

Grey Wagtail

Motacilla cinerea

Category A

Breeding resident and passage migrant.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds across western and central Europe from Britain and southern Norway south to north Africa, and south-eastwards to Turkey. Some spread in eastern and southern England was noted from the 1950s. Beyond the west Palearctic it extends eastwards from the Urals to the Pacific, and south to Iran, the Himalayas and northern China. It is mainly a partial migrant, but resident in more southern and western areas, whilst more northern and eastern birds may reach sub-Saharan Africa.



Grey Wagtail at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)

Kent status (KOS 2021):

In Kent it is a widespread but local breeding species and a regular passage migrant, especially in autumn.

The Grey Wagtail 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, whilst Ticehurst (1909) considered it to only be "in the main a visitor to Kent from autumn to spring", with just a "few instances" of breeding (after the first occurrence near Sittingbourne in 1885).

From 1900 a small number of pairs bred in the north or west of the county and Harrison (1953) charted the expansion of its range as it colonised Kent. By 1950 it was quite widespread along the valleys of the Darent and Medway and their tributaries, with a few isolated pairs that included one at Crabble near Dover (where it first nested in 1941).

The first documented record locally involved up to three that were present at Nickolls Quarry in August 1952 (Norman, 2007), but it is uncertain when it first nested, with Rowland (1968) merely stating that "the Grey Wagtail has nested in Hythe for many years".

Taylor *et al.* (1981) noted that its spread was slowed by the severe winter of 1962/63 but had recovered well by the time of the first county atlas, when a single pair probably continued to breed at Hythe (TR13 M). Henderson & Hodge (1988) documented the effects of further cold winters between 1985 and 1987 but noted an 82% increase in occupied tetrads across Kent in the second county atlas, including possible breeding pairs in four local tetrads (TR13 A, TR13 B, TR13 D and TR13 M).



Grey Wagtail at West Hythe (John Gomm)



Grey Wagtail at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)

Breeding atlas distribution

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

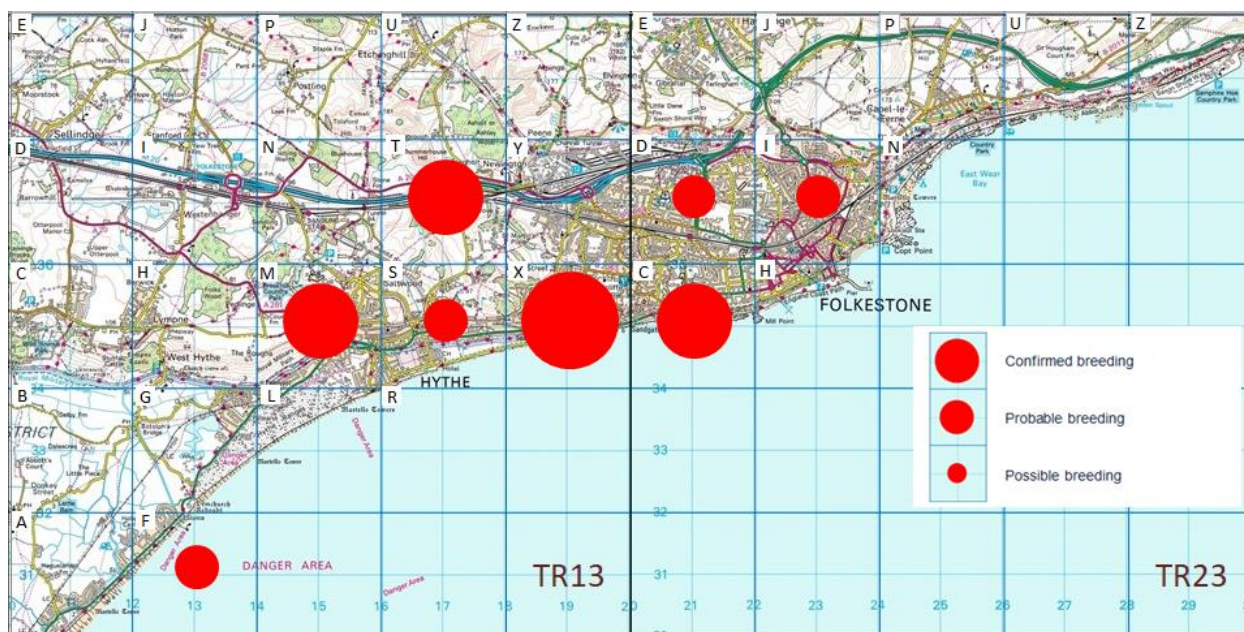


Figure 1: Breeding distribution of Grey Wagtail at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was confirmed in one tetrad, with probable breeding in three more and possible breeding in four 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%) | 4 | (13%) | 4 | (13%) |
| Probable/Confirmed | 1 | (3%) | 0 | (0%) | 4 | (13%) |
| Total | 1 | (3%) | 4 | (13%) | 8 | (26%) |
| Change | | | +3 | (+300%) | +4 | (+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 | +300% | +100% | +700% |
| Kent | +82% | +26% | +130% |

Clements *et al.* (2015) reported a further 26% increase in occupied tetrads across the county by the third county atlas, which included “an increase in east Kent, especially around Folkestone and in the Stour Valley”, with a doubling of tetrad occupancy locally.

The local population is centred around the towns of Folkestone and Hythe, particularly along the Brockhill Stream (TR13 M), Saltwood and Mill Lease stream (TR13 S), and Seabrook Stream (TR13 X and TR13 Y), and their outflows into the Royal Military Canal, and along the Pent Stream (TR23 D and TR23 I).

