

Yellow Wagtail

Motacilla flava Category A
Breeding summer visitor and passage migrant.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):
Breeds across much of Europe eastwards through northern Asia. Most of the population (except north African birds) are migratory and winter in the Afro-tropics. There has been a widespread decrease affecting Britain and much of north-west Europe in the second half of the twentieth century. The main form that occurs in Britain is *M. f. flavissima* (Yellow Wagtail), with other forms being migrants or vagrants.



Yellow Wagtail at West Hythe (Brian Harper)

Kent status (KOS 2021):
In Kent it is a widespread but declining breeding summer visitor and passage migrant.

The Yellow Wagtail was not 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 and so did not extend as far west as the local section of the Romney Marsh and the upper reaches of the East Stour River which this species inhabits.

However, Ticehurst (1909) stated that it was “distributed evenly, and in considerable numbers, all over the low ground that surrounds the north, east and south of the county” and “along all the river valleys it is also distributed in the meadows and various crop-bearing fields, such as wheat, pea, bean and clover. Up the Stour valley it is distributed in numbers as far as Ashford, and thence in gradually decreasing numbers as far as Westenhanger on one branch of the river”, so there can be little doubt that it has long been present locally.

Breeding atlas distribution

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

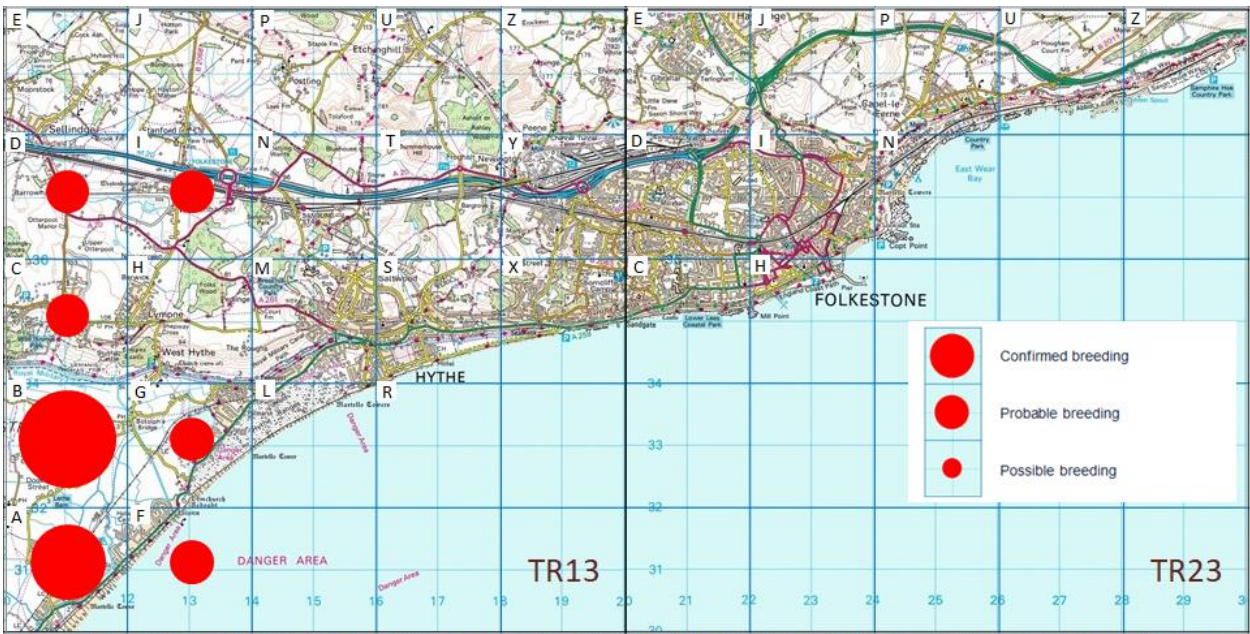


Figure 1: Breeding distribution of Yellow Wagtail at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was confirmed in one tetrad, with probable breeding in one more and possible breeding in five others. 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	2	(6%)	2	(6%)	1	(3%)
Probable/Confirmed	6	(19%)	7	(23%)	6	(19%)
Total	8	(26%)	9	(29%)	7	(23%)
Change			+1	(+13%)	-2	(-22%)

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	+13%	-22%	-13%
Kent	+36%	-42%	-21%

Clements *et al.* (2015) described how the change map between the second and third county atlases showed from inland areas along the North Downs and in the Weald and retreat to the coastal lowlands of the Romney/Walland Marshes, Wantsum/Sandwich Marshes and North Kent Marshes, within which a contraction in range had also been evident. Since the second county atlas the number of occupied tetrads in Kent has declined by 42%, whilst the BTO Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) trend in south-east England between 1995 and 2010 showed a 43% decrease in population. Clements concluded that the Yellow Wagtail population in the county at the time of the third atlas was “well under half and probably a quarter what it was in 1998-1994”.

