

# Reed Bunting

*Emberiza schoeniclus*

Category A

Breeding resident, winter visitor and passage migrant.

*World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):*

Breeds mainly in middle and upper latitudes across Europe eastwards across northern Asia to the Lena river, Sakhalin island and northern Japan, and south to Iran and northern China. In Europe populations in the north and east are migratory and move south-west, whilst it becomes increasingly sedentary towards the south-west. Some birds winter south of the breeding range in the Mediterranean Basin.



Reed Bunting at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)

*Kent status (KOS 2021):*

In Kent it is a widespread and locally common resident, passage migrant (particularly in autumn) and winter visitor.

The Reed Bunting 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 "well distributed throughout the county wherever there is water" and "found breeding abundantly throughout all the marshes near the south coast", 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.

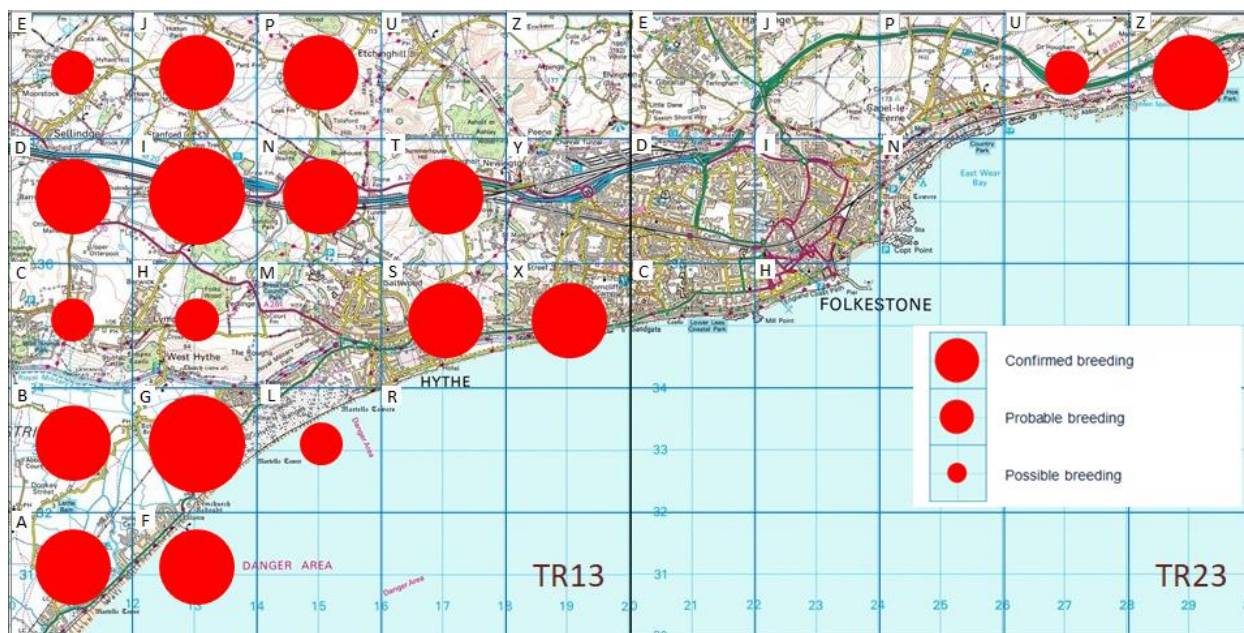


Figure 1: Breeding distribution of Reed Bunting at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was confirmed in two tetrads, with probable breeding in 11 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	0	(0%)	1	(3%)	5	(16%)
Probable/Confirmed	7	(23%)	8	(26%)	13	(42%)
Total	7	(23%)	9	(29%)	18	(58%)
Change			+2	(+29%)	+9	(+100%)

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	+29%	+100%	+157%
Kent	+1%	-2%	-1%