None were located during the most recent atlas in TR13 A, TR13 B or TR13 D (tetrads that were occupied in the second atlas, albeit as “possible” breeding), but in recent years pairs have been found at Westenhanger/Stanford South (TR13 I), the Frogholt/Beachborough Park area (TR13 T/TR13 U) and at Enbrook Park (TR23 C).

Overall distribution

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of Grey Wagtail by tetrad, with records in 28 tetrads (90%).

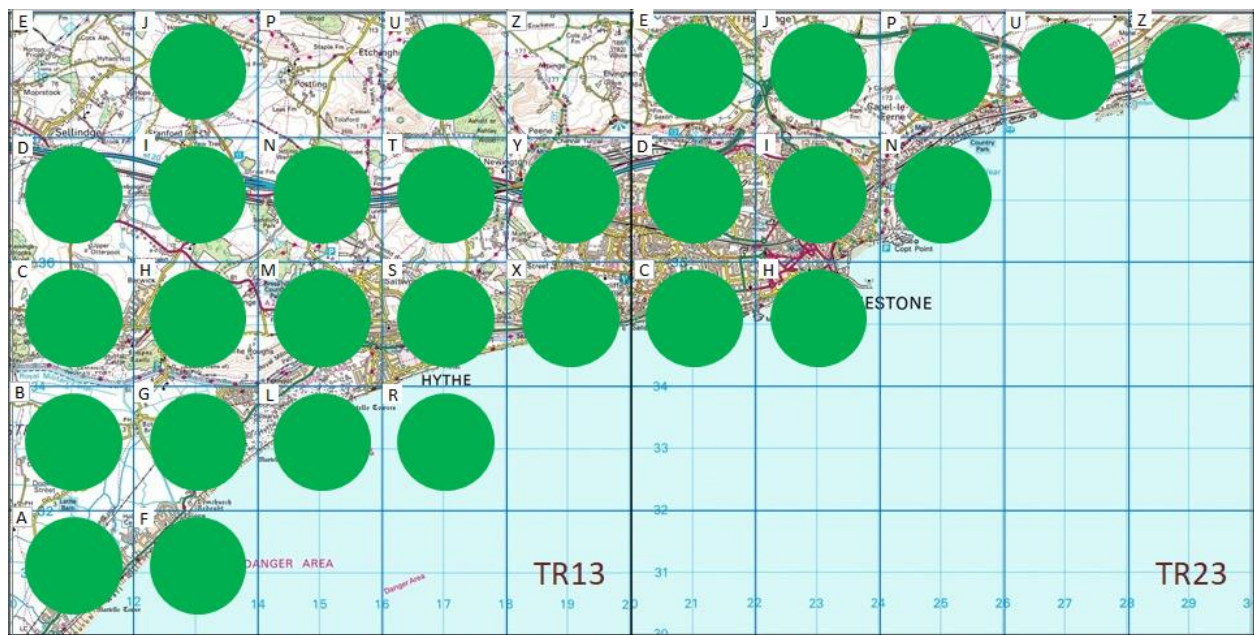


Figure 2: Distribution of all Grey Wagtail records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad



Grey Wagtail at Saltwood Castle (Brian Harper)



Grey Wagtail at Saltwood Castle (Brian Harper)

August passage may be noted between August and early November, but is most marked in September and October, with movements of five or more having been noted on a number of occasions:

- 5 south-west at Nickolls Quarry on the 25th September 1960
- 15 over at Cheriton on the 16th October 1985
- 9 west at Mill Point on the 19th September 1988
- 11 in/west at Mill Point on the 14th October 1989
- 5 west at Capel Battery on the 11th August 1992
- 9 east at Abbotscliffe on the 20th September 1996
- 18 east at Abbotscliffe on the 24th September 1996
- 5 west at Abbotscliffe on the 13th October 1998

6 east at Abbotscliffe on the 14th September 2002
6 east at Copt Point on the 15th September 2002
18 east at Abbotscliffe on the 21st September 2002
9 in/west at Abbotscliffe on the 11th October 2003
6 west at Capel Battery on the 30th September 2007
5 east at Abbotscliffe on the 17th September 2015
7 east at Hythe on the 30th September 2015
7 east at Abbotscliffe on the 18th September 2016
6 over Beachborough Lakes on the 7th October 2016
8 over Beachborough Lakes on the 25th October 2016

It is widespread in winter when, as Taylor *et al* noted ,it can be attracted to sewage works and gravel pits, into towns or to the coast, with records from 90% of local tetrads.

Spring passage is very light and typically involves one and twos, mainly in March. The only larger counts have involved three flying east at Samphire Hoe on the 21st March 2010 and three flying east at Abbotscliffe on the 20th March 2021.



Grey Wagtail at West Hythe (Brian Harper)



Grey Wagtail at West Hythe (Brian Harper)



Grey Wagtail at Beachborough Park (Steve Tomlinson)



Grey Wagtail at Saltwood Castle (Nigel Webster)

References

- Clements, R., Orchard, M., McCanch, N. & Wood, S. 2015. *Kent Breeding Bird Atlas 2008-13*. Kent Ornithological Society.
- 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
- Norman, R. K. 2007. The Birds of Palmarsh Gravel Pit. <https://folkestonebirds.com/where-to-watch> (see "Further Information" section).
- Rowland, H. M. 1968. *Some aspects of the Natural History of the Folkestone District*. The Invicta Press, Ashford.
- 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.



Grey Wagtail at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)



Grey Wagtail at Saltwood Castle (Brian Harper)