

Corncrake

Crex crex

Category A

Very rare vagrant. Formerly was 4 modern records, probably a regular breeder and 4 birds passage migrant.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds across much of mid-latitude Europe eastwards into Asia, wintering in sub-Saharan Africa, but has been subject to a long-term decline since the late nineteenth century, which accelerated from the 1950s and was widespread from the 1970s. The main causes have been loss of habitat and agricultural intensification, including destruction of nests through earlier harvesting. In Britain restricted to northern and western Scotland, where the population had been increasing since 2000 to a peak of around 1,200 pairs in 2014 but has since shown signs of a downward trend. A reintroduction programme in Cambridgeshire and Norfolk has had some success, with 28 singing males present in 2020 (Eaton *et al.* 2022).

Kent status (KOS 2022, KOS no date):

Having formerly bred in Kent, it is now a rare passage migrant, with just 12 records since 2000.

Ticehurst (1909) recorded how it bred in the more open parts of the county during the nineteenth century, but noted a marked decline after 1900: "I had some time ago formed the opinion that the Land-Rail [Corncrake] was annually decreasing as a breeding bird in the county ... and this is confirmed by every one of my correspondents. It was probably never as numerous as in the west of England, but during the last ten, and even the last five, years its numbers have shown a great and unaccountable diminution. The general use of mowing machines and the smaller amount of clover and such like crops grown nowadays may be factors in this decrease, but I am of opinion that it is part of a much larger question involving a gradual change in the distribution of this bird in England". "Formerly it bred in scattered pairs throughout the more open parts of Kent, where clover, lucerne and sanfoin were grown, as well as in the hayfields of the lower districts."

He also managed to accumulate "ample evidence of a considerable autumn passage through Kent", including some specific local references: "In September the autumn migration begins... in past years large 'bags' of Land-Rails were occasionally made... Mr. B. Turner [the gamekeeper of Major Deedes, of the Sandling Park Estate] tells me that he once shot twenty-six in a clover field near Hythe". He goes on to note that "in 1880 no less than 211 were killed [just outside the area] in Acrise [Acryse] Park, near Folkestone, during August and September, the largest daily 'bags' being 35, 26, 21 and 20."

It was clearly to be encountered locally with some abundance as was included within Knight and Tolputt's "List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood" (1871).

Harrison (1953) included reports of sporadic breeding in the county up until 1947, including a record from Beachborough in 1938 (where young were seen on the 11th July), whilst Roger Norman in his account of the Birds of Palmarsh Gravel Pit (Nickolls Quarry) recounted that "a colleague, who from 1948 used to regularly accompany his father shooting partridge and rabbit recalls initially being shown and then seeing occasional single birds each year to 1951 or 1952, in a grass field (where the grass was always particularly long) close to the current 'Southern Water' site and on the west side of the whole site" (Norman 2007). Roger was also able to provide details of a migrant found "in the rear garden of Mr. J. Horton's house in Market Street, Hythe" in mid-April 1950. At the time the garden would have extended as far as Hythe Green (Norman pers. comm.).

Taylor *et al.* (1981) noted that there has been no confirmation of nesting in Kent since 1947 and commented on a "striking further decrease" in records in the county during their review period (1952-76). The only documented local records during this period were provided by H. Schreiber, who saw one at Sandling Park on the 22nd August 1959, and Phil Smith, who recalled hearing one calling from a field at Capel-le-Ferne in 1971 or 1972.

There have been just four modern records, as shown in figure 1.

