

Nightingale

Luscinia megarhynchos

Category A

Declining breeding summer visitor and passage migrant.

Breeds across southern Europe, from southern Britain, the Low Countries, Germany and Poland, southwards to the Mediterranean Basin, including the north-west African coast, then eastwards from Iran to Altai and western Mongolia. Winters in the Afrotropics (Snow & Perrins, 1998).

In Kent it is a locally common breeding species, with the county holding over a quarter of the national breeding population (KOS, 2020).



Nightingale at Folkestone Warren (Dale Gibson)

Breeding 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 Nightingale at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was not confirmed in any tetrads, but there was probable breeding in two tetrads and possible breeding in five others. Breeding is difficult to confirm due to the skulking nature of this species. 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	5	(16%)	2	(6%)	5	(16%)
Probable/Confirmed	2	(6%)	8	(26%)	2	(6%)
Total	7	(23%)	10	(32%)	7	(23%)

The apparent increase locally between the first and second atlases is probably a reflection of improved as the county population was considered to be generally stable at this time, but the reduction since is considered to be genuine. Clements *et al* (2015) stated that the results of the third county atlas showed a significant contraction in range, with major losses along the North Downs, particularly in east Kent, and the southern Weald.

The Kent population has been surveyed on five occasions (although the 1985 survey only covered east Kent), with the overall and local hectad results (numbers of singing males) as follows:

	1980	1985	1994	1999	2012
TR13	11	3	13	9	3
TR23	4	5	0	0	2
East Kent	538	467	496	480	309
West Kent	393	-	570	732	686
Kent Total	931	-	1,066	1,212	995

The population locally and more widely has demonstrated considerable fluctuation between the survey periods but there does appear to have been a decrease in the most recent survey, at least at the east Kent level (where the 2012 total was 36% lower than in 1999 and accounts for most of the county decrease, with west Kent only showing a 6% decline). These surveys also highlighted an increasing trend for the species to concentrate in areas of damp scrub at lower altitude and abandon coppiced woodland, especially along the North Downs.

Non-breeding distribution

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of Nightingale by tetrad, with records in 21 tetrads (68%).

