

Siberian/Stejneger's Stonechat

Saxicola maurus/stejnegeri

Very rare vagrant.

1 record, 1 bird

World/British distribution (Holt et al. 2021):

The nominate form of Siberian Stonechat (*S. m. maurus*) breeds in Russia, western Siberia, north-west Mongolia and northern China, south to the Tien Shan mountains, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. It winters from Iran to northern India. The form *S. m. hemprichii* ("Caspian Stonechat") breeds from the Caspian Sea region to the lower reaches of the Volga and Ural rivers, migrating south-west to winter in south-west Asia, the Arabian Peninsula and north-east Africa. Other races occur in the Caucasus region (*S. m. variegatus*), the Himalayas (*S. m. indicus*) and in western China (*S. m. przewalskii*). Stejneger's Stonechat breeds from central Siberia eastwards to Sakhalin Island, and south to north-east Mongolia, north-east China and Japan. It winters in north-east India and southern China, south to the Malay Peninsula, Taiwan, the Philippines and Borneo.

Kent status (KOS 2022):

Kent status.

British (BBRC) records to end 2020: There have been ten national records that have been confirmed as Stejneger's Stonechat, 22 confirmed as Siberian Stonechat and 427 undetermined records of Siberian/Stejneger's Stonechat.

Kent (KOS) records to end 2020: There has been one confirmed record of Siberian Stonechat in the county and 12 undetermined records of Siberian/Stejneger's Stonechat.

The Stonechats breeding in the Palearctic were until comparatively recently considered to be a single, polytypic species: the Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquata* (e.g. Snow & Perrins 1998). This complex was then divided into three polytypic species: European Stonechat *S. rubicola* (comprising forms *rubicola* and *hibernans*), Siberian Stonechat *S. maurus* (comprising six forms: *maurus*, *stejnegeri*, *variegatus*, *hemprichii*, *indicus* and *przewalskii*) and African Stonechat *S. torquata* (comprising around 15 forms). These changes were adopted by the British Ornithologist's Union's Records Committee (BOURC 2012), following recommendations made by Sangster *et al.* (2011).

Meanwhile, the taxon *stejnegeri* had been proposed as a cryptic species in its own right, having been described as basal to all Palearctic stonechats and not the closest relative of Siberian Stonechat, from which it is genetically highly divergent. Since 2019, following the adoption by BOU of the IOC World Bird List (IOC 2019), this taxonomic change has also been followed for the British List. Consequently, Siberian Stonechat now comprises five forms and Stejneger's Stonechat is monotypic. Collectively these may be referred to as "eastern stonechats".

As Stoddart & Collinson (2019) stated, the BBRC has currently adopted "a cautious approach and considers only male Siberian Stonechats of the subspecies *S. m. hemprichii* to be separable in the field". All other "eastern stonechats" will be, "unless supported by genetic analysis, accepted as Siberian/Stejneger's Stonechat". Thus, at the end of 2021 the vast majority (93%) of the British records of "eastern stonechat" are currently treated as Siberian/Stejneger's Stonechat, with only 7% assignable to species (BBRC no date).

The first British record of an "eastern stonechat" was obtained on the Isle of May in October 1913 and has subsequently been ascribed to Siberian Stonechat based on genetic analysis, but there were no further records until 1960s, when four were logged. Records of "eastern stonechat" in Britain increased in frequency in the 1970s (with 34 recorded) and it has been recorded annually since 1974, with 9 per annum in the 1980s, a peak of 15 per annum in the 1990s and 7 per annum in the 2000s and 2010s. The first confirmed Stejneger's Stonechat occurred in 2012 but it may prove to be a regular vagrant, with nine records in the last six years, whilst there have been 15 confirmed Siberian Stonechats and 46 undetermined birds over the same period (BBRC no date).

The first county record of an "eastern stonechat" was seen at Dungeness in November 1986 and this was soon followed by singles at Foreness in September 1988, Dungeness in November 1989 and Foreness in 1990, before the first local record was found by Ian Roberts at Abbotscliffe on the 13th October 1991.

Further records followed in 1993, 1994, 1999, 2008, 2009 and 2012, before one at Halstow Marsh in November 2017 was confirmed by DNA analysis as the first county record of Siberian Stonechat. A further undetermined record followed at North Foreland in 2020.

