

Swallow

Hirundo rustica Category A
Breeding summer visitor and passage migrant.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998; Balmer et al. 2013):

Breeds virtually throughout Europe and Asia except the extreme north, also across much of North America. Most European birds are long-distance migrants, crossing the Sahara to winter, but small numbers remain in North Africa and southern Spain. There are occasional, but increasingly frequent, records further north to Britain in the winter months. Nationally the Swallow has the most extensive distribution of any summer migrant in Britain and Ireland.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

It is a common and widespread summer visitor and passage migrant in Kent.



Swallow at Saltwood Castle (Brian Harper)

The Swallow 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 “abundant and generally distributed throughout the county”, 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.

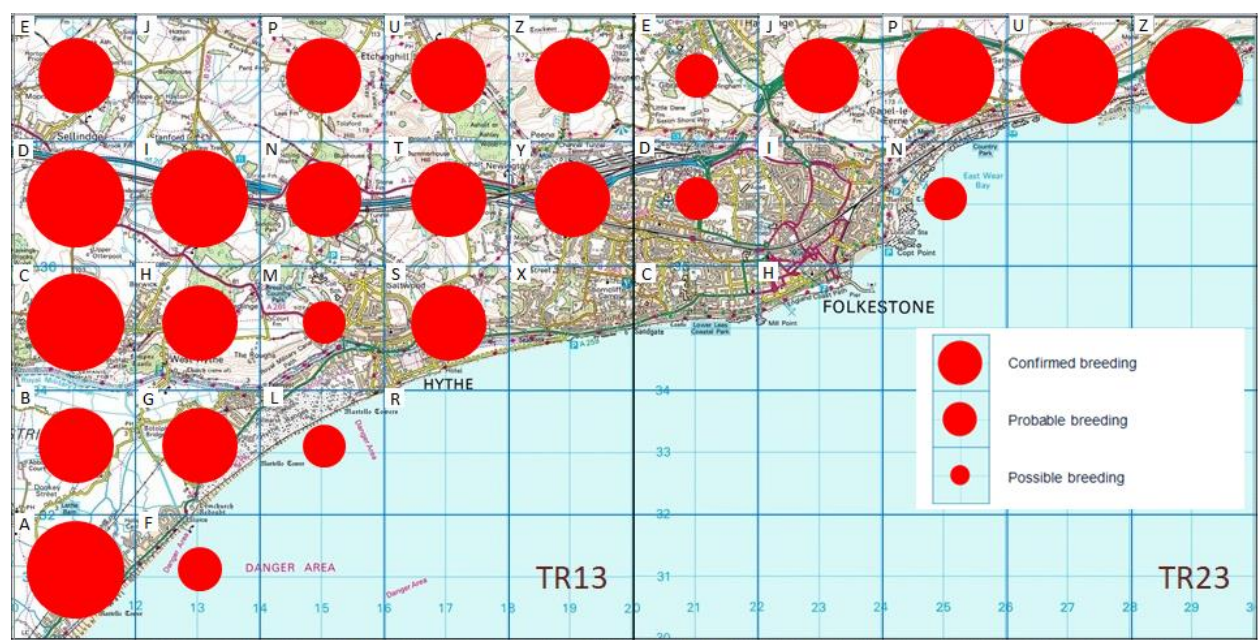


Figure 1: Breeding distribution of Swallow at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was confirmed in seven tetrads, with probable breeding in 12 more and possible breeding in six 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	2	(6%)	7	(23%)	6	(19%)
Probable/Confirmed	18	(58%)	21	(68%)	19	(61%)
Total	20	(65%)	28	(90%)	25	(81%)
Change			+8	(+40%)	-3	(-11%)

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	+40%	-11%	+25%
Kent	+11%	-2%	+9%

Henderson & Hodge felt that the full distribution map from the second atlas disguised a downward trend in numbers, citing unfavourable climatic conditions and a reduction in suitable nest sites, but Clements *et al.* (2015) remarked upon the BTO Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) trend since then, which has shown a slight upturn (with a 19% increase in south-east England between 1995 and 2012). They presented a very similar position in the most recent atlas in terms of total occupied tetrads (with just a 2% reduction) however the tetrads with probable/confirmed breeding had decreased by 18%.



Swallow at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)

Balmer *et al.* (2013) described how the abundance change map derived from the latest atlas results showed a pattern common to several long-distance migrants, including House and Sand Martin, whereby tetrad occupancy has increased in many parts of Ireland and northern Britain but decreased in south-east England. The causes of these regional differences are unclear. Ockendon *et al.* (2012) stated that given that this regional pattern is shared by several long-distance migrants with differing breeding ecology, it seems likely that factors acting on migration or in the wintering grounds are important. Climatic changes could also be a contributing factor.

