

Swift

Apus apus

Category A

Breeding summer visitor and passage migrant.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

A very widespread breeding summer visitor across almost all of Europe and Asia eastwards to c.120°E. West Palearctic population winters in sub-Saharan Africa.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

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



Swift at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)

The Swift 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 "generally distributed throughout the county, being abundant and on the increase", so there can be little doubt that it was to be found locally. He also made mention that "many also make use of the crannies in the chalk cliffs about Dover".

Breeding atlas distribution

Figure 1 shows the breeding distribution by tetrad based on the results of the 2007-13 BTO/KOS atlas fieldwork.

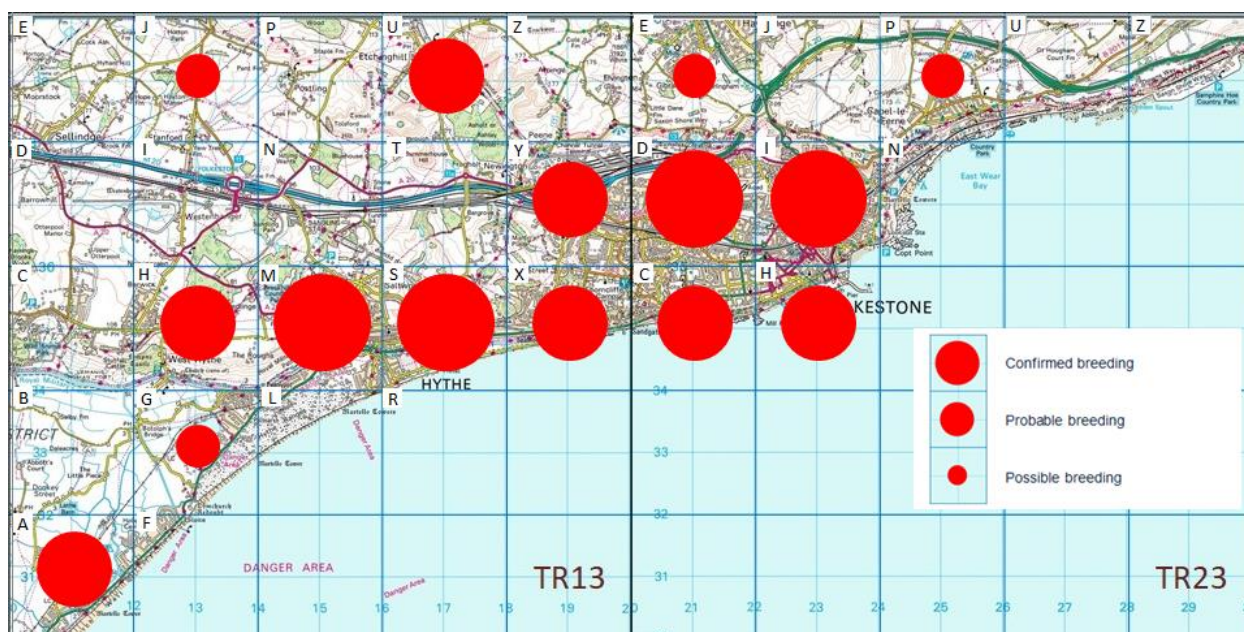


Figure 1: Breeding distribution of Swift at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was confirmed in four tetrads, with probable breeding in seven more and possible breeding in four 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	3	(10%)	16	(52%)	4	(13%)
Probable/Confirmed	9	(29%)	6	(19%)	11	(35%)
Total	12	(39%)	22	(71%)	15	(48%)
Change			+10	(+83%)	-7	(-32%)

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	+83%	-32%	+25%
Kent	+59%	-47%	-15%

The atlas results are difficult to interpret. There appears to have been a considerable increase between the first and second surveys, but this was driven by an increase in possible breeding, with the instances of probable/confirmed breeding decreasing, whilst the third atlas showed a marked overall decline from the second but the probable/confirmed instances almost doubled. Swifts tend to nest in urban and suburban areas but many of the records of possible breeding in the second atlas were in the more rural areas, and so perhaps related to migrant or feeding birds that were not necessarily in suitable nesting habitat. The results of the first and third atlases were actually very similar as regards the number and distribution of occupied tetrads, with a concentration around the built-up areas of Folkestone and Hythe.