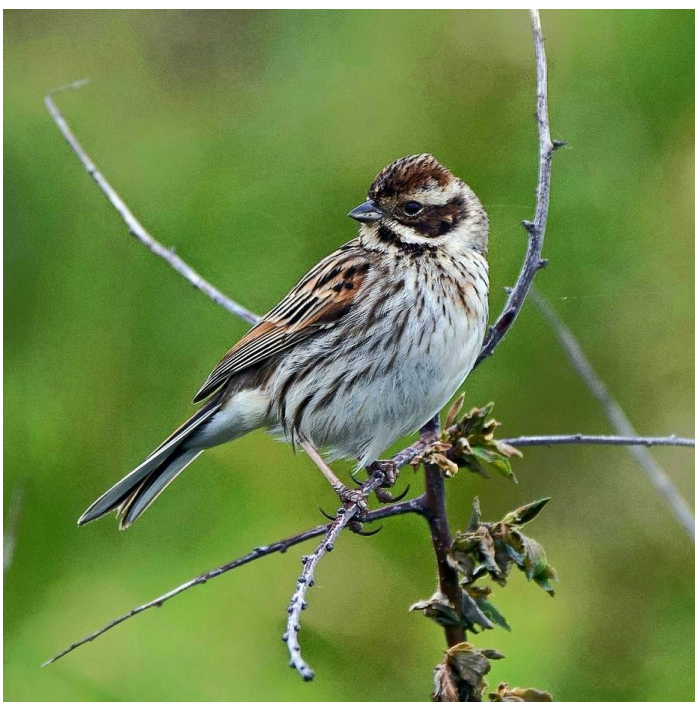
Taylor *et al* noted that the distribution of the Reed Bunting as a breeding bird was closely linked to the presence of suitably damp, waterside habitats. However, since the 1960s it had been expanding its ecological range into drier habitats, often at quite long distances from water.



Reed Bunting at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)



Reed Bunting at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)



Reed Bunting at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)



Reed Bunting at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)



Henderson & Hodge remarked upon a “dramatic” 66% decline in numbers at a national level over a 20-year period to the mid-1990s, which they attributed to an increase in the use of herbicides for weed control on farmland and the consequent lack of food in the winter. However, the number of occupied tetrads in Kent was almost identical in the first and second atlases, with losses having been offset by gains that were “undoubtedly the result of better and more extensive coverage”.

Clements *et al.* (2015) described some recovery in numbers nationally but noted that evidence from BTO Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) data for south-east England was of a further decline since the second atlas period (of 29% between 1995 and 2012). In Kent however there had been only a slight reduction in occupied tetrads, with the losses largely on farmland in western and central parts of the county. They remarked that it colonised arable farmland, especially oilseed rape, in areas adjacent to wetlands.



Reed Bunting at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)



Reed Bunting at Beachborough Lakes (Steve Tomlinson)

Locally, despite decline elsewhere, it increased its range by 29% between the first and second atlases, with a further 100% increase in the number of occupied tetrads in the third atlas. Figure 2 shows the breeding distribution in the first atlas which shows that it was largely confined to Romney Marsh and to the Royal Military Canal to the west of Hythe, with outlying breeding in TR13 E and TR23 D (the latter presumably at the area where the Pent Stream would have flowed through at the former golf course). By the time of the second atlas it had colonised TR13 D, TR13 I, TR13 P and TR13 T, with possible breeding in TR13 M, but was not noted in TR13 C, TR13 E or the by now urbanised TR23 D. Figure 1 shows a further spread inland, onto the Downs and along the canal to Seabrook.



Figure 2: Breeding distribution of Reed Bunting at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (1967-73 BTO/KOS Atlas)

## Overall distribution

Figure 3 shows the distribution of all records of Reed Bunting by tetrad, with records in 24 tetrads (77%).

