

Sedge Warbler

Acrocephalus schoenobaenus

Category A

Breeding summer visitor and passage migrant.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

A widespread breeding species across Britain and much of Europe and Russia eastwards to the Yenisey River. Winters in Africa south of the Sahara.

Kent status (KOS 2021):

A locally common summer visitor and passage migrant.



Sedge Warbler at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)

The Sedge Warbler 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 "numerous and generally distributed as a summer visitor in Kent", whilst Harrison (1953) found it to be "a very common summer visitor", which was "to be found occupying the sedge-grown dykes and ditches of all the coastal marshes", with Romney Marsh seeming to be "the headquarters of this bird in the county", so there can be little doubt that it has long inhabited the local section of the marsh and other suitable habitats.

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 Sedge Warbler at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was confirmed in two tetrads, with probable breeding in one 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	1	(3%)	1	(3%)	2	(6%)
Probable/Confirmed	8	(26%)	7	(23%)	3	(10%)
Total	9	(29%)	8	(26%)	5	(16%)
Change			-1	(-11%)	-3	(-38%)

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	-11%	-38%	-44%
Kent	0%	-16%	-16%

As Taylor *et al.* described, the Sedge Warbler favours a variety of wetland habitats, usually including scrub and other low, thick vegetation, but generally avoids uniform stands of *Phragmites*, preferring denser cover for nesting, whilst the main concentrations in the county included the Romney Marsh, which is the epicentre of the local population. They reported that due to increasingly intensive agricultural practices in the lowlands, traditional breeding sites were diminishing, but well-vegetated gravel pits had compensated for this in many areas and can hold high densities.

This appears to have been mirrored locally, with Peter Wells finding eight pairs in the Biggin's Wood area (site of the current Channel Tunnel Terminal, TR23 D) in 1982, which declined to three in 1983 and just one in 1984 and 1985, whilst Neil Frampton found eight pairs along the canal between the Aldergate Bridge (TR13 C) and Hythe (TR13 M) in 1983 but none in 1984, which he attributed to local habitat loss through conversion to agriculture and industry in late 1983, compounded by a wider national population crash over the 1983/84 winter.

At Nickolls Quarry (TR13 G) Roger Norman found "at best two pairs breeding in the 1950s", whilst "one pair bred annually at least from 1995", increasing to three pairs in 2003, with five birds singing through May and June 2004 (Norman 2007). The population here remained stable until increasing rapidly from 2014, when ten were holding territory, to 14 singing males in 2015 and peaking at about 20 singing males in 2017. This may have been associated within an increase in the vegetation cover but numbers have since declined as the area is gradually being built on as part of a housing development. In 2021 four territorial males were present.

Elsewhere it is thinly distributed across the Romney Marsh where it can mainly found along scrubby ditches and there are occasional territorial males or breeding pairs along the canal. Several singing males were noted at Hythe Ranges in the 1950s and 1960s and it probably bred here but there have been no indications of breeding there since (Norman 2006).

In addition to the tetrads listed above it was found to be breeding in TR13 E and TR13 X in the first county atlas, in TR13 I and TR13 J in the second county atlas and in TR13 T in both atlases.

Overall distribution

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of Sedge Warbler by tetrad, with records in 19 tetrads (61%).