Locally a decrease of 21% in the number of occupied tetrads was noted between the second and third atlases, with losses inland in TR13 E, TR13 N, TR13 T and TR13 Z, offset slightly by gains in TR13 D and TR13 F (the latter possibly a result of improved coverage). Its stronghold locally continues to be the Romney Marsh although it was also found along the upper reaches of the East Stour River (in TR13 D and TR13 I), having formerly occupied tetrads further to the east (TR13 N and TR13 T) and along the Downs (TR13 E and TR13 Z) in the second atlas, and TR13 J in the first atlas.

There have been few estimates of population numbers but around eight pairs bred in the Nickolls Quarry/Botolph's Bridge/Donkey Street area in the late 1990s, whereas only one or two pairs have nested in this area recent years.

Overall distribution

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

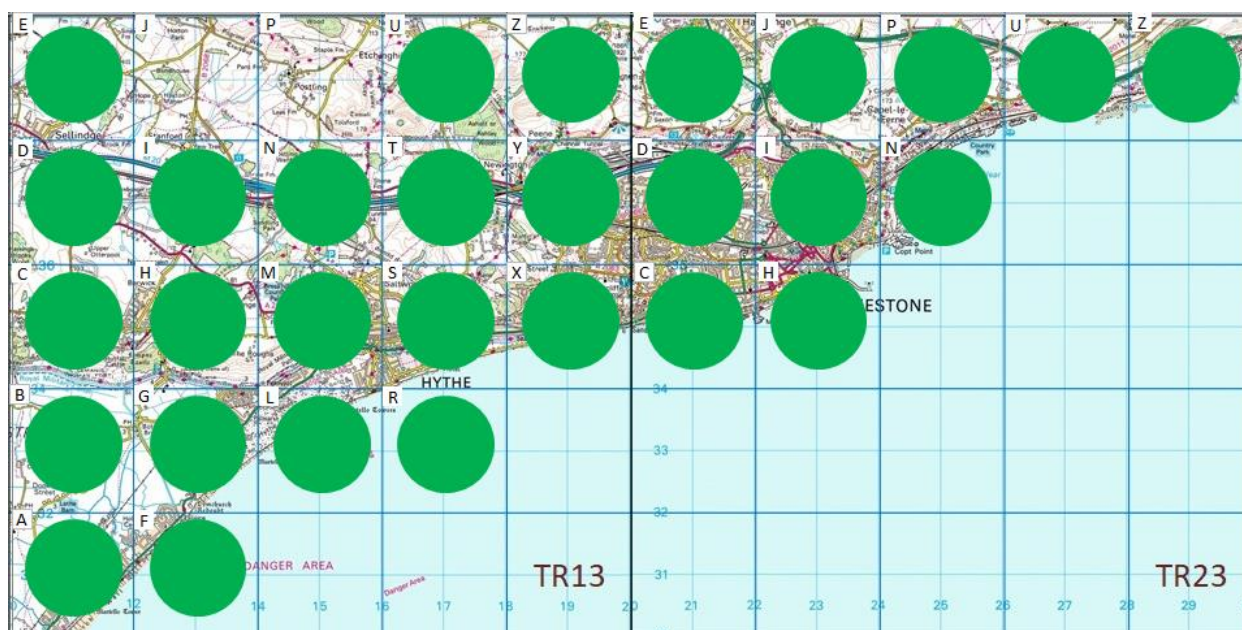


Figure 2: Distribution of all Yellow Wagtail records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

An autumn reed-bed roost was found by Roger Norman in the Nickolls Quarry works area in 1994 which was also being used by Pied Wagtails, but disbanded in 2008 due to disturbance and removal of some of the reeds. Yellow Wagtails were present during August and September, with peak counts in each year as follows: 100 on the 10th September 1995, 40 on the 26th August 1996, 48 on the 15th September 1996 and 40 on the 14th September 1997. Roger noted that “it was interesting to observe that this species left the roost as a ‘unit’ before Pied Wagtails started their protracted exodus” (Norman 2007).



