

Merlin

Falco columbarius

Category A

Scarce winter visitor and passage migrant.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds across northern regions of Europe, Asia and North America. Mainly migratory, with European birds moving into central and southern parts of the continent. Icelandic birds mainly winter in Britain. British birds are less migratory and more prone to altitudinal movements from moorland to coasts.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

In Kent it is a regular passage migrant and winter visitor, particularly to coastal marshes.



Merlin at Donkey Street (Ian Roberts)

The Merlin was not included in Knight and Tolputt's "List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood" (1871), although Ticehurst (1909) considered it to be "a regular autumn and winter visitor to Kent in some numbers, affecting chiefly the open marsh-lands along the coast, particularly Romney Marsh". Neither he nor Harrison (1953) made specific mention of any local records, so the first documented sighting involved one seen by Roger Norman at Nickolls Quarry on the 19th November 1961, with Dave Weaver adding the next there on the 7th May 1980 (Norman 2007). It seems very likely to have been overlooked however as Peter Wells considered to be "regular" at Biggin's Wood (near Cheriton) between 1982 and 1988, and it has been noted annually since 1991 as figure 1 demonstrates, with an average of 5.6 records per year across the period.

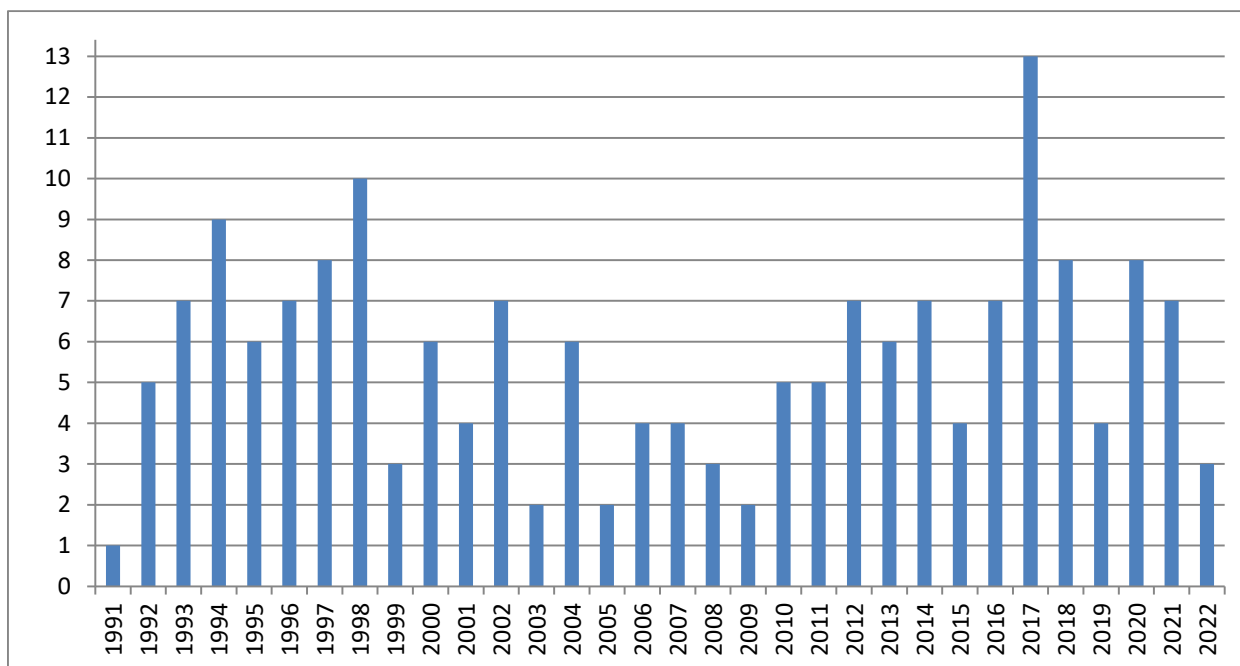


Figure 1: Merlin records at Folkestone and Hythe

There have been two August records (one flying out to sea from Hythe Ranges on the 14th August 2011 and one at Nickolls Quarry on the 20th August 2000) but arrivals in autumn do not typically occur before mid-September, with singles at Samphire Hoe on the 15th September 2008 and on the same date in 2009 being the earliest dates in that month. September records are quite frequent with sightings in 17 of the last 30 years.

October is the peak month for Merlin records, with 47 records and sightings in 22 of the 31 years. Most records from September and October are from the cliffs or Nickolls Quarry, and all relate to singles apart from two at Capel Battery on the 30th September 2004 and two at Botolph's Bridge on the 26th October 2008.

Winter records have been more widespread, with more inland sightings, and there have been sightings in 25 of the last 30 winters. Most have involved birds seen on a single date but some have been noted on multiple occasions, and it probably over-winters with some frequency, though this is difficult to detect as it tends to be elusive and wide-ranging.

There is a smaller peak of records suggesting spring passage from March into early May, and there have been spring sightings in 22 of the last 30 years. The latest spring departure date was the 4th May 2014. The records by week are given in figure 2.

