

Little Grebe

Tachybaptus ruficollis

Category A

Breeding resident and winter visitor.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

A widespread species across much of Europe, Asia and Africa. Mostly resident in western Europe, there is some dispersal and it may move in response to severe weather. It is not normally seen in significant numbers on the sea.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

It is a widespread breeding species in Kent, with large numbers seen at some localities outside of the breeding season.



Little Grebe at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)

The Little Grebe was included in Knight and Tolpitt'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 "common" and "found in all suitable localities throughout the county", remarking that "it frequents many of the ditches and fleets of the coast-marshes, but probably nowhere in such large numbers as in Romney Marsh", 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 Little Grebe at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was confirmed in one tetrad, with probable breeding in four more and possible breeding in two 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	0	(0%)	1	(3%)	2	(6%)
Probable/Confirmed	0	(0%)	1	(3%)	5	(16%)
Total	0	(0%)	2	(6%)	7	(23%)
Change			+2	(--%)	+5	(+250%)

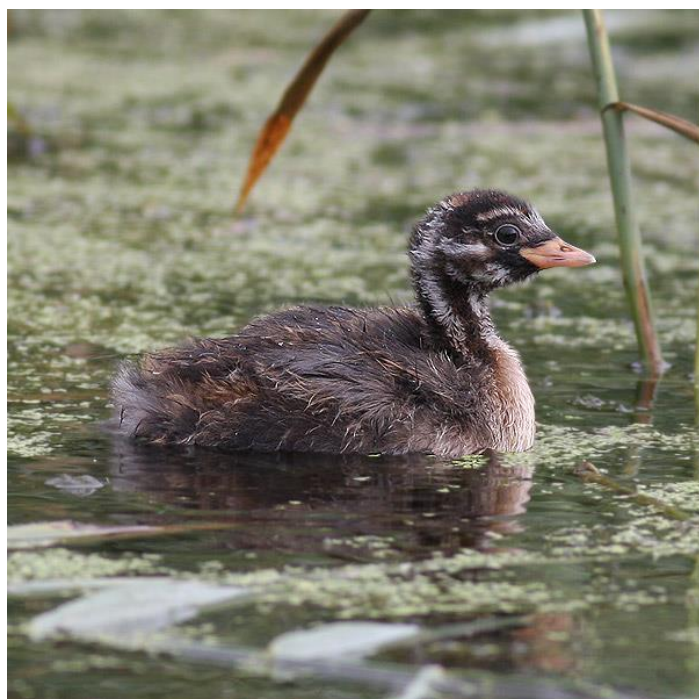
The table below shows the changes in tetrad occupancy across the three atlas periods.

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	--%	+250%	--%
Kent	+63%	+49%	+144%

The first documented evidence of breeding involved a pair that nested at the older of the two gravel workings at Nickolls Quarry between 1950 and 1959, whilst two pairs also bred on the newer pit, where a large patch of reeds had developed, in 1958 and 1959. Unfortunately, there was little subsequent coverage of this site but Roger Norman considered that “breeding most likely continued in subsequent years and a juvenile seen on the 25th August 1963 suggests that”, however he was surprised that Dave Weaver “made no reference except to winter birds” when watching the site between 1978 and 1983. So its absence from the first county atlas may have been a result of under-recording or perhaps genuine (Norman 2007).

During the second atlas period Pat Miller saw nests or pairs with young at Nickolls Quarry between 1988 and 1990 (probably two in the first year) in the west pool (the quietest part of the pit complex) and Roger Norman thought that breeding may have continued there to 1996 when the pool was reworked. An instance of possible breeding in TR13 M was also recorded in the second atlas.

Although breeding was likely to have ceased at Nickolls Quarry in 1996, Roger Norman noted that in 2001 one remained until the 15th April and there was an early isolated record of one bird “trilling” on the 2nd September, whilst in 2004 it was again noted until the 15th April, whilst one was heard “trilling” on the 6th July and a juvenile was seen on the 28th August, so “just possibly a pair stayed to breed undetected”. In 2006 two were seen on the 3rd May (with one “trilling”) and a single was noted on the 11th June, before a family group were observed on the 15th July (which may have bred at the pit or perhaps had moved from nearby Willop Sewer), whilst in 2007 one was “trilling” on the 2nd and 3rd May (resulting in a status of possible breeding in the most recent atlas). A pair may also have bred nearby on the canal cutting at Botolph’s Bridge in 2002 and 2003.



Little Grebe at Botolph’s Bridge (Brian Harper)



Little Grebe at Botolph’s Bridge (Brian Harper)

In the most recent atlas breeding was confirmed on the Willop Sewer (in TR13 A) and pairs were also present in suitable nesting habitat (probable breeding) on the Willop Sewer (in TR13 B), on the lake at the former Folkestone Racecourse near Westenhanger (TR13 I), at Chesterfield Wood (TR13 N) and at Samphire Hoe (TR23 Z) where a pair attempted to breed in 2009 but were unsuccessful.

