

Waxwing

Bombycilla garrulus

Category A

Rare winter visitor and passage migrant, with occasional influx years.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds across northern Fenno-Scandia and Russia, eastwards across Siberia to the Pacific. In winter moves both south-west to western Europe and also south and east to central and eastern Europe. Invasions of Britain occur between October and March, with maximum numbers in mid-winter. In most years only a few birds occur, but irregularly there are large numbers, mostly in eastern areas from Shetland to Kent. Irruptions are thought to be due to imbalances between the population size and food supply.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

It is a passage migrant and winter visitor in Kent, in fluctuating numbers.



Waxwing at Folkestone (Steve Ashton)

The Waxwing was not included in Knight and Tolputt's "List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood" (1871), whilst Ticehurst (1909) mentioned one at "Hougham" in March 1893 but without sufficient details to ascertain if this was within the local boundaries, so the first definite record was provided Harrison (1953), who recounted that there were up to 27 at Hythe from the 16th December 1946 into January 1947, seen by Miss H. G. Forsaith, G. E. Took & W. J. Taylor. This was part an "incursion that was probably as heavy as any so far recorded for the county" (with a total of probably over 200 involved).

Harrison also noted that Miss H. G. Forsaith observed a further solitary Waxwing in her garden in Hythe on the 5th February 1951, whilst Roger Norman observed two in the garden of "Herons Gate" on Burmarsh Road, Palmarsh between the 18th and 24th February 1951.

The next records occurred in the 1956/57 winter, when two were reported at Lympne on the 20th February 1957 and one was at Sandling Park on the 10th March 1957, and there were sightings in each of the next three winters. In the 1957/58 winter there were eight at Cliff Road, Hythe from the 8th to 10th November 1957, two again at "Herons Gate" on Burmarsh Road, Palmarsh from the 9th to 13th November, two at West Hythe on the 10th November, five at Botolph's Bridge from the 21st to 23rd January 1958 and four at Sandling Park on the 31st January. In the 1958/59 winter there were four at Sandling Park on the 31st January 1959 and the following winter there were four at West Hythe on the 30th November 1959 and one at Hythe on the 19th February 1960. One was also seen at Folkestone on the 22nd November 1963.

Taylor *et al.* (1981) reported that by far the largest irruption during their review period (1952 to 1976) was in 1965/66, when in all probability around 1,000 birds were present in the county. This invasion included local maxima of 53 at Hythe on the 22nd November 1965 and 35 at Folkestone on the 24th November 1965. There were further singles at Folkestone on the 18th December 1967 and Hythe on the 29th November 1969, whilst a flock of 30 at Folkestone on the 19th December 1971 was noted by Taylor *et al* as one of the few large flocks recorded outside of one of the irruption years.

Four were seen in Folkestone Warren on the 27th February 1972 and one was at Folkestone on the 27th November 1975 but there were no further sightings until 1988, when one was again in Folkestone Warren on the 5th November, two were at Joyes Road (Folkestone) on the 11th December and two were at Surrenden Road, Cheriton from the 11th to the 20th December, whilst four were seen at West Hythe from the 13th to 18th January 1960.

Overall distribution

Figure 1 shows the distribution of all records of Waxwing by tetrad, with records in 19 tetrads (61%).

