

Grey Partridge

Perdix perdix

Category A

Declining breeding resident.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

It is widely distributed across the middle latitudes of Europe and Asia, eastwards to 95°E, extending only into southern Fenno-Scandia and absent from most of the Mediterranean Basin. It has been introduced to North America, with unsuccessful attempts elsewhere. It has decreased due to agricultural intensification.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

In Kent it was once a widespread resident species but has declined considerably over recent years. It is recorded mainly from coastal areas.



Grey Partridge at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)

The Grey Partridge 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 "a numerous and increasing species in Kent and of general distribution, being found in the wooded districts almost as plentifully as in the more open parts", 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 Grey Partridge at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was not confirmed in any tetrads, but there was probable breeding in five and possible breeding in one other. 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	4	(13%)	3	(10%)	1	(3%)
Probable/Confirmed	12	(39%)	2	(6%)	5	(16%)
Total	16	(52%)	5	(16%)	6	(19%)
Change			-11	(-69%)	+1	(+20%)

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	-69%	+20%	-63%
Kent	-36%	-53%	-7-%

Taylor *et al.* (1981) considered that its general distribution had probably changed little since Ticehurst's time. They also noted that few estimates of population densities had been recorded, but it was likely that numbers had declined in Kent, as in other parts of Britain.

Clements *et al.*, reviewing the results of the latest atlas, stated that the map for Grey Partridge showed one of the most striking patterns of decline for any species in Kent. The decline had probably started well before the first Kent atlas and the second atlas showed a 30% decline in the number of tetrads occupied, whilst the most recent atlas showed a 70% decline compared to the first. Locally it could be found in about half of the tetrads at the time of the first atlas (with 14 of these in TR13), decreasing to 16% by the second atlas, but with little change in the most recent.

Balmer *et al.* (2013) reported a 46% decline in the number of occupied 10km squares across the UK between the first and third atlas period, which coincides with a 91% population decline during this time (Massimino *et al.* 2020). The Grey Partridge is one of the most strongly decreasing bird species in Europe, due to the effects of agricultural intensification. One of the key reasons for the decline appears to be the application of herbicides on the food plants of the young chicks' invertebrate prey (Potts 2012).

Overall distribution

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of Grey Partridge by tetrad, with records in 22 tetrads (71%).