As noted above, possible breeding was recorded at Nickolls Quarry (and also at Botolph's Bridge in 2008) (both in TR13 G), whilst a single was also seen in suitable breeding habitat on the Royal Military Canal near the Hythe Imperial golf course (TR13 S).

Since the end of the atlas period a pair successfully bred at Samphire Hoe in 2016, when two young fledged, and a pair returned in March 2017, remaining until June and breeding may have occurred but no young were seen. In 2018 one arrived during April being joined by a second bird from the 7th May but there were no signs of a breeding attempt and neither was seen after the 17th May when dry conditions had caused the pond to shrink considerably.

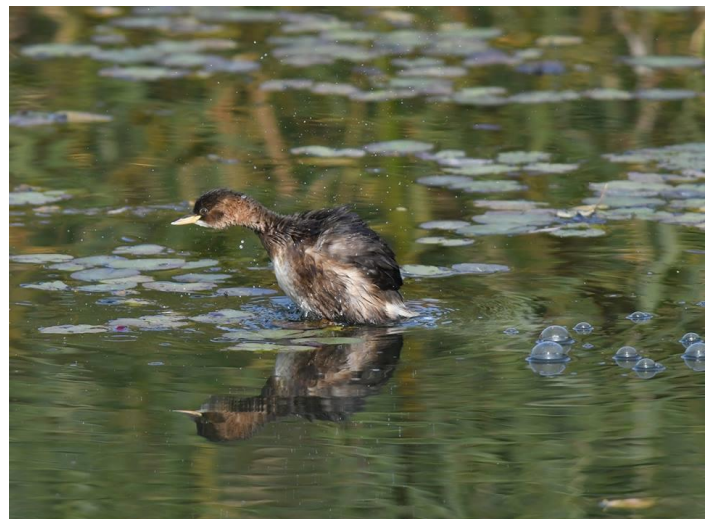
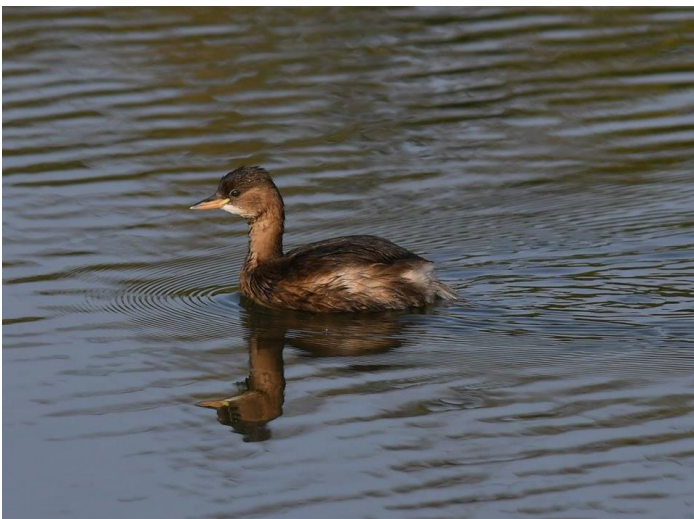


Little Grebe at Samphire Hoe (Ian Roberts)



Little Grebe at Samphire Hoe (Phil Smith)

A pair have also bred on a small pond between Newington and Peene (TR13 Y), where a juvenile was seen in June 2019, and a pair have nested successfully at Cock Ash Lake since at least 2020.



Little Grebe on the Royal Military Canal near Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)

Henderson & Hodge noted that there had been a slight increase since the first Atlas which they considered to “probably relate to improved coverage”, though noted that in “some areas small farm reservoirs built in recent years for irrigation purposes are proving attractive and this habitat type may help to replace the undoubted losses due to drainage and agricultural intensification”.

Clements *et al.* (2015) oversaw a continued increase between the second and third atlases, with a 49% increase in the number of occupied tetrads within the county, which is reflected in the local results.

