

Willow Warbler

Phylloscopus trochilus

Category A

Formerly a breeding summer visitor, now a declining passage migrant.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds throughout the upper and middle latitudes of the Western Palearctic, extending eastwards across Siberia in a narrowing band to c.180°E. Winters extensively in sub-Saharan Africa.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

It was once widespread but is now a declining breeding summer visitor and passage migrant in Kent.



Willow Warbler at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)

The Willow Warbler 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 "universally and numerous distributed throughout the county", so 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.

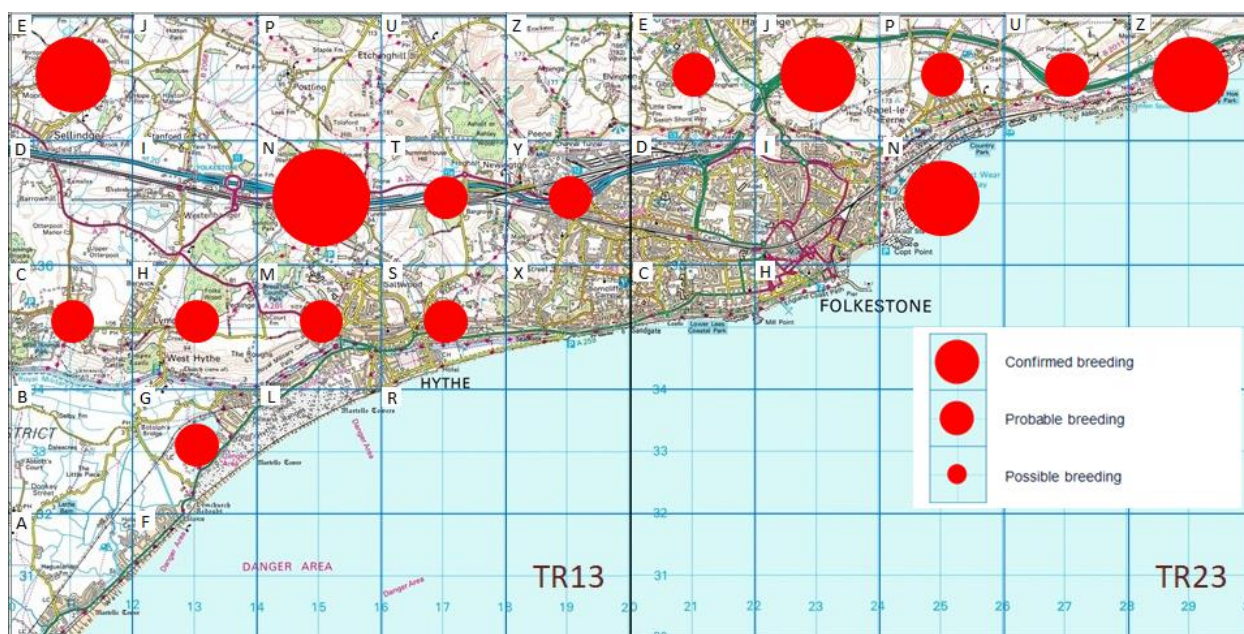


Figure 1: Breeding distribution of Willow Warbler at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was confirmed in one tetrad, with probable breeding in four more and possible breeding in ten 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	0	(0%)	2	(6%)	10	(32%)
Probable/Confirmed	21	(68%)	21	(68%)	5	(16%)
Total	21	(68%)	23	(74%)	15	(48%)
Change			+2	(+10%)	-8	(-35%)

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	+10%	-35%	-29%
Kent	+24%	-55%	-44%

Ticehurst (1909) considered it to be “the most numerous and generally distributed of the three species of leaf warblers that annually visit our county” and to be found “wherever there are woods, copses, orchards or gardens large enough for its requirements”, whilst Harrison (1953) also regarded it as “by far the most numerous of the three common *Phylloscopi* which have visited the county and it may be said to be very generally distributed”.

Taylor *et al.* still found it to be numerous and widely distributed, with probable or confirmed breeding in 68% of local tetrads in the first county atlas, and provided “an indication of the abundance of this species ... by the numbers ringed”, in their review period (1952-76) it was “the most frequently ringed species at both [Dungeness and Sandwich Bay] observatories”.

Henderson & Hodge stated that “the cascading song of the Willow Warbler ... is one of the most characteristic sounds of early spring. It is the most numerous summer visitor to our shores and has a widespread distribution. ... In Kent, it was recorded in ... 79% of tetrads” in the second county atlas (with probable or confirmed breeding again in 68% of local tetrads). They estimated the Kent population as being up to 60,000 pairs but drew attention to emerging evidence of a decline across South-east England.

