

# Desert Wheatear

*Oenanthe deserti*

Category A

Very rare vagrant.

1 record

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

Breeds in desert regions of North Africa from Morocco to the Middle East and in central Asia from Iran to Mongolia and northern China. Some North African birds are resident but most winter in the Sahara and Sahel region of North Africa. Asian breeders winter in the Arabian Peninsula to north-west India.

*Kent status (KOS 2021):*

Rare vagrant.

British (BBRC) records to end 2020: 164

Kent (KOS) records to end 2020: 16

It is a rare vagrant to Britain with on average between 4 and 5 records per annum currently, with some indications that it is occurring with greater frequency. In Kent it has occurred on 16 occasions, all since 1989 (BBRC no date; Holt *et al.* 2021; KOS no date).

The only local record was identified by Dale Gibson at Folkestone Warren on the 28<sup>th</sup> March 1998. An account of the record is provided below. The record by year is shown in figure 1.

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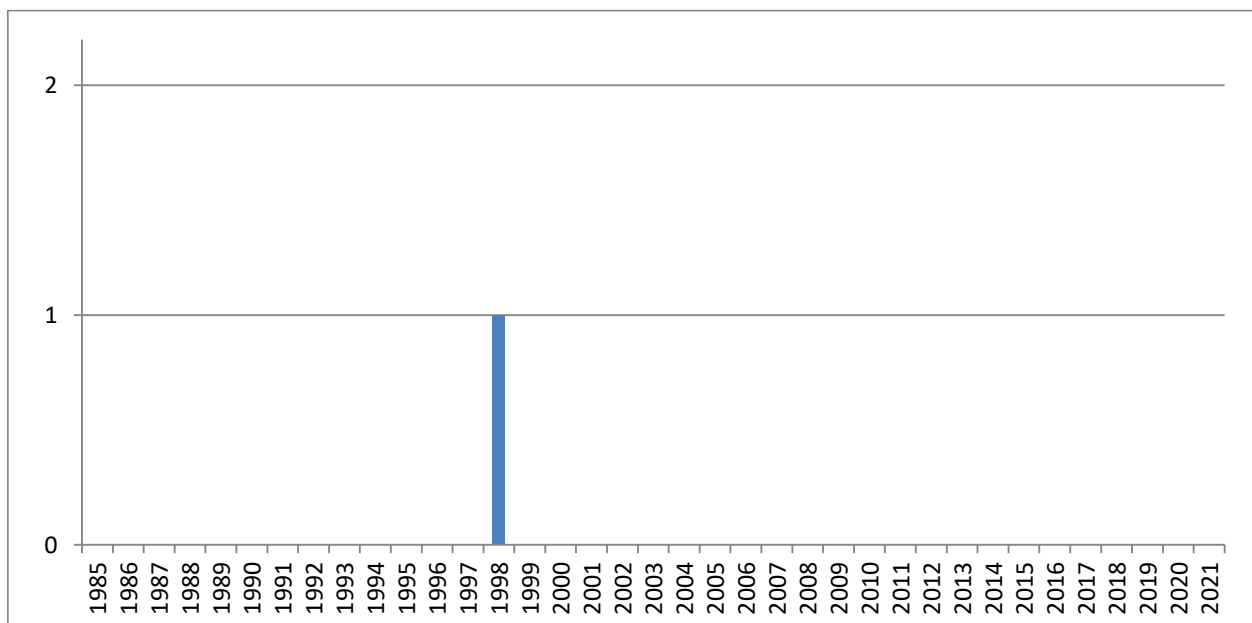


Figure 1: Desert Wheatear records at Folkestone and Hythe

The record by week is given in figure 2.

