

# Corncrake

*Crex crex*

Category A

Very rare vagrant. Formerly was probably a regular breeder and passage migrant.

4 recent records

Breeds across much of mid-latitude Europe eastwards into Asia, wintering in sub-Saharan Africa, but has been subject to a long-term decline since the late nineteenth century, which accelerated from the 1950s and was widespread from the 1970s. The main causes have been loss of habitat and agricultural intensification, including destruction of nests through earlier harvesting (Snow & Perrins, 1998). In Britain restricted to northern and western Scotland, where the population had been increasing since 2000 to a peak of around 1,200 pairs but has since shown signs of a downward trend. A reintroduction programme in Cambridgeshire and Norfolk has had limited success, with 23 singing males present in 2017 (Holling *et al*, 2019).

Having formerly bred in Kent, it is now a rare passage migrant, with just ten records since 2000 (KOS, 2020).

The species was included in Knight and Tolputt's "List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood" published in the Folkestone Natural History Society's annual report for 1871. This list covered an area of six mile radius of Folkestone town hall which extends further inland than the current Folkestone and Hythe area, so is not conclusive evidence of occurrence but it seems likely that it was widespread here.

Ticehurst (1909) recorded how it bred in the more open parts of the county during the nineteenth century, but noted a marked decline after 1900: "I had some time ago formed the opinion that the Land-Rail [Corncrake] was annually decreasing as a breeding bird in the county ... and this is confirmed by every one of my correspondents. It was probably never as numerous as in the west of England, but during the last ten, and even the last five, years its numbers have shown a great and unaccountable diminution. The general use of mowing machines and the smaller amount of clover and such like crops grown nowadays may be factors in this decrease, but I am of opinion that it is part of a much larger question involving a gradual change in the distribution of this bird in England". "Formerly it bred in scattered pairs throughout the more open parts of Kent, where clover, lucerne and sanfoin were grown, as well as in the hayfields of the lower districts."

He also managed to accumulate "ample evidence of a considerable autumn passage through Kent", including some specific local references: "In September the autumn migration begins... in past years large 'bags' of Land-Rails were occasionally made... Mr. B. Turner [the gamekeeper of Major Deedes, of the Sandling Park Estate] tells me that he once shot twenty-six in a clover field near Hythe". He goes on to note that "in 1880 no less than 211 were killed [just outside the area] in Acryse [Acrise] Park, near Folkestone, during August and September, the largest daily 'bags' being 35, 26, 21 and 20."

Harrison (1953) included reports of sporadic breeding in the county up until 1947, including a record from Beachborough in 1938 (where young were seen on the 11<sup>th</sup> July), but there has been no confirmation of nesting in Kent since, and Taylor *et al* (1981) commented on a "striking further decrease" in records in the county during their review period (1952-76).

Roger Norman recounted that "a colleague, who from 1948 used to regularly accompany his father shooting partridge and rabbit, recalls initially being shown and then seeing occasional single Corncrakes each year to 1951 or 1952, in a grass field (where the grass was always particularly long) on the western side of what is now Nickolls Quarry".

Roger was also able to provide details of a migrant found "in the rear garden of Mr. J. Horton's house in Market Street, Hythe" in mid-April 1950. At the time the garden would have extended as far as Hythe Green. A further historic record was provided by H Schreiber, who saw one at Sandling Park on the 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1959 and Phil Smith recalls hearing one calling from a field at Capel-le-Ferne in 1971 or 1972.

Locally there have been just four modern records, as shown in figure 1.