Clements *et al.* (2015) noted however that “the situation has changed dramatically, with a halving of occupied tetrads and possibly a 90% reduction in numbers” across the county, to a population of between 2,000 and 5,000 pairs in Kent. They stated that “Willow Warblers are now most commonly found in recently coppiced woodland and in re-planted conifers within the larger blocks of Kentish woodland”. Locally it had declined to probable or confirmed breeding in just 16% of tetrads.

In the most recent Kent Bird Report (for 2019) the only breeding reports in the county were from Blean Woods, where there 12 pairs, and Dungeness, where there were two pairs (KOS, 2020).



Willow Warbler at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)



Willow Warbler at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)

Harris *et al.* (2020) described how the Willow Warbler is part of a “long-distance migrant” group of birds that are undergoing long-term decline, where changes to the wintering and migration grounds are thought to be having a negative impact. Changes in breeding productivity vary across regions, with declines seen particularly in South-east England (where there had been a decrease of 81% since 1995).

The only confirmed local breeding during the most recent atlas was at Bluehouse Wood in 2011 and there have been no recorded instances since. There were also records of what were considered to be territorial birds in the Sellindge area (TR13 E), at Holy Well (TR23 J), in Folkestone Warren (TR23 N) and at Church Wood in the Hougham Valley (TR23 Z) during the survey but many of the cases of possible breeding may have related to migrants.

Overall distribution

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

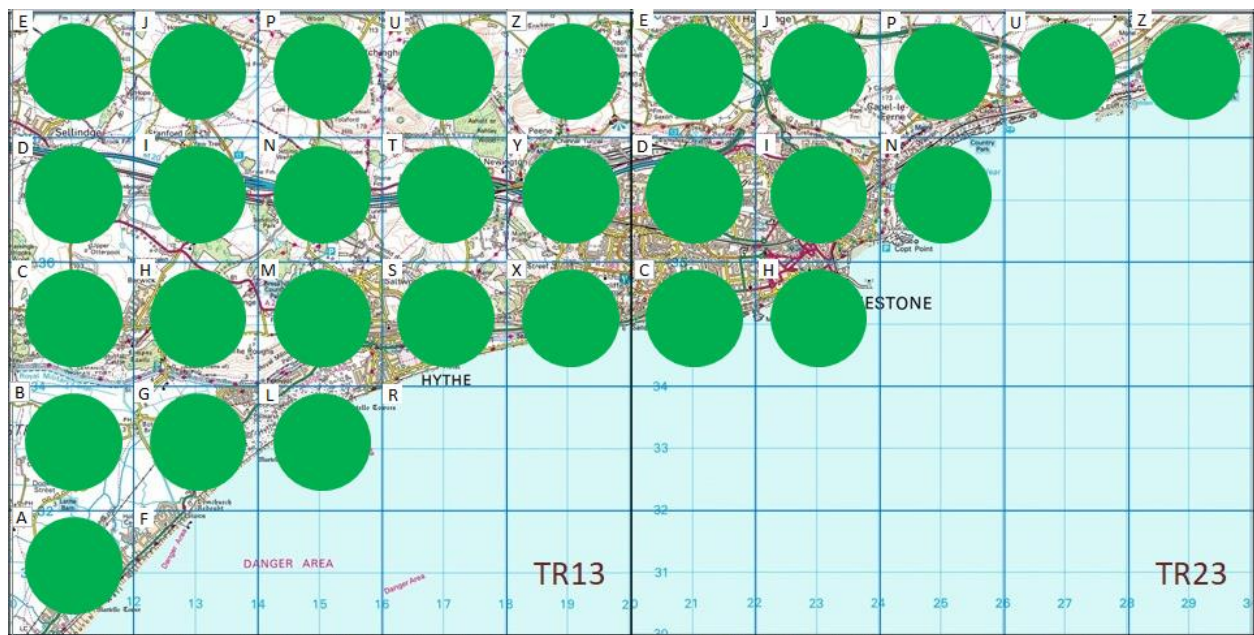


Figure 2: Distribution of all Willow Warbler records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The earliest ever arrival date is the 26th March, when singing males were recorded by Leslie Scrivener at Sandling Park in 1960 and by Ian Roberts at Samphire Hoe in 2011, and there have also been sightings on the 27th March (when Roger Norman saw one at Nickolls Quarry in 2001), the 28th March (when Neil Frampton saw one along the canal west of Hythe in 1982) and the 29th March (when Ian Roberts saw one at Abbotscliffe in 1998 and Roger Norman counted an exceptional total of seven along the canal between Hythe and Palmarsh in 1991). There have also been records on the 30th March in six years, including a count of five at Samphire Hoe in 2005, and on the 31st March in two. In total there have been March records in 12 years but the first arrival is typically in early April, with a mean arrival date over the last decade of the 7th April.



