

Cuckoo

Cuculus canorus

Category A

Declining breeding summer visitor and passage migrant.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Very widely distributed as a summer visitor across Europe and Asia. The West Palearctic population winters in Africa, mainly south of the equator. There have been widespread declines reported in the second half of the twentieth century, mainly in the north-west of its range, including Britain, with habitat loss thought to be a major factor.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

In Kent it is a widespread but declining breeding summer visitor and passage migrant.

The Cuckoo 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 "very numerous and generally distributed throughout the county", so there can be little doubt that it was to be found locally.



Cuckoo at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)



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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 Cuckoo at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was not confirmed in any tetrads but there was probable breeding in three and possible breeding in 12 more. 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	6	(19%)	7	(23%)	12	(39%)
Probable/Confirmed	4	(13%)	14	(45%)	3	(10%)
Total	10	(32%)	21	(68%)	15	(48%)
Change			+11	(+Y%)	-6	(+Y%)

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	+110%	-29%	+50%
Kent	+28%	-27%	-6%

Clements *et al.* (2015) reported that Cuckoos have been in decline since the 1980s (according to Breeding Bird Surveys), with abundance falling most in south-east England, so the results of the first atlas appear to present a considerable underestimate of distribution. The second atlas, even though the decline had commenced, found a presence in nearly 70% of tetrads, whilst in TR13 it was found in every tetrad except three (TR13 L, R and Y), with only three instances of possible breeding in TR23.

The third atlas showed a reduction in occupied tetrads and this was far more marked for probable/confirmed breeding than for possible breeding, which perhaps reflects different interpretations of the definitions: as a brood parasite, the Cuckoo is unique in Britain in its breeding behaviour.

TR13 continues to be the stronghold of the species, however in this hectad the disappearance from the inland tetrads TR13 D, J, P, U and Z (all of which had at least “probable” breeding in the second atlas) is striking. This mirrors the results of the county atlas, where Clements *et al.* reported “a clear pattern of losses on the North Downs, while the species persisted in wetland areas”.

They considered that “this may suggest that Cuckoos that parasitize Reed Warblers are faring better than those that use Dunnocks as hosts, perhaps linked to changes in those species’ breeding cycles”. The resident Dunnock (the most frequent host in drier habitats) is far more likely to have advanced its breeding cycle in response to local conditions than the migrant Reed Warbler (the most frequent host in wetland habitats).

A possible mismatch with the breeding cycles of host species, perhaps linked to climate change, has been suggested as one of the drivers of population decline. A reduction in large insect prey and habitat loss are other possible drivers, and the latter is certainly attributable to some losses, e.g. TR23 D where it formerly bred in Biggin’s Wood.



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It has continued to decline with just one or two pairs now present in recent years, with the Nickolls Quarry having been the most reliable site although this habitat too is now in the process of being lost due to development.

Overall distribution

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

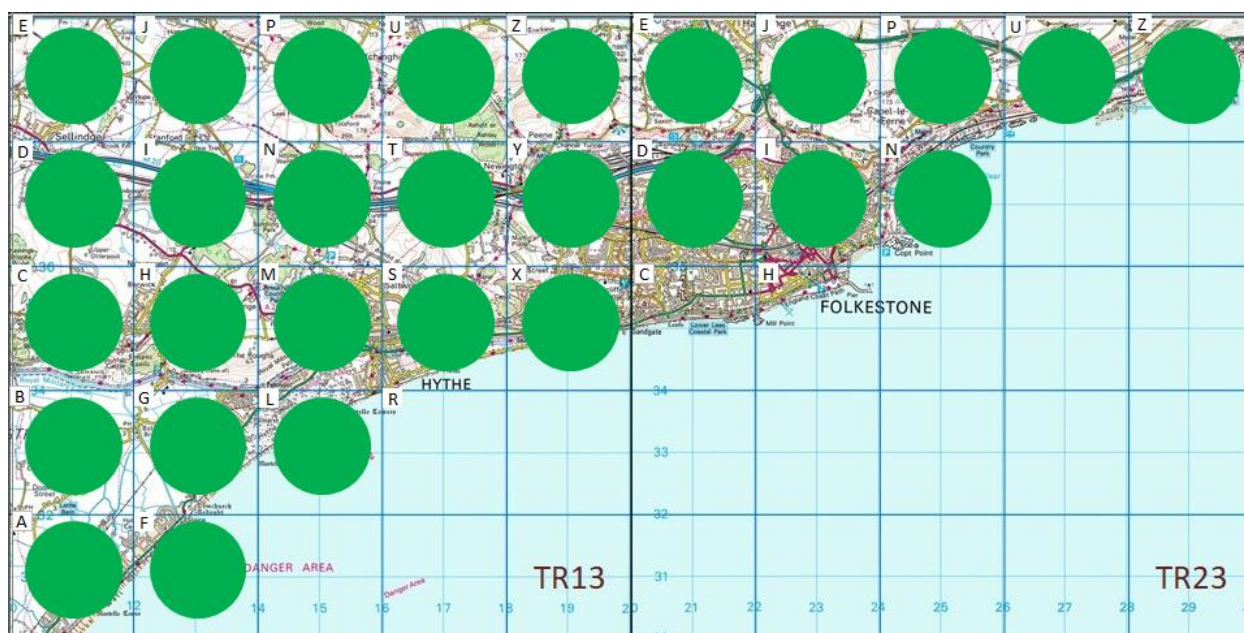


Figure 2: Distribution of all Cuckoo records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Arrivals can occur as early as the last few days of March and there have been four records in this month: one at Hythe on the 27th (in 2001), one at Samphire Hoe from the 28th to the 30th (1998), one at Sandling Park on the 31st (in 1958) and one at Hythe on the 31st (in 2009).

March records are exceptional and it remains scarce during the first fortnight of April, so that the following sightings are also of note: one at Nickolls Quarry on the 2nd (in 2008), one at Hythe on the 5th (in 1953), singles on the 10th at Hythe (in 1956) and Copt Point (in 1995), one at Copt Point on the 13th (in 1979) and singles on the 14th at Nickolls Quarry (in 2000), Hythe (in 2002) and Hythe Roughs (in 2013).



Cuckoo at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)

Sightings during the second half of the month are more commonplace and the mean arrival date over the previous decade was the 20th April.

Adults begin to leave in early July. The mean departure date over the previous decade was the 22nd July however passage can continue through August, with the great majority of the later birds being juveniles. There have only ever been six sightings in September: one at Church Hougham on the 2nd (in 2014), one at Abbotscliffe from the 4th to the 14th (in 1992), one at Seabrook on the 6th (in 2017), one at Abbotscliffe on the 10th (in 2022), one at Folkestone on the 19th (in 1993) and one at Copt Point on the 21st (in 1984).



Cuckoo at Beachborough Lakes (Steve Tomlinson)



Cuckoo at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)

Click [here](#) to listen to a local audio recording of one singing at Nickolls Quarry on the 12th May 2015 (Ian Roberts).

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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