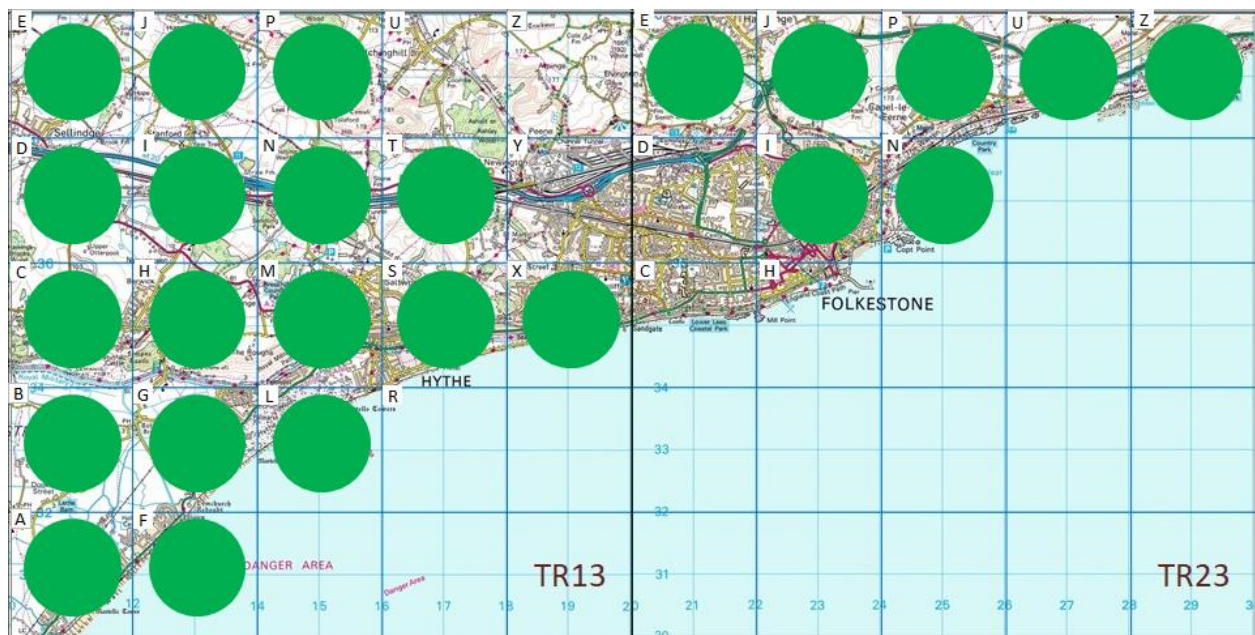


Figure 3: Distribution of all Reed Bunting records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Taylor *et al.* noted that some dispersal of the breeding population occurs in late July and August. It is difficult to differentiate between breeding and dispersing birds but one seen in a garden close to Hythe seafront on the 15<sup>th</sup> August 2016 was certainly a wanderer.



Reed Bunting at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)



Taylor *et al.* also remarked that winter visitors may appear from late September onwards. These may increase the numbers at breeding sites, with a peak count at Nickolls Quarry of 22 on the 25<sup>th</sup> September 1994, or be seen on visual passage, including counts of five flying west at Abbotscliffe on the 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2000 and 29<sup>th</sup> September 2012, seven flying west there on the 30<sup>th</sup> September 2000 and eight flying west there on the 30<sup>th</sup> September 1999.



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Passage tends to increase through October when double-figure movements may be noted. There was a particularly heavy passage in 1998, when up to 320 passed through at the cliffs, including counts of 28 flying west at Abbotscliffe on the 12<sup>th</sup> October, 37 flying west there the following day, a record count of 96 flying west there on the 15<sup>th</sup> October and 25 flying west there on the 20<sup>th</sup> October. Double-figure movements in other years have comprised:

- 20 west at Nickolls Quarry on the 25<sup>th</sup> October 1957
- 11 west at Abbotscliffe on the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1999
- 16 south-west at Nickolls Quarry on the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2001
- 11 west at Abbotscliffe on the 10<sup>th</sup> October 2001
- 12 west at Abbotscliffe on the 27<sup>th</sup> October 2006
- 13 over at Abbotscliffe on the 20<sup>th</sup> October 2012
- 11 over at Abbotscliffe on the 8<sup>th</sup> October 2016
- 11 south at Beachborough Lakes on the 25<sup>th</sup> October 2016
- 12 west at Beachborough Lakes on the 28<sup>th</sup> October 2016
- 11 west at Abbotscliffe on the 14<sup>th</sup> October 2018
- 12 west at Abbotscliffe on the 7<sup>th</sup> October 2021

Coastal passage may continue in decreasing numbers until around mid-November. Autumn or winter flocks of 15 or more have been noted as follows:

- 18 at Botolph's Bridge on the 28<sup>th</sup> December 1997
- 17 at Nickolls Quarry on the 7<sup>th</sup> October 2001
- 15 at Nickolls Quarry on the 8<sup>th</sup> October 2002
- At least 50 in the Donkey Street area in January and February 2015
- Up to 30 in the Botolph's Bridge area from December 2015 to January 2016
- 15 at Donkey Street on the 17<sup>th</sup> November 2017
- 20 at the Willop Basin on the 9<sup>th</sup> November 2019
- 20 at the Willop Basin on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 2021
- 20 at Donkey Street on the 6<sup>th</sup> October 2021

Spring passage, which may be noted between early March and early April, by contrast is very light and is not evident in every year. Numbers have only ever involved ones or twos.

## **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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