Willow Warbler at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)



Willow Warbler at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)

Spring passage is usually light and double-figure counts are notable, particularly in recent years, with the only instance since 2000 involving 14 along the canal by Princes Parade on the 18th April 2017. Arrivals of 20 or more have been noted on five occasions: 20 at Hythe Ranges on the 22nd April 1958, 20 at Copt Point on the 29th April 1986, at least 30 along the canal between Hythe and West Hythe on the 19th April 1953, 34 at Capel Battery on the 20th April 1998 and an exceptional 'fall' of 150 between Capel Battery and Abbotscliffe on the 27th April 1997. Arrivals can continue well into May, with occasional stragglers into June.

Emigration begins in July, with early sightings on the 12th July (in gardens in Folkestone in 2017 and in Hythe in July 2019) and on the 13th July (at Beachborough Lakes in 2018 and Abbotscliffe in 1999), but the first sightings are usually in the second half of the month. The only double-figure count in July involved 16 at Abbotscliffe on the 29th July 2020, with the peak passage taking place during August. Day totals of 40 or more have been noted on nine occasions: 70 at Cheriton on the 10th August 1968, 40 at Mill Point on the 4th August 1988 and 65 there on the 16th August 1988, 78 in the area on the 15th August 1992, 60 between Capel Battery and Abbotscliffe on the 14th August 1996, 73 there on the 22nd August 1996, 43 there on the 14th August 1997, 49 at Abbotscliffe on the 23rd August 1998 and 51 at the cliffs on the 28th August 1999.

The largest counts since 2000 have been at least 30 at Nickolls Quarry on the 25th August 2006, 30 at Abbotscliffe on the 14th August 2013 and at least 35 at Creteway Down on the 5th September 2014, which is the second largest count in that month, following 36 at Capel Battery on the 6th September 1998. Numbers typically drop away quickly during September with double-figure counts being rare after the first week, with the latest being 12 at Mill Point on the 13th September 1988.

October records have occurred in just ten years, with the latest at Copt Point on the 19th October 1986.

A bird recovered at Westenhangar on the 13th August 1954 had been ringed in Cambridge on 9th June of the same year.

Click [here](#) to listen to a local audio recording of one singing at Nickolls Quarry on the 17th April 2021 (Brian Harper).

Northern Willow Warbler

Phylloscopus trochilus acredula

The northern form *P. t. acredula* that breeds in northern Scandinavia, Russia and western Siberia is thought to be a common passage migrant in Britain, particularly on the east coast, whilst the Siberian form *P. t. yakutensis*, breeding in central and eastern Siberia, is a potential vagrant to Britain. However, the subspecies are not well-defined and there is extensive intergradation. Furthermore, variation is not linear, and birds showing the characters of one subspecies occur regularly within the range of another (BBRC, no date). *P. t. acredula* and *yakutensis* tend to be greyer and paler than the nominate form and may occur later in the migration seasons. Birds exhibiting some of these characteristics have been noted on occasion, including at Samphire Hoe on the 13th May 2014 and on the 27th to 28th September 2008.



Willow Warbler at Samphire Hoe (Roger Pearce)



Possible *P. t. acredula* at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)

References

- British Birds Rarities Committee (BBRC). 2016. Subspecies Information. www.bbrc.org.uk/subspecies-information
- Clements, R., Orchard, M., McCanch, N. & Wood, S. 2015. *Kent Breeding Bird Atlas 2008-13*. Kent Ornithological Society.
- Harris, S.J., Massimino, D., Balmer, D.E., Eaton, M.A., Noble, D.G., Pearce-Higgins, J.W., Woodcock, P. & Gillings, S. 2020. *The Breeding Bird Survey 2019*. British Trust for Ornithology, Thetford. Available at: www.bto.org/our-science/publications/breeding-bird-survey-report/breeding-bird-survey-2019
- Harrison, J. M. 1953. *The Birds of Kent*. Witherby, London.
- 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.



Willow Warbler at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)