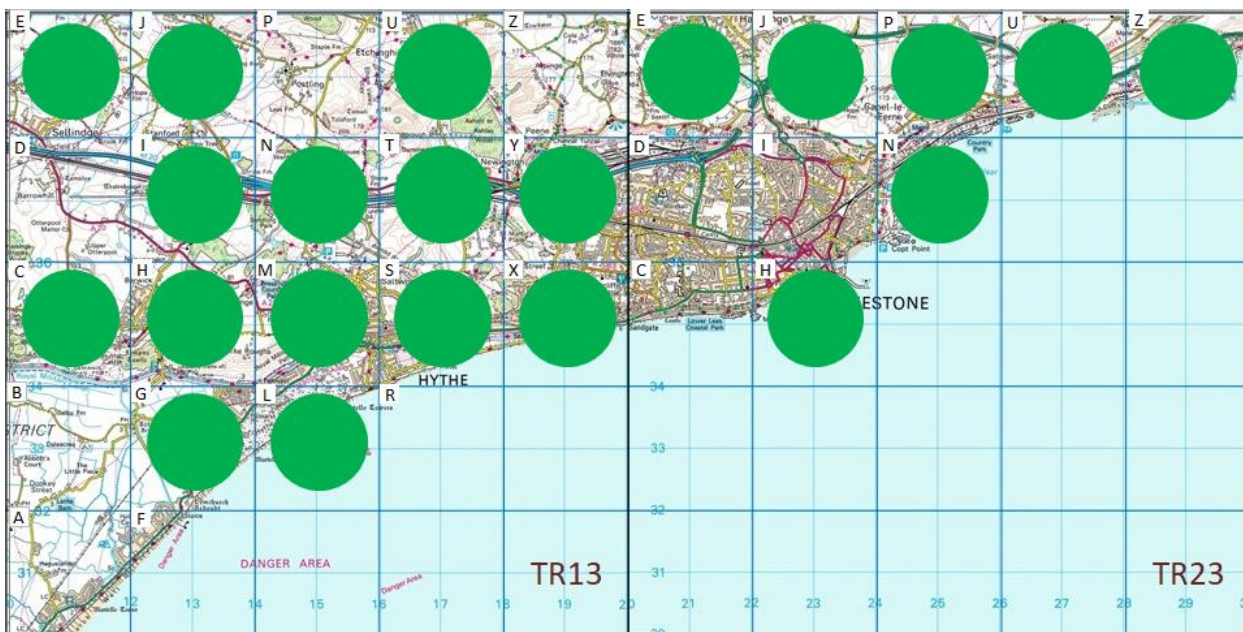


Figure 2: Distribution of all Nightingale records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The species had long been known from Folkestone Warren, where John Perrot found 12 pairs (even locating eight nests) in the summer of 1957. This appears to have been an unusually high count though as reports from the 1960s to mid-1980s did not exceed five pairs. Between the 1980s and 2007 only single singing males were noted, with the exception of two in 1995 and 2005, and in some years none could be found. Since 2007 there has only been two singing males in 2011 and 2016.

At Hythe Ranges ten pairs were noted by Roger Norman in 1958, with five to six pairs present in the 1960s. There was little coverage of this site in the 1970s or 1980s but the population persisted, as eight singing birds were noted on the 6th May 1983 and up to four singing males were noted between 1992 and 2001, but since then there have only been singles males in 2006, 2013, 2016 and 2017.

Elsewhere it has been sporadic in occurrence. As Henderson & Hodge (1998) explained, particularly in areas where it prefers coppiced woodland, the relatively short period in which a site’s habitat may be suitable for the species results in fairly low site fidelity.

The Kent Bird Report for 1974 noted that “at least 15 pairs were recorded breeding at Saltwood” but gave no further details and later reports made no further mention of this site. The woods in the Saltwood area have occasionally held a pair in recent years. It has been found in areas of woodland or scrub adjacent to the Royal Military Canal between Palmarsh and Port Lympne in some years, with two singing males present in 1991, 1994 and 2021. The Asholt Wood area may also attract a pair or two but there have been no sightings there since two singing males were present in 2012. The scrub in the Holy Well area held a single singing male in 2012 and 2020.

It can appear however in any patch of suitable habitat, in 2021 for example a male held territory in a small, isolated copse near Stanford North (in TR13 J).

Considering its disappearance from the favoured haunts of Folkestone Warren and Hythe Ranges and the sporadic nature of its appearance at other sites, in the context of the apparent decline across east Kent, its continued status as a regular breeding species would appear to be tenuous.

Away from areas of potential breeding habitat the following records of spring migrant birds (all involving single singing males) are of note, as they are the only records at these relatively well-watched sites:

At Mill Point on the 14th April 2005 and 18th April 2017

At Nickolls Quarry from the 2nd to 9th May 1999, 19th April 2016, 1st May 2016 and 25th April 2020

At Samphire Hoe on the 19th April 1998, 1st May 2012 and 14th April 2013

Autumn migrants are very scarce and have comprised singles at Capel Battery on the 11th August 1992, 18th August 1992, 12th August 1998, 11th August 1999, 11th August 2000 and 20th August 2000, and at Creteway Down on a single date in August 2019.



Nightingale at Oak Banks (Brian Harper)

Follow the links below for a selection of local audio recordings:

- [One singing at Asholt Wood on the 27th April 2012 \(Ian Roberts\)](#)
- [One singing at Hythe Ranges on the 23rd May 2013 \(Brian Harper\)](#)
- [One singing at Nickolls Quarry on the 19th April 2016 \(Ian Roberts\)](#)
- [One singing at Oak Banks on the 6th May 2019 \(Brian Harper\)](#)
- [One calling at Oak Banks on the 6th May 2019 \(Brian Harper\)](#)
- [One singing at West Hythe on the 20th April 2021 \(Brian Harper\)](#)

References

Clements, R., Orchard, M., McCanch, N. & Wood, S. 2015. *Kent Breeding Bird Atlas 2008-13*. Kent Ornithological Society

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Taylor, D., Davenport, D. & Flegg, J. 1981. *Birds of Kent*. Kent Ornithological Society

Acknowledgements

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