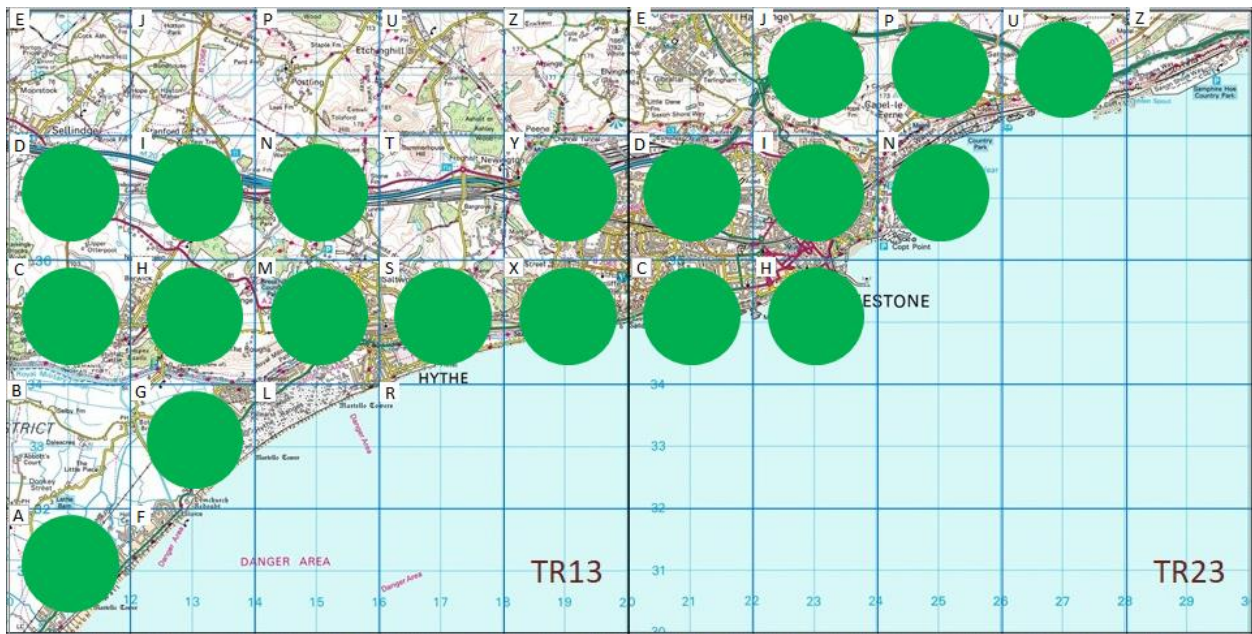


Figure 1: Distribution of all Waxwing records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

From early January 1996 there was an event that the Kent Bird Report for the year described as a “huge and widespread influx into western Europe”, with the largest numbers in the Folkestone and Hythe area. It was difficult to assess the total that was involved locally as flocks were mobile, and the degree of turnover was unclear. It was estimated that about 380, but perhaps many as 600 were seen. A summary of the irruption is provided below:

The first were seen at Shorncliffe Road near St. Mary's College (Cheriton) on the 19th January, when 11 were present, with 32 there the next day. This flock remained until the 4th February and peaked at 41 on the 29th January.

Other major flocks were recorded as follows:

- 15 at Tram Road (Folkestone) on the 5th February
- **65** at Sandgate Road (Folkestone) on the 7th-8th February
- 38 at Joyes Road (Folkestone) on 8th February
- At Marler Road (Cheriton), birds were present from 12th February to the 15th April, with notable counts of 30 on the 12th February, 18 on the 19th, 47 on the 25th, 16 on the 11th March, 27 on the 13th, 65 on the 19th, peak of **79** on the 20th, 30 on the 21st-22nd, 20 on the 26th, 28 on the 30th, 15 on the 3rd April, 18 on the 4th
- **70** at Church Road (Cheriton) on the 24th February, with 40 next day
- **60** at Holywell Avenue (Folkestone) on the 29th February
- About 20 at Capel Street (Capel-le-Ferne) in February
- 32 at Links Way (Cheriton) on the 7th March
- 31 at Coniston Road (Cheriton) on the 11th March, 10 there on 17th March
- 15 at Holywell Avenue (Folkestone) on the 15th March
- 28 at Shorncliffe Road (Folkestone) on the 17th March
- 19 at the Nailbox (Cheriton) on the 28th March
- 40 at Shorncliffe Road/Jointon Road (Folkestone) on the 28th March
- 11 at Avondale Road (Capel-le-Ferne) on the 31st March - 5th April, decreasing to 2 on the 8th April
- 33 at Hythe on the 2nd April
- 18 at Shorncliffe Road (Folkestone) on the 4th April
- 37 at Pennypot (Palmarsh) on the 7th April
- 20 at Sandgate Road (Folkestone) on the 8th April
- 22 at Cheriton Road (Cheriton) on the 12th April

Birds began to head back east towards their breeding areas during the last week of March and the early days of April, when several migrants were noted passing Capel Battery: four on the 29th March, eight on the 31st March, two on the 1st April and 13 on the 5th April.

The last two at Lympne on the 17th April were the latest that have been recorded locally to date.



Waxwing at Folkestone (Brian Harper)

The only record from the latter half of that year was one that flew over Cheriton on 27th November 1996 and there were no further sightings until 2001, when up to four were seen in Cheriton between the 8th and 13th January, and then 2003, when there were singles at Nickolls Quarry in January, Cheriton in February and Palmarsh in December. One was also seen in Folkestone in March 2005.

The 2008/09 winter saw a small influx, beginning with eight in the Park Farm area of Folkestone on the 20th December 2008, with this flock increasing to a peak of at least 30 on the 27th December, with 23 still present on the 5th January before it rapidly dissipated. There were a further three near Firs Lane (Cheriton) on the 6th January and six at Joyes Road (Folkestone) on the 8th January 2009.

In February 2010 three were noted at Sandgate on the 14th, whilst later that year three flew over Abbotscliffe on the 24th October and another arrived in off the sea there the following day. These are the only October records to date and were perhaps a harbinger of the irruption of a quite unprecedented scale that was to follow, that produced spectacular numbers and Kent's largest ever recorded counts. A summary of the irruption, which involved an absolute minimum of 850 birds, is provided below:

A flock of 30 were found in Hythe on the 1st December 2010 and these increased to 39 on the 3rd, 51 on the 5th and peaked at an impressive **87** on the 13th. The birds generally favoured the Prospect Road area and delighted many observers however, with the berry supply diminished, a rapid decrease occurred mid-month though at least 11 were present to the month's end.