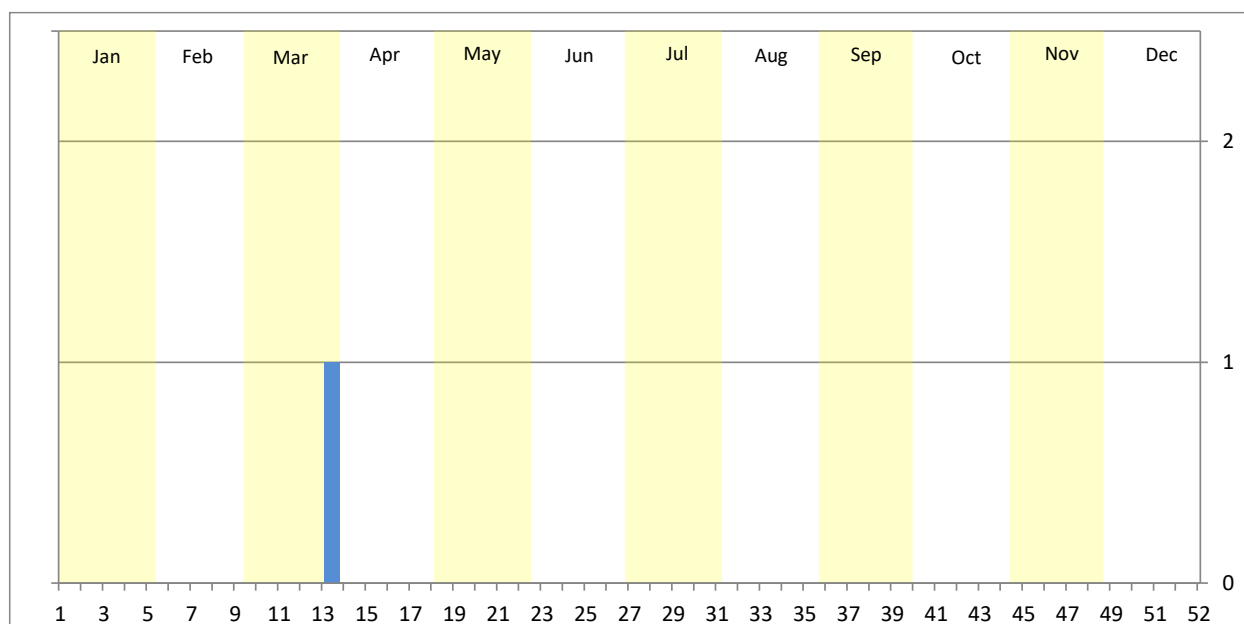


Figure 2: Desert Wheatear records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Figure 3 shows the location of the record by tetrad.