Any decline locally has been far less apparent to date than with the other hirundines and the Swallow is by far the most common and widespread species, only absent as a breeding bird from the most built-up areas.

Overall distribution

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of Swallow by tetrad, with records in 31 tetrads (100%).

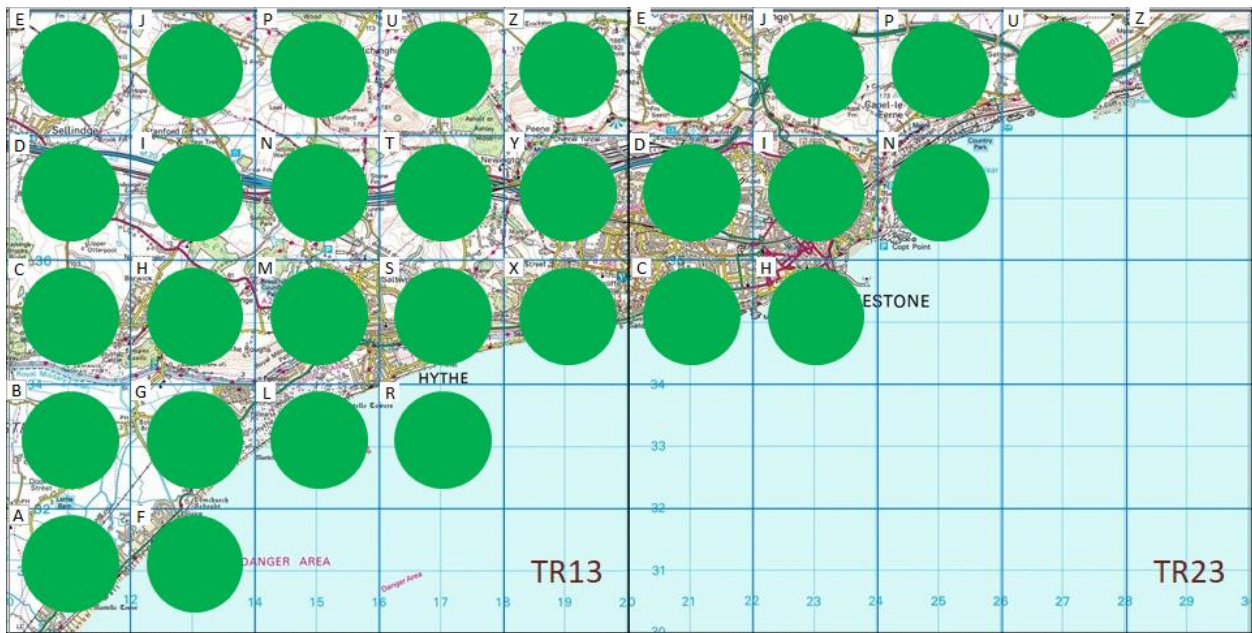


Figure 2: Distribution of all Swallow records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The earliest ever arrival date involved one seen at Hythe by Katharine Daniells on the 2nd March 2019. This was an exceptionally early appearance but part of a significant influx into Britain at this time which actually commenced in mid-February and saw ten arrive in Kent in that month, with several others in the county in early March. This broke an extremely long-standing record which had stood since 1952, when Colonel R. V. Argyle saw one at Hythe on the 10th March 1952.

Other early arrivals have involved two at Folkestone on the 12th March 2015, one at Nickolls Quarry on the 18th March 2002, singles at Nickolls Quarry on the 20th March 2005 and along the canal at Seabrook on the 20th March 2015, and singles at Hythe on the 21st March 2011 and along the canal at Seabrook on the 21st March 2015. One along the canal at Seabrook on the 23rd March 2015 and two at Lympne on the 23rd March 2016 were also noteworthy.



Swallow at Saltwood Castle (Brian Harper)



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A couple of very early arrivals in recent years have reduced the mean arrival date for the last decade to the 24th March and, although there are March records in most years, the first sighting is sometimes not until April. The highest count in March was five at Samphire Hoe on the 24th March 2013.