The only local record is currently only acceptable as Siberian/Stejneger's Stonechat as it was not supported by DNA analysis.

The record by year is shown in figure 1.



Figure 1: Siberian/Stejneger's records at Folkestone and Hythe

The record by week is given in figure 2.

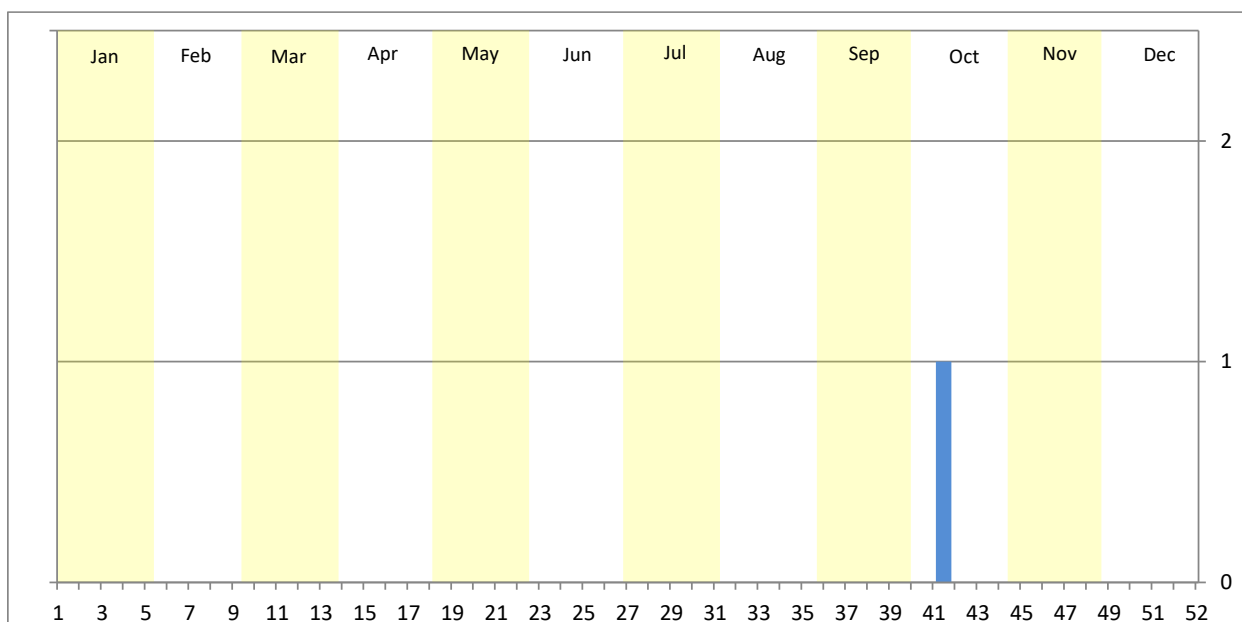


Figure 2: Siberian/Stejneger's records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Figure 3 shows the location of the record by tetrad.

