

Whimbrel

Numenius phaeopus

Category A

Passage migrant, mainly in spring.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998; Holling et al. 2019):

Breeds across Fenno-Scandia and northern Russia, very locally into Siberia, and also in Alaska, parts of Canada, and Greenland and Iceland, with a small population of around 300 pairs in northern Scotland, principally in Shetland. Western Palearctic populations winter mainly in the Afrotropical region and on islands and coasts of the western Indian Ocean. Migrants pass through western Europe in spring and autumn.



Whimbrel at the Dymchurch Redoubt (Brian Harper)

Kent status (KOS 2021):

It is a regular passage migrant in Kent, with occasional winter records.

The Whimbrel was not included in Knight and Tolputt's "List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood" (1871), although Ticehurst considered it to be "a regular bird of passage through Kent in spring and autumn", and the first documented occurrence involved two seen flying east over Nickolls Quarry by Roger Norman on the 26th April 1952. Roger recorded further singles there on the 26th April 1957, the 28th April 1961 and the 18th July 1965 (Norman 2007). At nearby Hythe Ranges he noted "very small numbers of birds on passage" in spring in the 1950s and 1960s, with larger counts of 9 flying east there on the 27th April 1957 and 13 east on the 12th May 1957. All spring sightings fell between the dates of 25th April and 12th May, whilst two singles were noted in autumn, on the 18th July 1965 and 28th August 1957 (Norman 2006).

There are very few records from the 1970s and early 1980s, presumably due to a lack of local coverage, as regular seawatching from 1988 revealed it to be annual in occurrence.

Overall distribution

Figure 1 shows the distribution of all records of Whimbrel by tetrad, with records in 18 tetrads (58%).

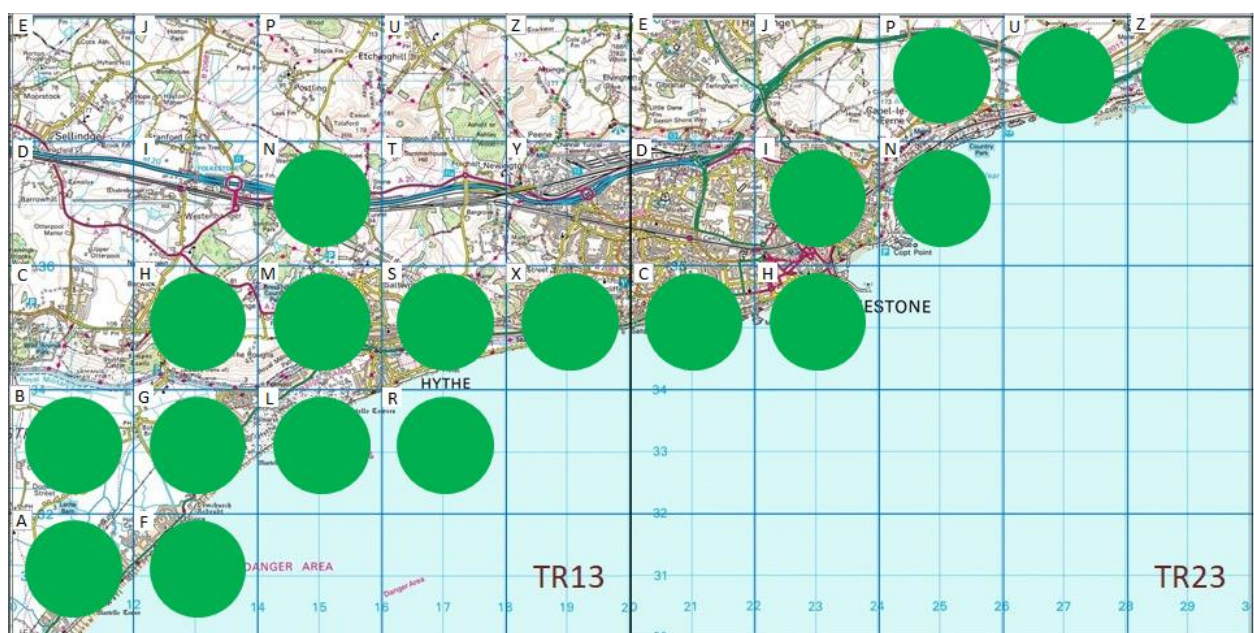


Figure 1: Distribution of all Whimbrel records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

It passes up-channel in some numbers in spring, with a total of 121 flying east past Mill Point between the 14th April and 6th May 1990. Further spring totals in the 1990s included 141 in 1991, 142 in 1996 and 159 in 1999, whilst since 2000 spring passage has comprised an average total of 162 birds per annum, with particularly high totals in 2001 (523), 2011 (230), 2017 (235), 2018 (328) and 2020 (250).