Clements *et al.* (2015) warned that: “Swifts are a difficult species to monitor. Because of their extreme mobility, birds recorded during survey work are hard to categorise as local breeding unless their nest sites are located”.

Clements *et al.* also reported that the BTO Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) trend for south-east England showed a 47% decline over the period 1995-2012 and that “the second Kent atlas found Swifts to be widespread in the county, but the change map shows many losses”, and a reduction in the county population of around 50% was estimated. Loss of nest sites in Victorian dwellings and older and derelict industry due to property improvement and redevelopment was considered to perhaps be the cause. It is possible that a similar decline has occurred locally and is reflected in the results of the third atlas, and/or that the Swift has maintained the distribution of its core breeding range but decreased in numbers within it.

Overall distribution

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of Swift by tetrad, with records in 30 tetrads (97%).

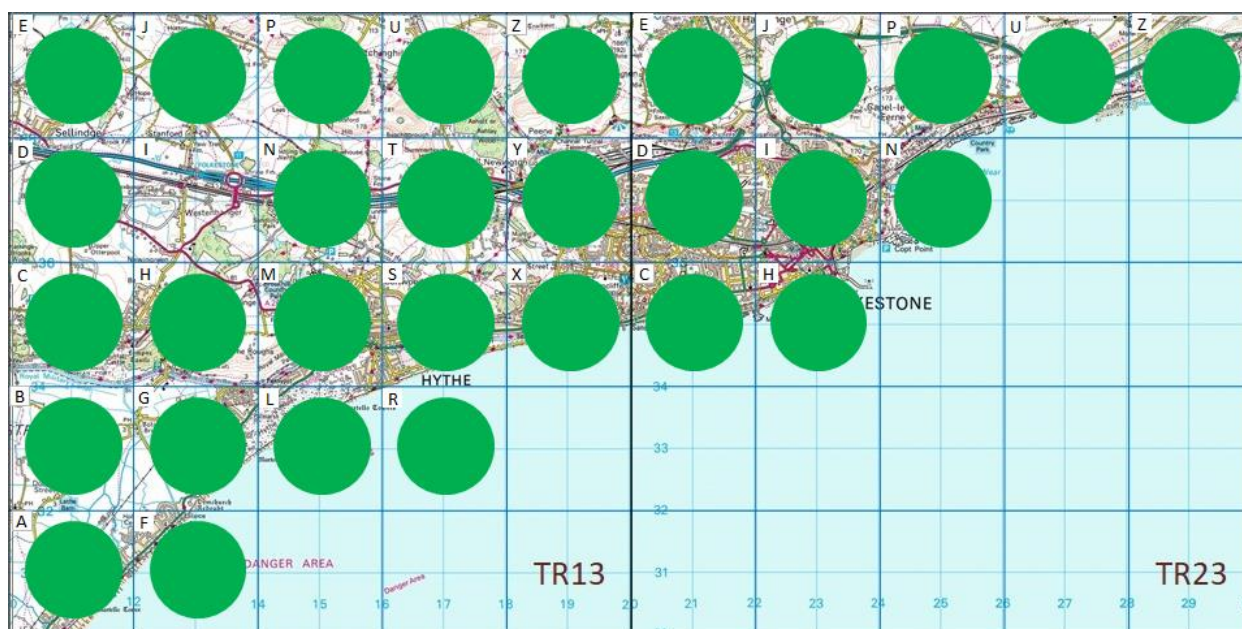


Figure 2: Distribution of all Swift records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The first record usually occurs in late April but occasionally not until early May. The earliest ever arrival date is the 18th April, when birds have been noted in three recent years: at Nickolls Quarry in 2015 and 2016, and near Sandling Station in 2018. Other notably early dates have been the 20th April 1985 (at Copt Point), 20th April 2015 (at Nickolls Quarry) and 21st April 1993 (at Folkestone), with sightings on the 22nd April in several years, whilst the mean arrival date over the most recent decade in the 23rd April.