Overall distribution

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

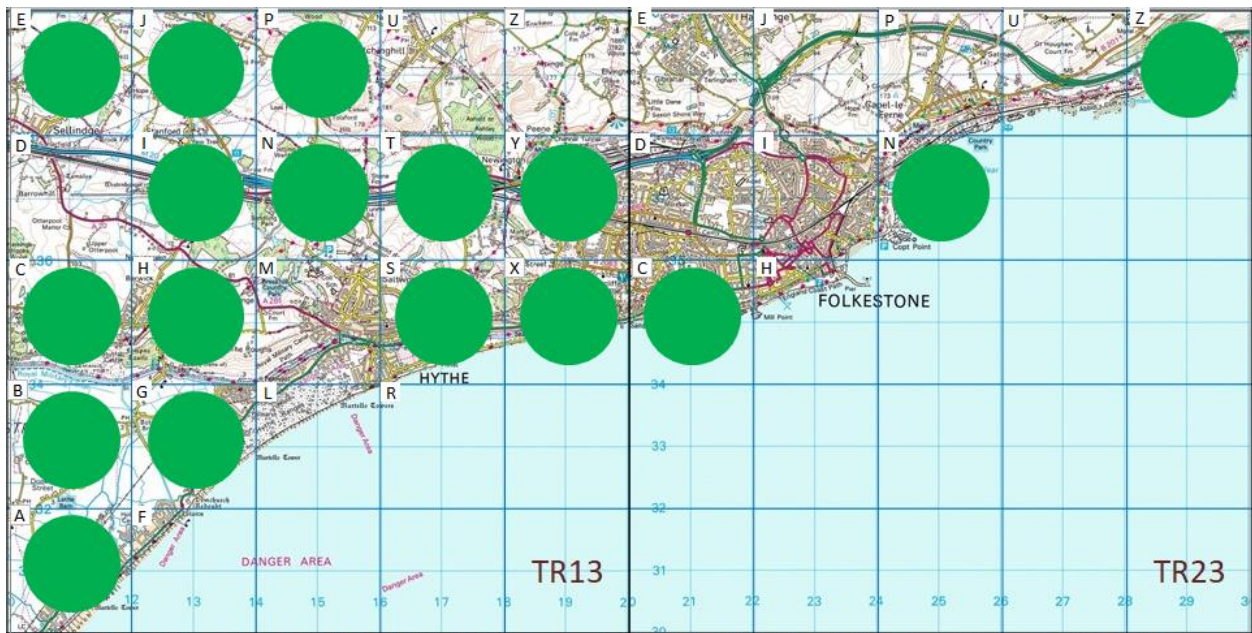


Figure 2: Distribution of all Little Grebe records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

It can be found more widely during the non-breeding season, when favoured sites include the Willop Sewer (TR13 A and TR13 B), Cock Ash Lake (TR13 E), Botolph's Bridge and Nickolls Quarry (TR13 G), the former Folkestone Racecourse near Westenhanger (TR13 I), Beachborough Lakes (TR13 N) and the Royal Military Canal between Hythe and Seabrook (TR13 S and TR13 X), with occasional records from West Hythe dam (TR13 C), Chesterfield Wood (TR13 N), Oak Banks (TR13 T) and Samphire Hoe (TR23 Z) amongst others.

Birds frequently congregate on the canal cutting at Botolph's Bridge in the autumn and winter months, with larger counts often, although not always, associated with the onset of cold conditions. The largest count to date was made by Dave Weaver on the 5th December 1981, when 19 were noted. Further double-figure counts there have involved 14 in November 1998, 10 in December 2001, 15 in January 2006, 12 in October 2006, 13 in January 2009 and 10 in February 2012.

The only other double-figure count occurred during severe weather in February 1991, when up to 13 were present at Nickolls Quarry.

There have been no observable migration and sightings on the sea are extremely rare, with just two occurrences on record: three off Copt Point on the 17th November 1991 and one off Mill Point on the 12th April 2019.



Little Grebe at Cock Ash Lake (Ian Roberts)



Little Grebe at Beachborough Lakes (Steve Tomlinson)

References

- Clements, R., Orchard, M., McCanch, N. & Wood, S. 2015. *Kent Breeding Bird Atlas 2008-13*. Kent Ornithological Society.
- Henderson, A. & Hodge, T. 1998. The Kent Breeding Bird Atlas 1988-94. *Kent Bird Report 1996*: 134-272.
- Kent Ornithological Society (KOS). 1953-2021. *Kent Bird Reports*. Kent Ornithological Society.
- Knight, V. & Tolputt, F. 1871. List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood. *Fourth Annual Report of the Folkestone Natural History Society*. Available at: www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/46103
- Norman, R. K. 2007. The Birds of Palmarsh Gravel Pit. <https://folkestonebirds.com/where-to-watch> (see "Further Information" section).
- Snow, D. & Perrins, C.M. 1998. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, D., Davenport, D. & Flegg, J. 1981. *Birds of Kent*. Kent Ornithological Society.
- Ticehurst, N. F. 1909. *A History of the Birds of Kent*. Witherby, London.

Acknowledgements

The tetrad map images were produced from the Ordnance Survey [Get-a-map service](#) and are reproduced with kind permission of [Ordnance Survey](#).

I am indebted to Andrew Henderson and Tim Hodge for providing access to the Kent Ornithological Society archives.



Little Grebe at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)



Little Grebe at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)