March records are rare, having been noted in just three years, with one flying east past Samphire Hoe on the 25th March 2011, one flying east past Seabrook on the 27th March 2020 and three at the Willop Basin on the 29th March 2021. The first migrants are usually seen in April, with a mean arrival date in the last decade of 10th April.



Whimbrel at Hotel Imperial Golf Course (Brian Harper)



Whimbrel at Hotel Imperial Golf Course (Brian Harper)



Whimbrel at Nickolls Quarry (Ian Roberts)



Whimbrel at the Willop Basin (Ian Roberts)



Whimbrels at Hotel Imperial Golf Course (Brian Harper)



Whimbrel at Princes Parade (Brian Harper)

Numbers increase during the second half of April, when the largest movement has involved 70 flying east past Mill Point on the 18th April 2020, whilst the peak passage typically occurs during the first ten days of May, when there have been 12 further day counts of 50 or more (with the two largest counts occurring during the record spring passage in 2001):

82 east past Mill Point on the 8th May 1991
53 east past Mill Point on the 10th May 1991
87 east past Copt Point on the 10th May 1993
140 east past Copt Point on the 10th May 1996
167 east past Copt Point on the 7th May 2001
230 east past Copt Point on the 8th May 2001
53 east past Mill Point on the 2nd May 2004
100 east past Mill Point on the 8th May 2010
87 east past Copt Point on the 3rd May 2011
68 east past Samphire Hoe on the 7th May 2017
71 east past Samphire Hoe on the 6th May 2018
56 east past Samphire Hoe on the 7th May 2018



Whimbrels at Hythe (Glenn Tutton)



Whimbrel at Folkestone Pier (Brian Harper)

Whilst passage is primarily coastal, Roger Norman has considered it to be a regular spring migrant at Nickolls Quarry since coverage recommenced in 1990. Counts have typically been in single figures but larger flocks have occurred on six occasions: 16 flying east on the 6th May 1995, 12 flying north on the 27th April 1997, 15 flying north on the 7th May 1999, 24 flying east on the 10th May 2002, 24 on the 3rd May 2009 and 13 on the 2nd May 2012.



Whimbrel at the Dymchurch Redoubt (Brian Harper)



Whimbrel at the Dymchurch Redoubt (Brian Harper)

Double figure flocks from other inland sites have comprised 17 flying north-east over Capel-le-Ferne village on the 9th May 1993, ten flying east over Hythe Roughs on the 26th April 2014 and ten at Donkey Street on the 20th April 2017. Most birds are seen flying over or are short-stayers but in spring 2021 a flock of up to ten remained in the Botolph's Bridge/Donkey Street area between the 20th April and 4th May. The latest double-figure count involved 17 flying east past Samphire Hoe on the 21st May 2021 and smaller numbers may be seen into late May. June records are rare and have comprised one at Hythe Ranges on the 2nd June 2022, two flying west past Copt Point on the 12th June 2000, one flying west there on the 13th June 1998, one flying inland from Copt Point on the 19th June 2020 and one heard calling over Chesterfield Wood on the night of the 29th June 2019.

In autumn small numbers have been noted from the first week of July, with the largest counts being just five flying over Grove Road, Folkestone on the 29th July 2016 and seven flying west past Copt Point on the 17th August 2000. There have been only three sightings in September: singles flying west past Mill Point on the 3rd September 1988, past Samphire Hoe on the 5th September 2015 and past Copt Point on the 7th September 2004, and two in October: one flying west past Copt Point on the 6th October 2001 and two flying west past Samphire Hoe on the 12th October 2020. An exceptionally late bird flew west past Samphire Hoe on the 12th November 2013.

Away from the coast, Roger Norman considered it to be rare at Nickolls Quarry in autumn, with just seven sightings there since 1990.



Whimbrels and Bar-tailed Godwits heading east past Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)

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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Whimbrels at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)