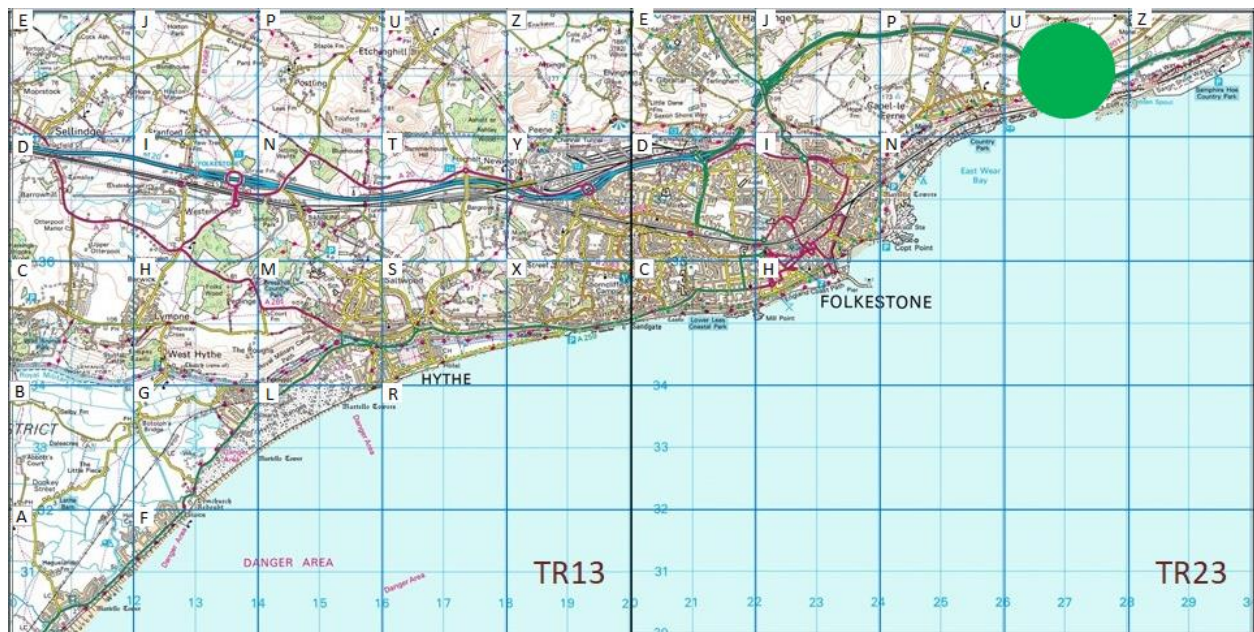


Figure 3: Distribution of all Siberian/Stejneger's records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Confirmation of the only area record of the species pair is as follows:

1991 Abbotscliffe, immature/female, 13th October (I. A. & C. D. Roberts)

An account of the first area record is given below.

Siberian/Stejneger's Stonechat at Abbotscliffe 13th October 1991

By Ian Roberts

Weather conditions:

A dry, mild day with a promising light (force 1-2) south-easterly wind and around 4/8^{ths} cloud cover.

Circumstances of the find:

The 13th October had a good feel about it and I had already logged three Ring Ouzels (in Abbot's Gully) by the time I reached the western end of the old rifle range at around 08:50. As I cut in towards the small bushes a chat flew up from the path and landed on some low vegetation. It immediately looked rather different from a Stonechat and I was reminded of the Siberian Stonechat which I had seen at Dungeness two years previously.

All of the visible features seemed to fit Siberian Stonechat: the pale supercilium, whitish throat, pale wing-bar and wing panel, and general paler overall colouration. Then the bird flew a couple of times and reasonable flight views were obtained, allowing the pale rump to be noted against a particularly dark and contrasting tail, and effectively confirming the identification.

I scribbled down some details and headed off to the nearest phone box to release the news. Returning about half an hour later I was relieved to find it still in the same area, where it remained for another 15 minutes before it began to slowly move west along the fence-line towards Abbot's Gully. It lingered in the gully for a while but then was lost to view, possibly disappearing down the cliff. In all I has spent about 50 minutes watching it, enjoying some very good views and managing to get some more comprehensive field notes. There were six Common Stonechats in the area to provide comparison.

My brother, Colin Roberts, did manage to successfully twitch the bird, but several other observers who arrived later in the morning and early afternoon were not able to relocate it.

Description of the bird:

Size, shape, jizz: Little discernible difference from Common Stonechat, apart from the primary projection being adjudged to be slightly longer.

Head and upperparts: Pale off-white supercilium, less obvious than that of Whinchat. Crown and ear-coverts brown, crown speckled darker. Mantle brown, faintly streaked dark. Wings dark brown with pale tips to primaries, pale fringes to tertiaries and secondaries (forming a prominent pale wing-panel), and pale tips to the primary coverts. There were also pale tips to the greater coverts which formed a pale wing-bar.

The rump was contrastingly pale orangey-buff, especially against the noticeably black tail (both above and below), which had a pale terminal fringe.

Underparts: Whitish throat, isabelline-buff breast, and rest of underparts pale buffish.

Bare parts: Bill and legs dark.

Comments on the record:

At the time of the sighting and for the subsequent 21 years, "Siberian Stonechat" was considered to be a sub-species of Common Stonechat, before it gained full species status. Since 2019 however it must now be considered to be an unassigned individual within the species pair Siberian/Stejneger's Stonechat.

The record was accepted by the KOS as the fourth county record (KOS 1995) and by the BBRC (Rogers *et al.* 1996) following a delay due to the paperwork being lost during assessment.

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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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