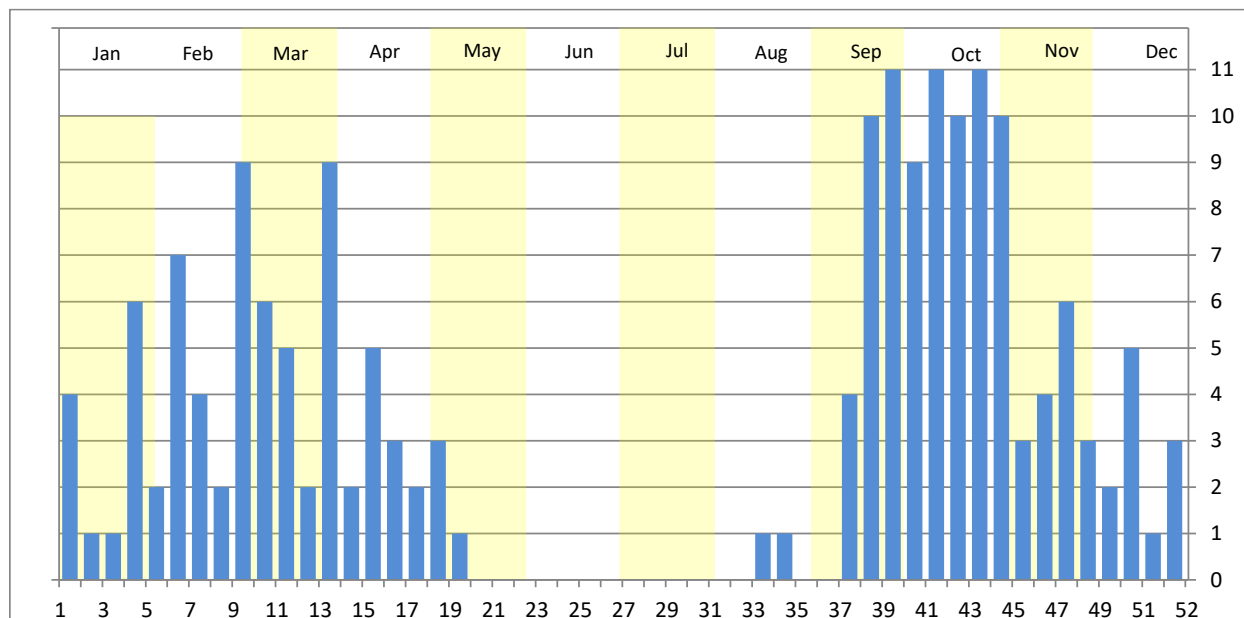


Figure 2: Merlin records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Overall distribution

Figure 3 shows the distribution of all records of Merlin by tetrad, with records in 23 tetrads (74%).

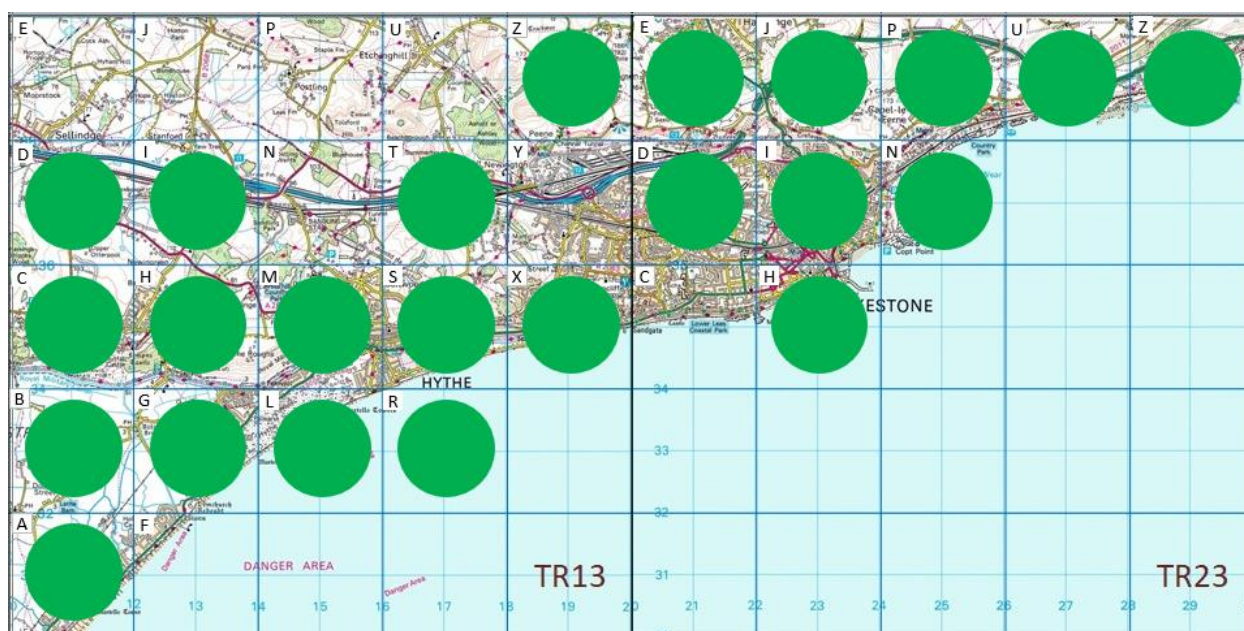


Figure 3: Distribution of all Merlin records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

References

Harrison, J. M. 1953. *The Birds of Kent*. Witherby, London.

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

Norman, R. K. 2007. The Birds of Palmarsh Gravel Pit. <https://folkestonebirds.com/where-to-watch> (see "Further Information" section).

Snow, D. & Perrins, C.M. 1998. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Oxford University Press.

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.



Merlin at Donkey Street (Ian Roberts)