Meanwhile this flock was eclipsed by events at Park Farm in Folkestone, where ten were first noted on the 6th December. 12 were present on the morning of the 7th, increasing to 30 by the afternoon. A similar number were noted on the 8th when **97** were found by Grace Hill in Folkestone (the largest flock ever recorded in the area). There was no further sign of the Grace Hill flock and these presumably joined up with the Park Farm flock, which increased to **120** the following morning and continue to grow to **162** by the afternoon (a new county record). The 10th saw a further increase, to **170**, but it was the 11th which was the truly remarkable day: **246** were counted in the early morning, increasing to **280** by late morning, **410** by mid-afternoon and up to **500** by late afternoon.

This massive flock quickly devoured the local berries and very soon they began to disperse. **310** were still present early the next morning but decreased to **200** by midday and the last 25 were seen flying off early on the 13th. It seems likely that **200** which were seen in Cheriton on the 13th involved some of the same birds but thereafter relatively few were seen in Cheriton or Folkestone, though 50 flew over Broadmead Village on the 31st December. Elsewhere, **118** were seen flying east over the Willop Outfall on the 10th December, 9 were in the Westenhanger area on the 21st December and up to 5 were at Lympe in December.

Ones at twos were seen in Hythe and Folkestone in early January before a flock of 25 appeared at Guildhall Street between on the 7th January (decreasing to 15 by the 10th, but with eight remaining until the 1st February) and ten were at Pond Hill Road (Cheriton) on the 13th, with 13 at Hillside Farm (Hawkinge) on the 15th, 12 at Foreland Avenue (Folkestone) on the 16th and eight at Shorncliffe Camp on the 23rd January.



Waxwings at Folkestone (Mike Gould)



Waxwing at Hythe (Brian Harper)

Another early arrival, when four arrived in off the sea at Abbotscliffe on the 6th November 2012, heralded the beginning of the third largest irruption to date, a summary of which is provided below:

Following the four that flew in off the sea at Abbotscliffe on the 6th November, a further 124 birds were noted in November and December 2012 as follows:

- 22 south-west over Capel-le-Ferne Café on the 18th November
- 1 over Victoria Grove (Folkestone) and 15 at Dover Hill (Folkestone) on the 30th November
- 37 at the Battle of Britain Memorial (Capel-le-Ferne) on the 8th December
- 3 at Browning Place (Folkestone) on the 11th December
- 9 at the Eurotunnel complex (Cheriton) on the 16th December
- 14 at Cheriton Parc on the 18th December, increasing to 24 the next day
- 1 over Cheriton Road (Cheriton) on the 21st December
- 2 over Church Road (Cheriton) and 10 over the Willop Outfall on the 26th December

Up to 116 were then recorded in early winter 2013. On the 2nd January six were seen at the junction of Archer Road and Canterbury Road, (Folkestone), whilst the following day eight were at Hill Road (Folkestone) and a flock of about 20 were seen by the A20 near Coombe Farm. A flock of 11 were at Churchill Avenue (Folkestone) on the 15th January and 20 were seen along the canal east of Twiss Road (Hythe) on the 25th January, whilst eight were at Seabrook the following day (A. Jupp), with eight, possibly the same, at Hythe Ranges later that afternoon.

In March 15 were at the junction of Grimstone Avenue and Westbourne Gardens (Folkestone) on the 2nd and between ten and 15 were seen at the junction of Surrenden Road and Wells Road (Cheriton) on the 15th (L. Harper). Finally ten were reported on Brockman Road (Folkestone) on the 13th April.

The total for this influx was estimated to be 244 but this does not allow for any duplication apart from obvious cases where flocks were seen on consecutive days at the same site however, in contrast to other influx years, few flocks stayed for any length of time, with most moving quickly on.

There were no further sightings until January 2017, when 20 were seen at Hythe on the 8th (with up to intermittently until the 13th), six were seen near the Leas Cliff Hall (Folkestone) on the 15th and up to 25 were at Nickolls Quarry on the 16th, whilst in 2019 there were six at Foord Road (Folkestone) on the 11th February and seven in the Enbrook Valley area between the 3rd and 6th February.

It does seem that irruptions might be becoming larger and more frequent and Balmer et al (2013) stated that it appeared that Waxwings are becoming more regular winter visitors to Britain.



Waxwings at Folkestone (Steve Ashton)



Waxwing at Hythe (Martin Casemore)



Waxwing at Hythe (Nigel Webster)

Click [here](#) to watch a local video recording of two at Hythe on the 13th January 2017 (Ian Roberts).

References

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Acknowledgements

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Waxwings at Folkestone (David Walker)