Swallow at Saltwood Castle (Brian Harper)



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The earliest double-figure count involved 20 at Nickolls Quarry on the 2nd April 2008 and counts of over 50 in April have occurred as follows:

66 in off the sea at Folkestone on the 28th April 1996
53 in off the sea at Capel-le-Ferne on the 23rd April 2000
51 in off the sea at Copt Point on the 27th April 2003
85 in off the sea at Copt Point on the 29th April 2003
300 at Nickolls Quarry on the 29th April 2012
75 at Nickolls Quarry on the 17th April 2015
60 at Nickolls Quarry on the 24th April 2016
60 at Nickolls Quarry on the 26th April 2017
68 in off the sea at Mill Point on the 29th April 2022

Spring passage tends to peak in May, when the following counts of over 150 have been noted:

188 in/east at Capel-le-Ferne on the 10th May 1998
153 in/east at Capel Battery on the 15th May 1999
161 in off the sea at Capel-le-Ferne on the 6th May 2003
150 at Nickolls Quarry on the 9th May 2010
160 east at Capel-le-Ferne on the 14th May 2011
300+ at Nickolls Quarry on the 2nd May 2012
c.300 at Nickolls Quarry on the 24th May 2013
154 in/west at Abbotscliffe on the 13th May 2014

Return passage can be apparent from late July and numbers increase during August, when counts have included 700 flying west at Abbotscliffe on the 30th August 1993, c.1,200 flying west at Nickolls Quarry on the 23rd August 2006 and c.4,500 flying west at the Dymchurch Redoubt on the 8th August 1951, before generally peaking in September. A number of the earlier movements were unfortunately not quantified but clearly involved large volumes of birds: on the 23rd September "a continuous stream moved south-west at Hythe Ranges during the morning - over the sea as far as could be seen", whilst "clouds of birds flew south-west over the sea" there on the 22nd September 1958 and 3,000 per hour were passing south over Hythe on the 13th September 1969.

On the 29th September 1984 a total 4,000 flew west at Copt Point, whilst on the 19th September 1992 around 2,000 per hour were moving south-west at Hythe Ranges during the morning. Movements of 3,000 or more in September since have been noted as follows:

8,200 east at Abbotscliffe on the 20th Sep 1995
5,000 east at Abbotscliffe on the 15th Sep 1996
3,500 west at Abbotscliffe on the 5th Sep 2000
5,000 at Abbotscliffe on the 23rd Sep 2000 (2,000 moving south-east and 3,000 feeding)
4,000 east at Princes Parade on the 21st Sep 2001
3,000 west at Abbotscliffe on the 27th Sep 2012
4,000 west at Samphire Hoe on the 23rd Sep 2013
4,000 at Abbotscliffe on the 19th Sep 2015
7,500 west at Abbotscliffe on the 20th Sep 2015
10,000 at Samphire Hoe on the 20th Sep 2015
c.5,000 south at Beachborough Ponds on the 14th Sep 2018 ("at least 10,000 Swallows and House Martins")
3,000 west at Abbotscliffe on the 12th Sep 2019



Swallow at Hythe (Ian Roberts)



Swallow at Casebourne Farm, Horn Street (Ian Roberts)

Numbers tend to dwindle during October but 3,000 flew east at Hythe on the 1st October 2000, c.5,000 (an "estimated flock of c.10,000 Swallows/martins") flew east over Hythe "ahead of a weather front" on the 2nd October 1984, 2,165 flew east over Cheriton on the 9th October 1998, 2,070 flew west at Abbotscliffe on the 10th October 1998 and 3,000 flew west at Copt Point on the 16th October 1984. The latest ever four-figure count involved 1,100 flying east at Folkestone on the 25th October 1994, whilst the latest three-figure count involved 150 at Mill Point on the 29th October 1985 and the latest double-figure counts at a single site were 10 at Hythe on the 11th November 1951 and 25 at Nickolls Quarry on the 11th November 2022, although later that year there were totals of ten across the area on the 12th November and 12 (five at Nickolls Quarry and seven at West Hythe) on the 19th November.

Swallows are comparatively late-departing migrants that are leaving later with growing frequency (Balmer *et al.*). The mean departure date over the last decade was the 15th November and there have been December records in nine years, with the latest ever sightings on the 8th December (in 1955 and 2015):

Two at Hythe on the 1st December 1953
Two at Sandgate on the 3rd December 1955 and one at Hythe on the 8th December 1955
One at Sandgate on the 2nd December 1967
One at Hythe on the 6th December in the "early 1980s"
One at West Hythe on the 2nd December 2002
Two at Samphire Hoe on the 5th December 2012
One at Princes Parade on the 8th December 2015
One at Botolph's Bridge on the 6th December 2020
One at Nickolls Quarry on the 4th December 2022



Swallows at Saltwood Castle (Brian Harper)



Swallows at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)



Swallow at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)

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Acknowledgements

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