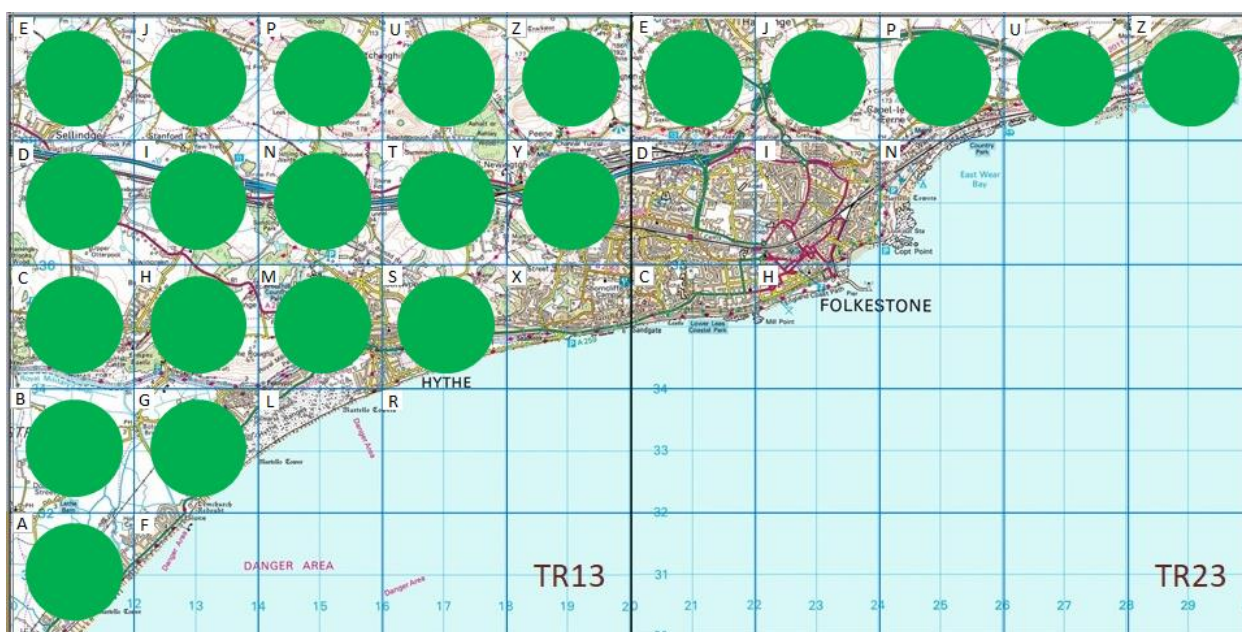


Figure 2: Distribution of all Grey Partridge records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The species was formerly far more widespread and was only really absent from the built-up areas. It was also far more numerous although there are few historic counts on record. H. Schreiber noted in 1959 that at Sandling Park "there was a big increase in the breeding population and 40 pairs nested".

In the same year 21 were counted on the old airfield that is now the Nickolls Quarry site in August and up to 14 were noted in winter at the western end of Hythe Ranges in the 1950s (Norman 2006; 2007). In 1968 six pairs bred on a 300-acre farm “to the north of Hythe”.

Good numbers could still be found in the 1990s, with 23 near Botolph’s Bridge in December 1993, 20 at Capel-le-Ferne in August 1997 and 20 at Abbotscliffe in October and November 1997. The only counts of 20 or more since have all been from Abbotscliffe, where there were 23 in October 2003, 21 in January 2004 and 26 in January 2010, however the final double-figure count there was in August of the following year.

By the time of the most recent atlas it was restricted to the areas around Blackhouse Hill/Saltwood Castle, Beachborough Park/Summerhouse Hill and between Capel-le-Ferne and Abbotscliffe. However, it has since disappeared from some of these sites, with the last records from Capel-le-Ferne in May 2011, Saltwood Castle in April 2016 and Church Hougham in May 2016.

There had been no records at Abbotscliffe since August 2018 until two were seen there in April 2021, with singles there in May 2021 and January 2022, and two again in December 2022, so it appears that is still surviving at low density at this site. There had also been no records in the Beachborough Park/Summerhouse Hill area since August 2018 until one was seen flying across the A20 near Bluehouse Wood in TR1537 (the 1km square to the west of Summerhouse Hill) in June 2021, so perhaps it is also persisting here.

Although the outlook for this species appears bleak it is possible that it could reappear locally at other sites. There had been no sightings on the local section of the Romney Marsh for 12 years until in 2017 a flock of six were present near the Willop Sewage Works in January and two were seen at Donkey Street in April. These were followed by records of a pair at Botolph’s Bridge and Donkey Street in May, at the Willop Sewage Works in October 2017 and a pair on the Botolph’s Bridge Road near Rock Cottage on the 18th November 2018. A sighting of two in Kiln Wood (in TR13 I) in March 2022 was the first record in this tetrad for many years and provides further hope for its continued presence.



Grey Partridges at Abbotscliffe (Ian Roberts)

Harrison describes some aberrations in birds that were obtained locally: “Mr. F. A. C. Munns sent me a note (8th May 1949) that, on three occasions in that year (1949), Partridges had been shot at Etchinghill in the Folkestone district with the “horseshoe” in white instead of the usual chestnut. This aberration is actually the suppression of the chestnut of the horseshoe, for, if the species is examined closely, it will be found that the chestnut marking, which is

subject to much individual variation, being well marked in some and less so in others, may be represented by only a few feathers. In addition to the above note by him, Mr. Munns kindly sent me two such specimens obtained at Burmarsh in the Romney Marsh on 23rd September 1950. Both are females, one in first winter plumage and the other an adult. The latter specimen shows some albescence of the fourth to eighth primaries inclusive, a purely individual finding unconnected with the white horseshoe!”.



Grey Partridge at Donkey Street (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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