

Little Owl

Athene noctua

Category C1

Declining resident breeding species.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998; BTO 2020):

Widespread across lower and middle latitude Europe and eastwards across central Asia to northern China, also south into east Africa. Introduced into Britain in the nineteenth century, with the first successful release in Kent in 1874. Also introduced into New Zealand. It is sedentary, with dispersal amongst first-year birds, although most settle within 20km of their birthplace. Some adults may also make short dispersals in autumn and winter.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

In Kent it is a widespread resident that is perhaps declining in recent years.



Little Owl at Selby Farm, Lower Wall Road (Brian Harper)

The Little Owl was not included in Knight and Tolputt's "List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood" (1871) and Ticehurst (1909) was only able to list six records of presumed immigrants prior to 1874, when it was first introduced into Kent at Edenbridge. About 40 birds had been released there by 1880 and it soon spread and became established throughout the county in the early twentieth century (Taylor *et al.* 1981).

It is not known precisely when it first arrived in the local area but it was starting to reach nearby areas around the turn of the twentieth century, with Ticehurst noting that stragglers had reached "the Dover district some time prior to 1899" and Bilsington in 1906, whilst by 1914 it was reported to have become well established on Romney Marsh (Harrison 1953).



Little Owl at Beachborough (Steve Tomlinson)



Little Owl at West Hythe (Brian Harper)

The first documented records were not until the 1950s, when one was seen at Hythe Roughs on the 19th April 1953, with the first sightings at Hythe Ranges in 1957 and Nickolls Quarry in 1959 (Norman 2006; 2007). Taylor *et al.* described a widespread marked decline in numbers in the late 1950s/early 1960s, probably due to the effects of certain persistent organochlorine pesticides introduced into agriculture at this time. This decline combined with a paucity of observer coverage led to very few local reports in the 1960s or 1970s, but by the 1980s two pairs were known to breed on Hythe Roughs and it was regularly seen at Nickolls Quarry and in the Summerhouse Hill area, with frequent records from numerous locations since the 1990s.

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

Breeding was not confirmed in any tetrads but there was possible breeding in ten tetrads. The table below shows how this compares to previous atlases (Taylor *et al.*; 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	8	(26%)	9	(29%)	10	(32%)
Probable/Confirmed	0	(0%)	4	(13%)	0	(0%)
Total	8	(26%)	13	(42%)	10	(32%)
Change			+5	(+63%)	-3	(-23%)

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	+63%	-23%	+25%
Kent	-7%	+11%	+3%

The increase in occupied tetrads between the first and second atlases was perhaps a reflection of improved local coverage as at a county level the latter atlas suggested a slow decline in numbers. Clements *et al.* (2015) suggested that this decline may have continued, with much habitat loss due to urban development and clearance of orchards, and this appears to be reflected in the third atlas results. Balmer *et al.* (2013) cited a population decline of 40% across Britain during 1995 to 2010, with a retraction of range in south-west England and Wales, which they suggested was due to changing farming practices.

As figure 1 illustrates, the stronghold of this species during the most recent atlas was the Romney Marsh and the greensand ridge to the north, with a patchy distribution along the North Downs. From a peak of perhaps 13 breeding pairs in the second atlas there are about five to six pairs remaining in 2020.

Overall distribution

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of Little Owl by tetrad, with records in 17 tetrads (55%).



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

The Little Owl is strongly sedentary and generally site-faithful but undertakes limited post-natal movements spanning autumn and winter (Wernham *et al.* 2002). A local example of wintering site-fidelity was provided by an individual that returned to the cliff-face at Samphire in every winter between 2008/09 and 2011/12.



Little Owl at Hythe Roughs (Brian Harper)

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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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