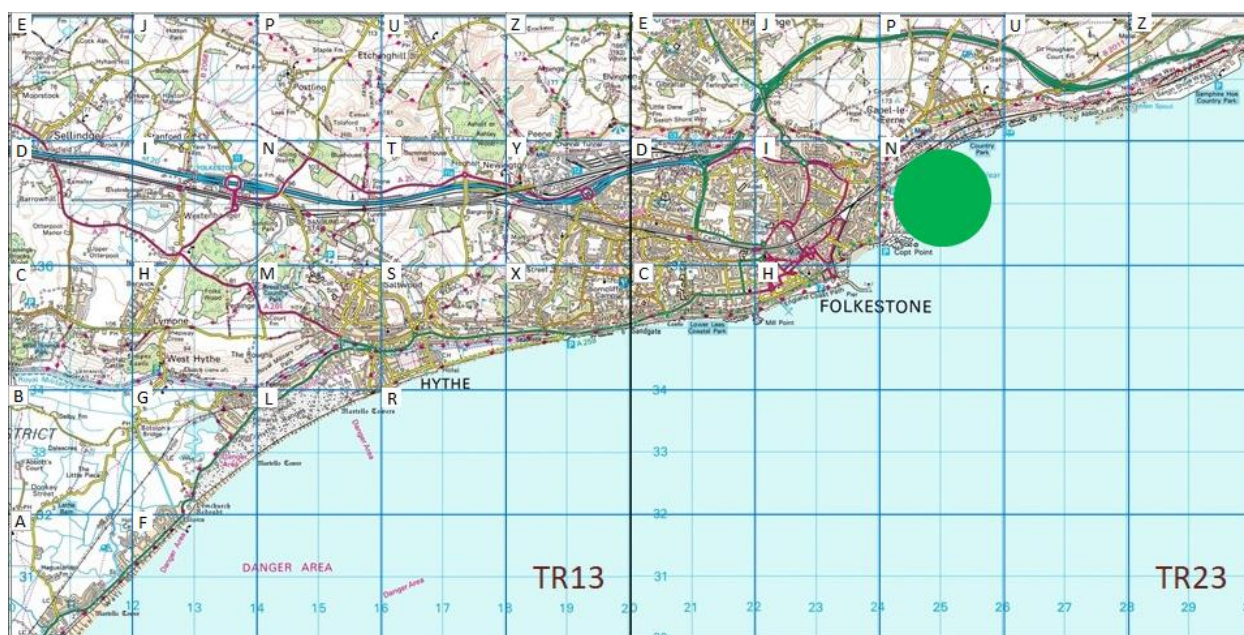


Figure 3: Distribution of all Desert Wheatear records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Confirmation of the only area record is as follows:

**1998** Folkestone Warren, adult male, 28<sup>th</sup> March, video recorded (D. A. Gibson, J. A. Gibson, I. A. Roberts).

An account of the first area record is given below.

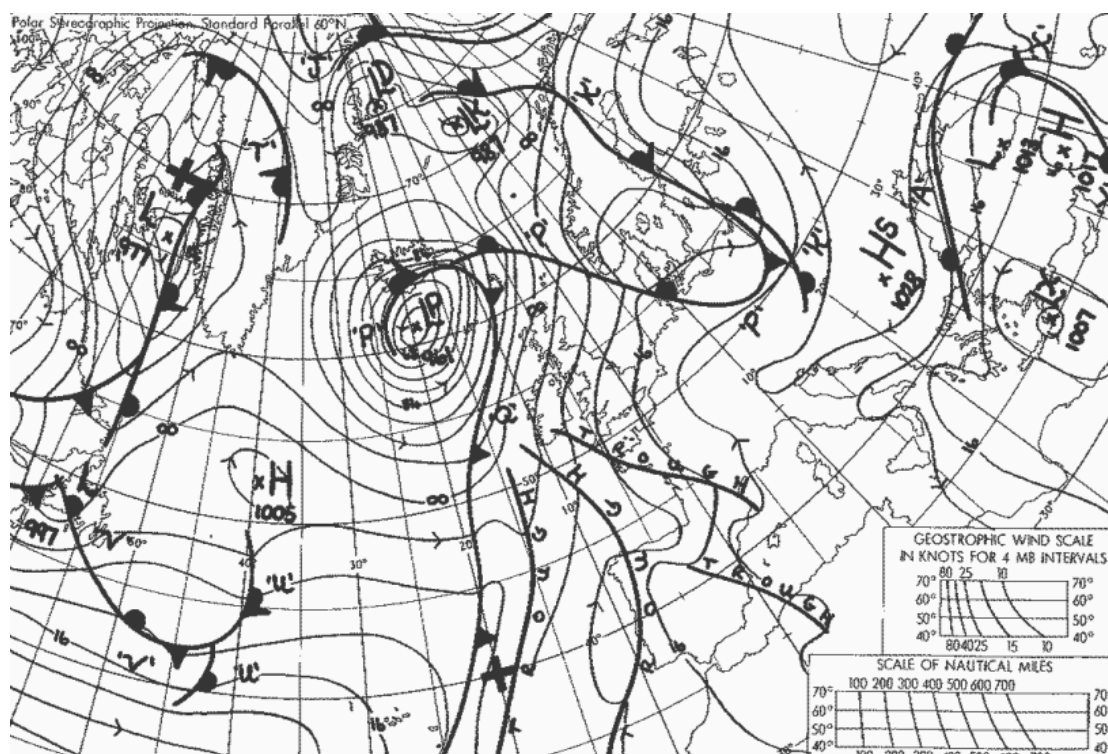
## Desert Wheatear at Folkestone Warren 28<sup>th</sup> March 1998

By Dale Gibson

### Weather conditions:

SSW force 4-5, with dull and misty conditions in the morning, becoming calm and warm with a light E-SE breeze about force 2-3, c.3/8 high cloud and moderate visibility to sea.