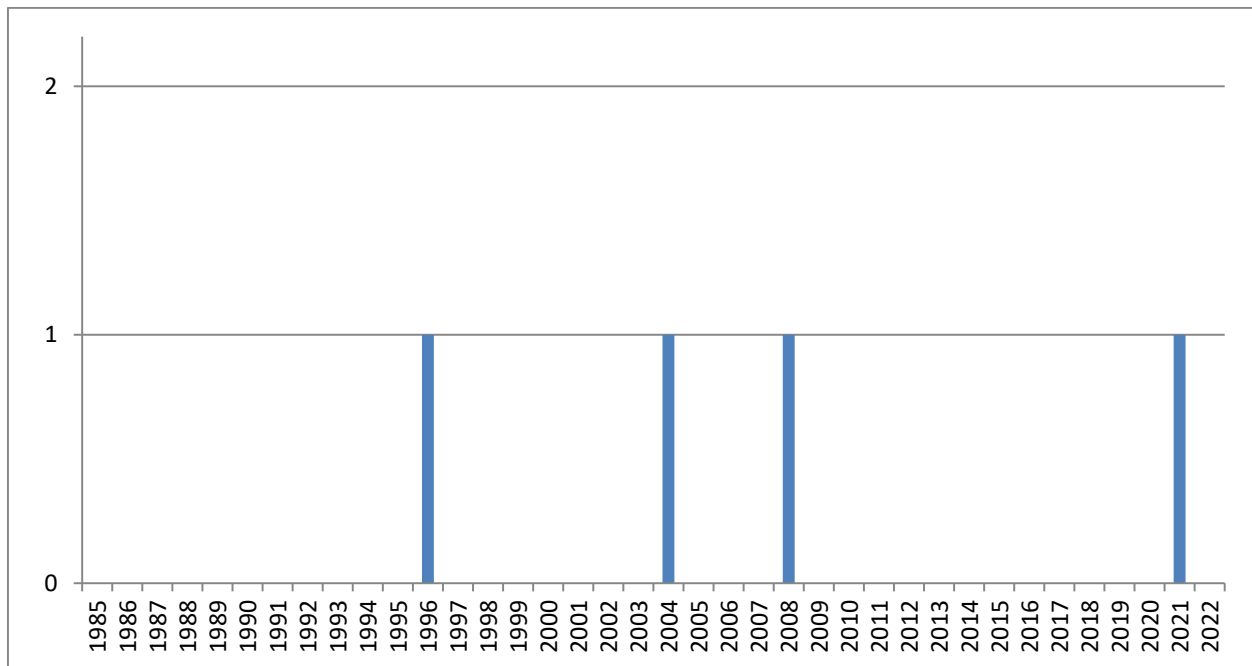


Figure 1: Corncrake records at Folkestone and Hythe since 1985

All modern records have occurred in autumn, between 10th September (week 37) and 16th October (week 42), with three in week 37. The records by week are given in figure 2.

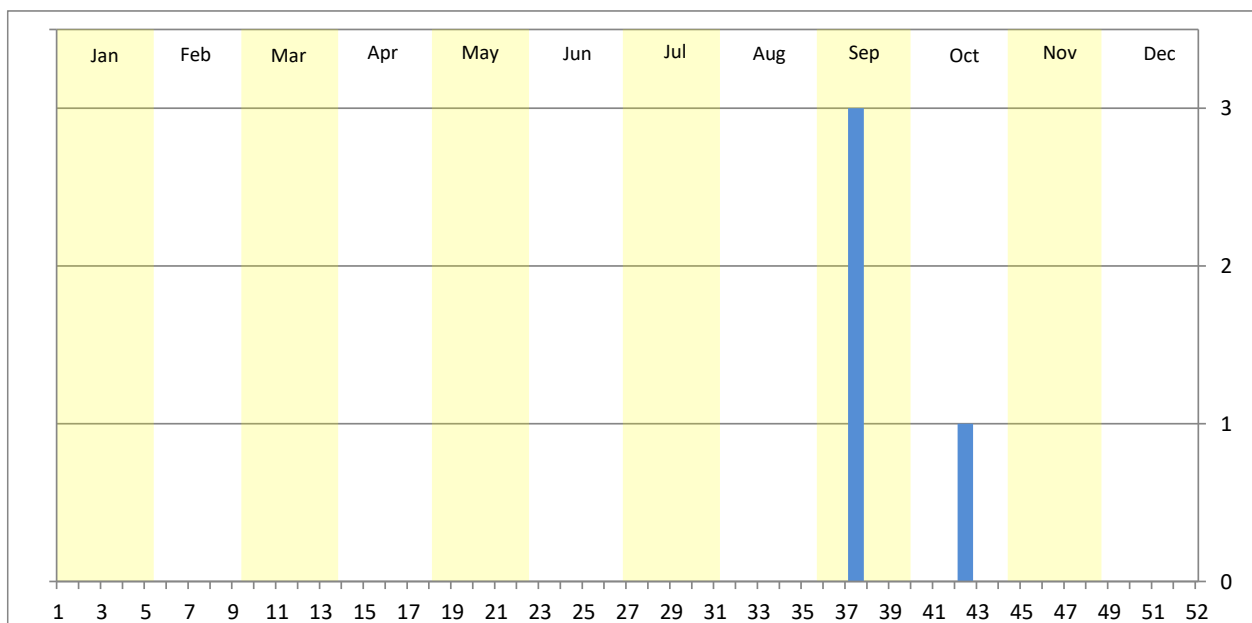


Figure 2: Corncrake records at Folkestone and Hythe by week since 1985

Figure 3 shows the location of all documented records by tetrad.



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

The full list of modern records is as follows:

1996 Abbotscliffe, one, 10th September (D. A. Gibson)

2004 Abbotscliffe, one, 16th October (I. A. Roberts)

2008 Abbotscliffe, one, 13th September (D. A. Gibson, J. A. Gibson)

2021 Folkestone, one flew over the A20 just south of the Round Hill tunnel, 11th September (P. Chantler)

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Acknowledgements

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