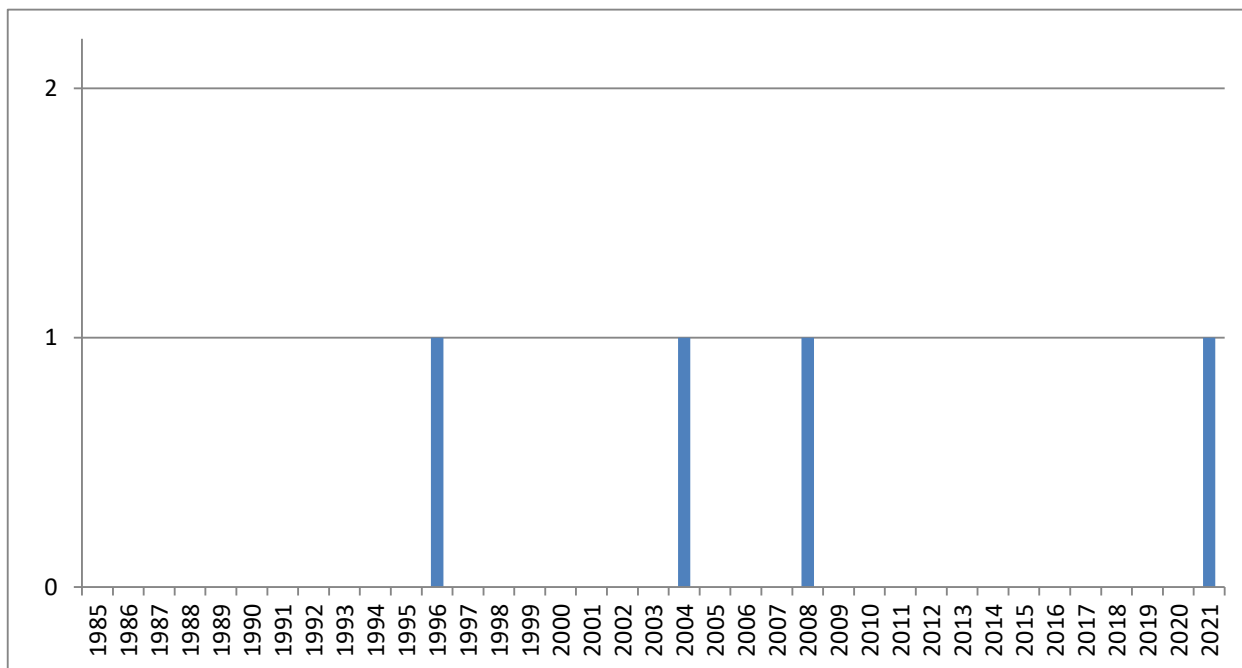


Figure 1: Corncrake records at Folkestone and Hythe since 1985

The modern records by week are shown in figure 2.

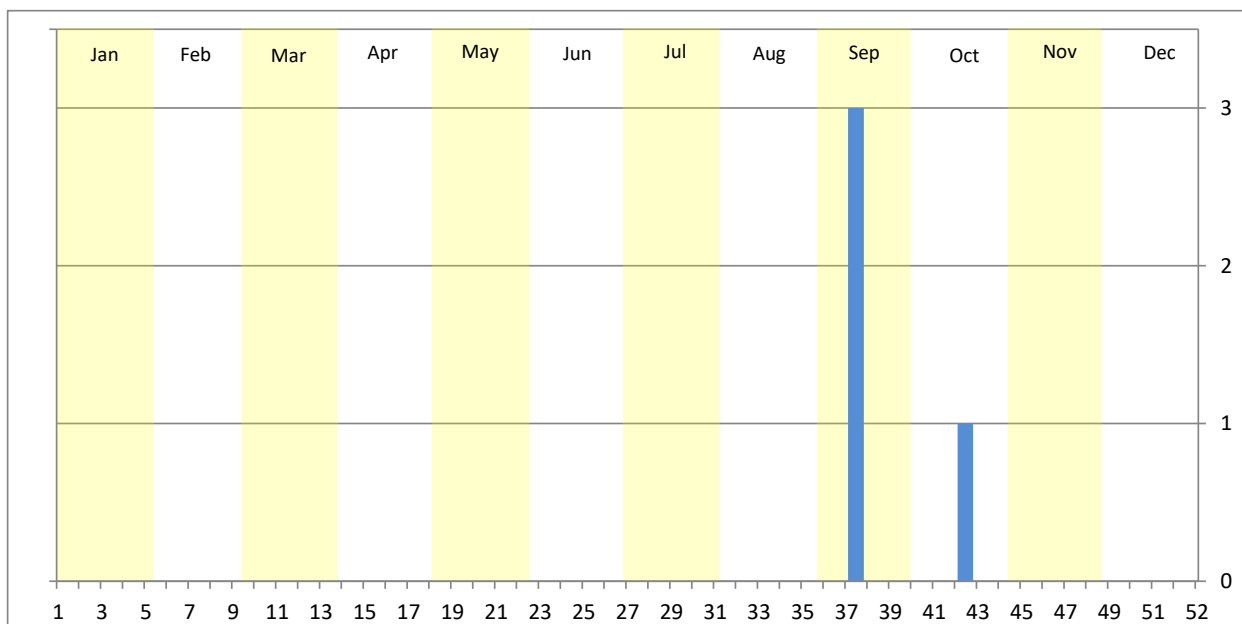


Figure 2: Corncrake records at Folkestone and Hythe by week since 1985

All modern records have occurred in autumn, between 10<sup>th</sup> September (week 37) and 16<sup>th</sup> October (week 42), with three in week 37.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of records by tetrad.



Figure 3: Distribution of all Corncrake records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The full list of modern records is as follows:

**1996** Abbotscliffe, one, 10<sup>th</sup> September (D. A. Gibson)

**2004** Abbotscliffe, one, 16<sup>th</sup> October (I. A. Roberts)

**2008** Abbotscliffe, one, 13<sup>th</sup> September (D. A. Gibson, J. A. Gibson)

**2021** Folkestone, one flew over the A20 just south of the Round Hill tunnel, 11<sup>th</sup> September (P. Chantler)

### References

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### Acknowledgements

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