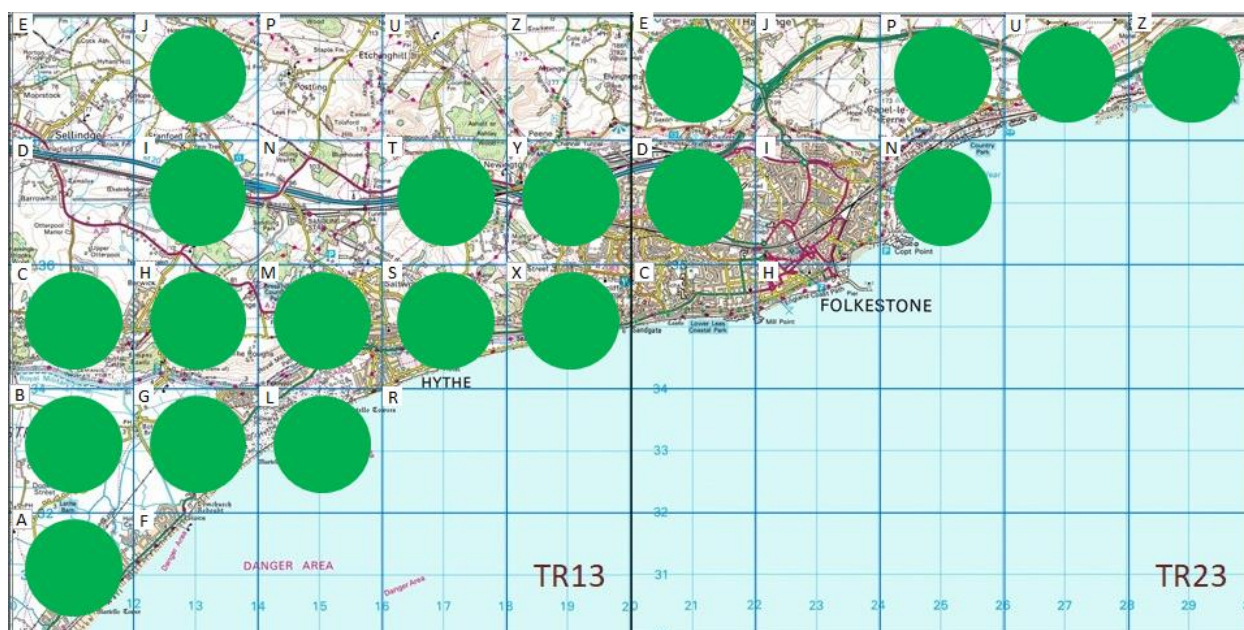


Figure 2: Distribution of all Sedge Warbler records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The earliest arrival in the 1950s was the 23rd April (in 1957 and 1958) but coverage was then insufficient to determine arrival dates until the 1990s, during which decade the earliest was on the 13th April (1999) and in the 2000s was on the 10th April (2009 and 2010). The most recent decade has seen a mean arrival date of the 8th April and six arrival dates within the first ten days of the month, as follows:

- Two at Nickolls Quarry and two along the canal at Seabrook on the 1st April 2017
- One at Nickolls Quarry on the 4th April 2020
- Two at Nickolls Quarry on the 5th April 2014
- Two at Nickolls Quarry on the 6th April 2018 and one there on the 6th April 2021
- One at Nickolls Quarry on the 7th April 2012 and four there on the 7th April 2016

As Kovács *et al.* (2012) have demonstrated, the spring arrival dates of the Sedge Warbler appear to be getting earlier, presumably related to climatic change.

Spring migrants away from the breeding sites are scarce, averaging about one per annum since 1990, and occur later in the season, between mid-April and late May. Almost all sightings relate to singles but there were six at the cliffs (two at Capel Battery and four at Abbotscliffe) on the 13th May 1992 and two at Capel Battery on the 29th May 2001.

The earliest returning migrant was at Abbotscliffe on the 19th July (1995), whilst it has twice been first recorded on the 21st July (1994 and 2006) and the 22nd July (2006 and 2007), whilst it is normally first noted during the last week of July or in early August. Only ones and twos have been noted away from the breeding sites in July, but August and September can produce higher numbers. The largest counts were recorded at Abbotscliffe during the 1990s, with peaks of nine on the 26th August 1992, eight on the 3rd August 1994, 18 on the 16th August 1995, 11 on the 10th September 1995 and an exceptional 35 on the 14th August 1996 (part of a large arrival of migrants that also included a record count of 11 Grasshopper Warblers).

The only counts in excess of five since have involved 12 at Abbotscliffe on the 17th August 2005, six there on the 29th August 2005 and seven there on the 16th August 2006. The mean departure date over the last decade has been the 20th September but small numbers have been seen in many years into late September, however October sightings are unusual, having occurred in just seven years:

- One at Abbotscliffe on the 3rd October 2003
- One at Abbotscliffe on the 5th October 1995
- One at the Willop Sewage Works on the 7th October 2020
- One at Princes Parade on the 8th October 2015
- One at Abbotscliffe on the 12th October 1991, with two there the following day
- One at Abbotscliffe on the 14th October 2016
- One at Capel Battery on the 15th October 1996



Sedge Warbler at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)



Sedge Warbler at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)



Sedge Warbler at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)



Sedge Warbler at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)



Sedge Warbler at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)



Sedge Warbler at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)

Click [here](#) to listen to a local audio recording of one singing at Nickolls Quarry on the 4th May 2015 (Ian Roberts).

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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Sedge Warbler at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)



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