Yellow Wagtail at Abbotscliffe (Mike Linklater)



Yellow Wagtail at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)

Autumn passage peaked in the 1990s, when regular coverage at the cliffs began and before the population decline across the county. Movements of 50 or more were noted as follows:

60 west at Abbotscliffe on the 15th August 1992
 75 west at Abbotscliffe on the 17th August 1992
 80 west at Abbotscliffe on the 19th August 1992
 128 west at Abbotscliffe on the 21st August 1992
 70 west at Abbotscliffe on the 21st August 1993
 72 west at Abbotscliffe on the 29th August 1993
 60 west at Abbotscliffe on the 18th August 1994
 51 west at Abbotscliffe on the 6th September 1994
 75 west at Abbotscliffe on the 10th September 1995
 68 west at Abbotscliffe on the 22nd August 1996
 81 west at Abbotscliffe on the 28th August 1996
 59 west at Abbotscliffe on the 3rd September 1996
 54 west at Abbotscliffe on the 11th September 1996
 131 west at Abbotscliffe on the 21st August 1997
 53 west at Abbotscliffe on the 28th August 2000

There were also counts of 50 at Nickolls Quarry on the 31st August 1997, 81 there on the 30th August 1999 and 96 in the Church Hougham/Hougham Court area on the 6th September 1999.

The only movements of 20 or more since 2000 have been as follows

21 west at Abbotscliffe on the 21st August 2002
 20 west at Abbotscliffe on the 25th August 2004
 23 west at Abbotscliffe on the 26th August 2007
 25 west at Hythe Ranges on the 24th August 2014

In addition a flock of up to 36 were present in a cattle field at Abbotscliffe in late August/early September 2021.

Numbers dwindle in late September and the only double-figure count in October involved 11 flying west at Abbotscliffe on the 1st October 1999. The mean departure date over the most recent decade has been the 2nd October.

Stragglers have been noted on the 13th October on three occasions: three at Hythe on the 13th October 1985, one at Hythe on the 13th October 2012 and one flying east at Abbotscliffe on the 13th October 2015, whilst the latest ever record was one at Copt Point on the 20th October 1984.



Yellow Wagtail at Beachborough Lakes (Steve Tomlinson)



Yellow Wagtail at Samphire Hoe (Martin Collins)

The earliest ever spring arrival involved one flying west over Beachborough Lakes on the 21st March and 2018 and records in this month are unusual, with the others as follows: two at the Willop Sewer on the 28th March 1991, one at Nickolls Quarry on the 28th March 2004 and two there on the 31st March 1992. April arrivals are more typical, with a mean arrival date over the most recent decade of the 7th April.

Spring passage has always been light, with single figure movements even in the 1990s, apart from an exceptional total of 72 heading west over Abbotscliffe logged by Dale Gibson on the 29th April 1993. Spring arrivals of five or more since 2000 have occurred on just five occasions:

- 5 in off the sea at Capel-le-Ferne Café on the 3rd May 2002
- 6 in/west at Abbotscliffe on the 24th April 2004
- 6 over Samphire Hoe on the 17th April 2006
- 7 in/west at Samphire Hoe on the 24th April 2008
- 5 in off the sea at Samphire Hoe on the 2nd May 2016



Yellow Wagtail at West Hythe (Brian Harper)



Yellow Wagtail at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)

Blue-headed Wagtail
Motacilla flava flava

Most Yellow Wagtails that are recorded on passage are seen or heard as they fly over and very few can be identified to sub-species, so records of *M. f. flava* (Blue-headed Wagtail) are rare and have only been noted as follows:

- 4 at Copt Point on the 26th April 1987
- 1 at Church Hougham on the 10th September 1994
- 1 at Abbotscliffe from the 18th to 19th May 1995
- 1 reported at Church Hougham in spring 2000
- 1 at Hougham Court on the 11th September 2005

References

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Yellow Wagtail at West Hythe (Brian Harper)



Yellow Wagtail 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](#).

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