrub layer. Henderson & Hodge referred to “a steady increase in numbers of this species dating from at least the mid-1950s” whilst Clements *et al.* reported a 65% increase in the number of occupied tetrads between the first and third Kent breeding surveys and Balmer *et al.* noted a 102% increase in the UK population between 1995 and 2010, although with the most extensive gains in the north and west. Its success has been attributed to its adaptability and it has colonised urban and suburban areas to a far greater degree than most other migrants, however climate change is also likely to have been a factor. As the table above demonstrates, there has been a 200% increase locally in occupied tetrads since the first Atlas.

Overall distribution

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of Blackcap by tetrad, with records in 29 tetrads (94%).

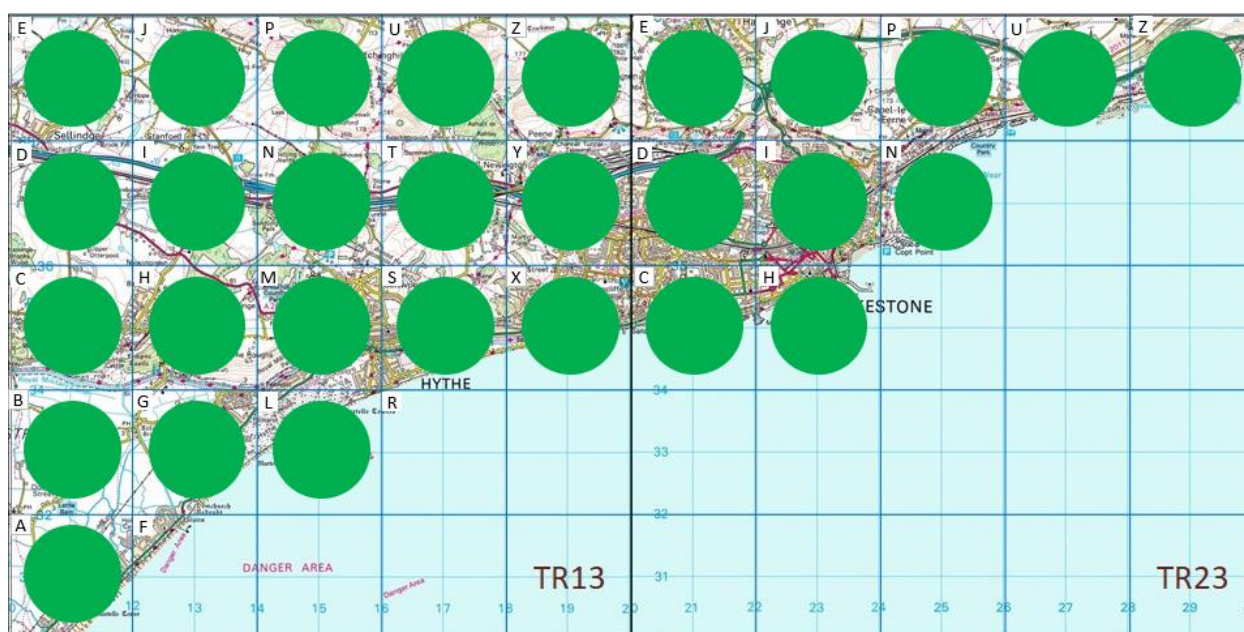


Figure 2: Distribution of all Blackcap records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Ticehurst (1909) was only able to cite three wintering records in the county, whilst Harrison (1953) added a further four, including one seen by Miss A. Mercer at Hythe on the 6th January 1939. Taylor *et al.* however wrote that during their review period (1952-76) “in most winters there were a number of records between December and February, and some of these involved individuals visiting garden bird feeders. In the winter of 1974/75 there was a peak of 14, followed two years later by an exceptional total of 35”.

Balmer *et al.* (2013) stated that there had been a striking increase since the 1990s in the numbers of birds wintering, with numbers peaking in gardens in late January or February. Accordingly, there had been a 77% in 10-km square occupancy since the 1981-84 Winter Atlas, with densities appearing to be highest in the milder south and west of Britain.

This increase has been attributed, at least in part, to milder winters leading to a change in migration patterns. A proportion of Blackcaps from breeding populations in central Europe have adapted their migration strategy and now winter in Britain and Ireland. This strategy is thought to increase winter survival and enable earlier return to their breeding territories.



Blackcap at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)



Blackcap at Hythe (Glenn Tutton)

This situation has been mirrored locally, with very few winter records prior to the 2000s. There were singles at Folkestone Warren on the 16th December 1979, at Palmarsh from the 31st December 1981 to the 3rd January 1982, and at West Hythe on the 17th January 1983, before a small influx occurred in the 1995/96 winter (which coincided with a large arrival of Waxwings) when a pair were present in Seabrook between the 7th December 1995 and the 13th February 1996 and up to four were seen in gardens in Folkestone. A further bird was seen along the Royal Military Canal near Green Lane on the 2nd January 1999.

There have however been annual records since the 2003/04 winter and the currently wintering population appears to be around 15 birds, although this is probably a significant underestimate given the difficulty of surveying private gardens (which appear to be the favoured habitat, in addition to the sheltered banks of the Royal Military Canal). Cold weather in February 2021 saw numbers increase to at least 24 across the local area.



Blackcap at West Hythe (Brian Harper)



Blackcap at Peene (Brian Harper)

Despite the relatively small number of wintering birds in the 1970s, Taylor *et al.* were already finding it “difficult to ascertain the early and late dates of genuine migrants” and birds that have wintered locally have been heard to commence singing before they have departed for their breeding grounds.

Although the first arriving migrant is hard to detect, there is usually a distinct increase in numbers at a wider variety of sites during the last week of March, with arrivals continuing well into April or possibly early May. Double-figure spring counts have been noted as follows:

12 at Capel Battery on the 27th April 1997
11 at Capel Battery on the 27th April 1998
10 at Capel Battery on the 24th April 2002
10 at Nickolls Quarry on the 25th April 2015
18 at Princes Parade on the 12th April 2016 (with up to 11 until the 21st April)
10 at Beachborough Park on the 11th and 20th Apr 2018
17 at Beachborough Park on the 9th April 2019 (with up to 14 until the 25th April)

In autumn the main exodus commences in late August and many have left by the end of September, whilst the arrival of winter visitors may begin from October. Autumn counts in excess of 25 have been noted as follows:

32 at Capel Battery on the 13th September 2000
40 at Princes Parade on the 5th October 2014
30 at Capel Battery on the 1st September 2015
32 at Beachborough Park on the 6th September 2016
48 at Folkestone Warren on the 17th September 2017
50 at Samphire Hoe on the 19th September 2017
26 at Beachborough Park on the 30th August 2018
27 at Samphire Hoe on the 30th September 2018
40 at Abbotscliffe on the 15th September 2019

The only ringing recovery locally relates to one ringed at Beachy Head on the 7th September 1968 and found dead at West Hythe two days later, having travelled 40 miles to the north-east.



Blackcap at West Hythe (Brian Harper)



Blackcap at West Hythe (Brian Harper)

Click [here](#) to listen to a local audio recording of one singing at Lympe on the 28th April 2022 (Ian Roberts).

References

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Acknowledgements

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Blackcap at West Hythe (Brian Harper)



Blackcap at Crete Road East (Brian Harper)