The synoptic chart for the 28th March 1998 shows a fairly complex pattern with a ridge of high pressure producing a 'window' of clear weather from north-east Africa across central Europe to Britain in between a front and a series of troughs.



These conditions produced a large arrival of migrants in Kent which included almost 1,000 Redwings, 29 Goldcrests, 9 Chiffchaffs, 5 Black Redstarts and 3 Northern Wheatears in the Folkestone and Hythe area. Elsewhere there was an unprecedented total of at least 300 Black Redstarts around the Kent coast (including 150 at Foreness) and huge numbers of winter thrushes at St. Margaret's Bay. More unusual arrivals also included single Bluethroats at Foreness and Pegwell Bay, and a Serin at Dungeness.

### Circumstances of the find:

While walking back to my car on the afternoon of the 28<sup>th</sup> March 1998, after birding at Capel-le-Ferne, I was called over by a chap who had been paragliding from the Gun Site down on to the concrete apron at Folkestone Warren. He asked if I was bird-watching, then mentioned that he'd noticed a wheatear on the apron where he had landed. He thought its throat looked darkish but as it was distant, and he had no bins, he couldn't be sure.

I drove the couple of miles down to the Warren, and, after about 15 minutes searching, I noticed a pale-looking passerine on the platform facing away from me. I walked towards the bird to get a closer look and watched in amazement as it turned around. I screamed "Oh my God!" as the bird showed all the characteristics of a male Desert Wheatear (a species I had seen twice before) - black throat, blackish wings and totally black tail, with the rest of the plumage being a pale sandy colour.

After watching for a short time I ran up to the nearest phone box, and phoned Ian Roberts and Jamie Gibson who arrived within a few minutes. We all enjoyed superb views for the next twenty minutes or so in good light, with the bird as close as about 40 feet away. Jamie managed to record some reasonable footage on his camcorder. We then phoned a few local birders and let Birdline know.

The following morning we arrived before dawn, but there was no sign of the bird after a thorough search. Although there was a report of it flying along the cliffs later in the day, it seems unlikely. As mentioned below it is possible that it had relocated to Reculver in the north of the county.

#### **Description of the bird:**

Size, shape, jizz: This was a rather small, compact-looking wheatear which was fairly tame and not concerned with us all watching. It had an unusual habit whilst catching insects of hopping and turning 90 degrees all in one movement, which was something I don't recall seeing from Northern Wheatear. It also had a rather short tail compared with Black-eared Wheatear.

Head and upperparts: Very contrasting, with black face and throat and a short dark line connecting the black throat to the blackish wings. The wings and wing-coverts were black with pale sandy-coloured fringes to the flight feathers, the tertials appearing more broadly fringed. The tail was all black, and lacked the distinctive 'T' shape of other wheatear species. The rump was pale buffish in colour, with the back, nape and crown pale sandy. It also showed a paler whitish supercilium and a paler line on the outer coverts.

Underparts: Pale, whitish underparts, with a peachy cast to the upper breast.

Bare parts: The bill was rather small and dagger-like, and it and the legs were blackish.

Age, sex: Adult male.

#### **Comments on the record:**

This was the fifth county record and appears in the 2000 Kent Bird Report (KOS, 2002) and the 2001 BBRC report (Rogers *et al.* 2002) (as the original description was lost in circulation). It was considered to possibly be the same bird as one found at Reculver the following day.

#### **References**

British Birds Rarities Committee (BBRC). Statistics. [www.bbrc.org.uk/main-information/statistics](http://www.bbrc.org.uk/main-information/statistics) (accessed 2022).

Holt, C., French, P. & the Rarities Committee 2021. Report on rare birds in Great Britain in 2020. *British Birds* 114: 570-628.

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Rogers, M. J. & the Rarities Committee 2002. Report on rare birds in Great Britain in 2001. *British Birds* 95: 476-528.

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

#### **Acknowledgements**

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