

Grasshopper Warbler

Locustella naevia

Category A

Scarce and declining passage migrant, mainly in autumn. Bred until about the late 1980s/early 1990s but now rare in spring.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds across mid-latitude Europe from Britain eastwards into Russia. Winters mainly in West Africa south of the Sahara.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

It is a local and declining summer visitor and passage migrant in Kent.



Grasshopper Warbler at Hythe Roughs (Brian Harper)

The Grasshopper Warbler was included in Knight and Tolpitt'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. Ticehurst (1909) considered it to be "the least numerous of the warblers that make their summer home in Kent" and "nowhere found in any numbers, single pairs being locally distributed at wide intervals throughout the county, where there are suitable thickets of coarse herbage and brambles".

Neither Ticehurst, nor Harrison (1953) made any specific mentions of any local records but Taylor *et al.* (1981) reported its presence in three tetrads during the 1967-1973 breeding atlas: with probable/confirmed breeding in TR23 Z and possible breeding in TR23 N and TR23 P.

Henderson & Hodge (1998) however noted that it had "undergone a catastrophic decline" since a countywide woodland survey in 1971 revealed the presence of 171 singing males and that this "decline had continued unabated" since the 1988-94 survey, which revealed 68 occupied tetrads in the county, and none locally. They considered that "extinction as a breeding species in the county must be a real possibility" and noted that this "decline had been evident throughout Britain, and in Kent this is now one of our most local and least numerous breeding species". Clements *et al.* reported on a "halving of records for this unobtrusive species, but they cling on in a variety of habitats", with presence in just 31 tetrads in the 2007-2013 survey.

Locally it appears to have persisted as a breeding species in TR23 Z until the late 1980s/early 1990s. Here it favoured the Round Down area and this area was affected by disturbance and habitat loss during the construction of the A20 dual carriageway (which opened in 1993). The references to possible breeding in TR23 N and TR23 P presumably relate to singing birds present in suitable habitat at Folkestone Warren (where there do not appear to have been any spring records since 1983) and Capel Battery (where singing males were present more recently, in 1992, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2002 and 2007, although none lingered).



Grasshopper Warbler at Abbotscliffe (Ian Roberts)



Grasshopper Warbler at Abbotscliffe (Ian Roberts)

The only other site that has produced more than an occasional spring migrant is the Hythe Roughts area. Here there were historical records in 1981, 1992, 1994 and 1999, but much more recently 'reeling' males were present in April 2016, April 2018, and April and May 2019, so perhaps it might still nest locally undetected or become re-established.

Overall distribution

Figure 1 shows the distribution of all records of Grasshopper Warbler by tetrad, with records in 10 tetrads (32%).

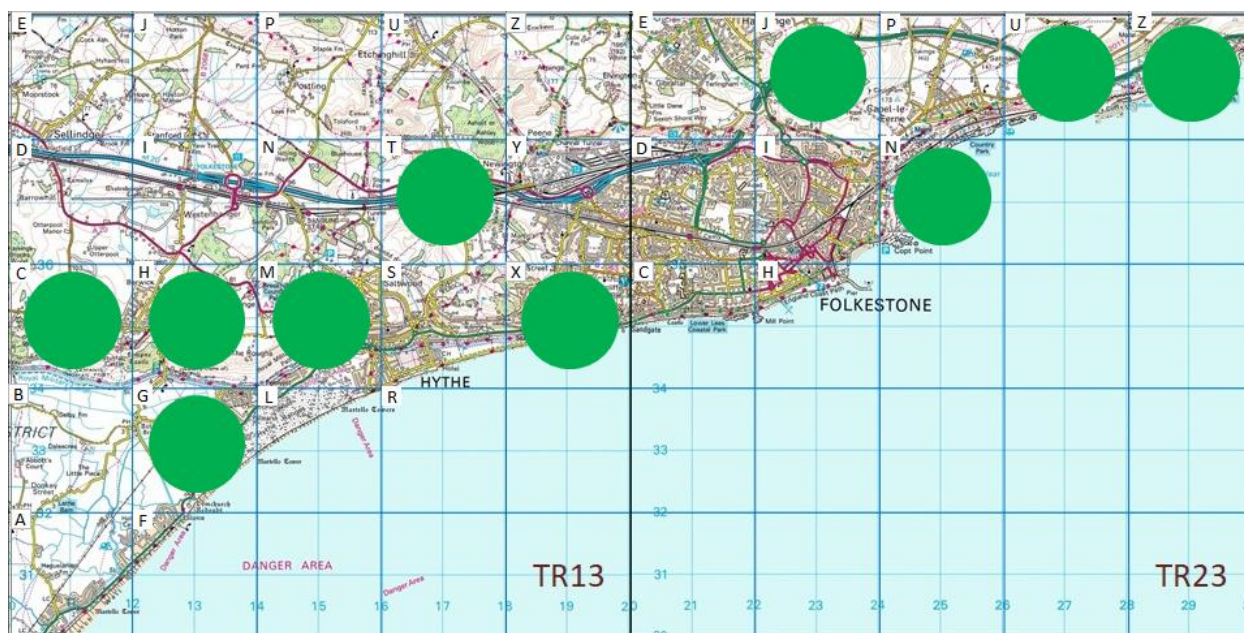


Figure 1: Distribution of all Grasshopper Warbler records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

There had been few autumn records before systematic coverage of the cliffs from 1991 revealed it to be a regular migrant, particularly in the Abbotscliffe area, although it has since declined in numbers. An average of 12.9 bird/days per annum was logged in the 1990s, decreasing to 3.3 per annum in the following decade and 2.8 since 2010. The heaviest passage occurred in 1996, with a total of 30 bird/days, including an exceptional count of 11 at Abbotscliffe on the 14th August. The next highest counts were four: at Abbotscliffe on the 26th August 1993, 2nd September 1996, 23rd September 1996 and 3rd October 1998.



Grasshopper Warbler at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)



Grasshopper Warbler at Abbotscliffe (Dale Gibson)

The only modern records away from the cliffs have comprised two at Church Hougham on the 1st September 1996, one there on the 27th August 2009, one at Beachborough Lakes on the 9th August 2016, singles at Creteway Down on the 28th September 2017 and 13th September 2018, and one between the Aldergate Bridge and West Hythe on the 9th September 2021.

The earliest spring arrival involved a reeling male at the Aldergate Bridge on the 8th April 2020, whilst the latest departures were singles at Abbotscliffe on the 15th October (in 1999 and 2015).

Click [here](#) to listen to a local audio recording of one singing at Hythe Roughs on the 21st April 2015 (Brian Harper).



Grasshopper Warbler at Hythe Roughs (Brian Harper)

References

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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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Grasshopper Warbler at Abbotscliffe (Ian Roberts)