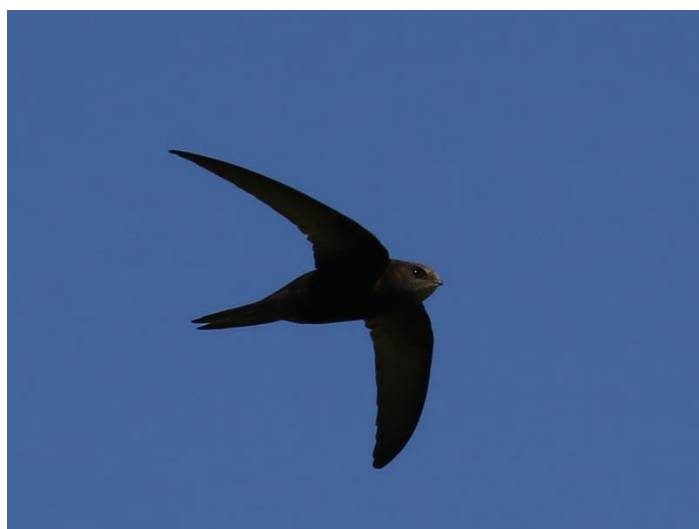
Although first arrivals in April are quite usual, the main arrival does not occur until May, and double-figure counts in this month are uncommon, with a peak of 25 at Nickolls Quarry on the 28th April 2001 and on the same date in 2003. Numbers can increase rapidly during the May and the earliest treble-figure count involved 178 flying east at Abbotscliffe on the 4th May 2012. Other notable counts in May have included 300 at Folkestone on the 11th May 1980, 527 at Copt Point on the 17th May 1996 and 1,132 flying in/east at Folkestone on the 18th May 1994.

Movements in June are usually in response to poor weather, when birds can move considerable distances to forage in more favourable conditions. Counts have included 800 flying over Capel-le-Ferne on the 13th June 1999, 864 flying west at Seabrook on the 29th June 2020, 960 flying east over Folkestone on the 19th June 1994, 988 flying west there on the 10th June 1994 and 1,550 flying west at Capel-le-Ferne on the 24th June 2000, but the largest numbers were involved in a spectacular event documented by Taylor *et al.* when under exceptionally heavy cloud and stormy rain in the evening of the 18th June 1971, “up to 2,000 screamed up and down a confined flight line in the centre of Folkestone town. Coming up into a force 8 wind, they are described as having hung in clusters of up to 100 on the walls of the Public Library”.

Even larger numbers can occur in July and early August, which may involve foraging birds or departing migrants (with emigration commencing early in July), and counts of 1,000 or more have been recorded on eight occasions:

- 1,660 west over Copt Point on the 9th August 1981
- 1,500 west at Abbotscliffe on the 4th August 1992
- 1,000 west at Abbotscliffe on the 16th August 1992
- 5,000 west at Abbotscliffe on the 26th July 1993
- 1,900 west over Copt Point on the 12th July 1996
- 2,400 west at Capel-le-Ferne on the 1st August 1997
- 1,000 feeding between Capel-le-Ferne and Creteway Down on the 14th to 15th July 1998
- 2,500 west over Copt Point on the 11th July 2000

Numbers decrease rapidly during the second half of August and the latest three figure count involved 175 flying west at Abbotscliffe on the 25th August 1997, whilst by September double-figure counts are unusual, although September 1992 saw a particularly late passage, when 26 flew west at Abbotscliffe on the 1st, with 39 west there on the 4th, 10 west there on the 9th and 11 west there on the 13th. There have only been three other counts of ten or more in September, with the latest being 13 flying west at Capel-le-Ferne on the 12th in 1998.



Swift at Hythe Roughs (Brian Harper)



Swift at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)

The mean departure date over the last ten years has been the 12th September and stragglers are frequently noted well into the month, although October records are rare, with sightings in just eight years: two at Abbotscliffe on the 1st in 2000, one at West Hythe on the 3rd in 1995, four at Folkestone on the 4th in 1971, two west at Abbotscliffe on the 5th in 1996, one west at the Aldergate Bridge on the 6th in 2021, one at Lympne on the 4th and 8th in 2020, one west at Capel-le-Ferne on the 8th in 2000, and one north over Abbotscliffe on the 15th October 2004.

Despite the scarcity of October records and the lack of any sightings in the second half of the month, there have been three in November: one at Nickolls Quarry on the 8th in 1998, one at Folkestone on the 9th in 1993 and the latest ever, which flew over William Nevin's house at Tanner's Hill, Hythe on the 16th in 1957.

There is also a record of a swift species (Common or Pallid) seen flying east over Folkestone on the 7th November 2018 that was not seen well enough to be specifically identified.



Swift at Hythe (Brian Harper)



Swift at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)

References

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Acknowledgements

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