

Wood Warbler

Phylloscopus sibilatrix

Category A

Formerly regular, probably bred. 24 records of 25
Now a rare passage migrant. birds since 1980

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

It is a widespread breeding species across the middle and upper middle latitudes of Europe from Britain eastwards into Russia. It winters in sub-Saharan Africa.

Kent status (KOS 2022):

It is a scarce and declining passage migrant to the county, having formerly bred.



Wood Warbler at Samphire Hoe (Ian Roberts)

Ticehurst (1909) considered it to be “the least numerous of the ‘leaf-warblers’ in the county, and ... much more locally distributed”, “preferring woods that are furnished with tall oaks, beeches and occasionally firs, and that have little, or comparatively little, undergrowth”. He notes that “these conditions are somewhat rare in the east of the county” and that in the “Dover and Folkestone districts it is very sparingly distributed”. Knight & Tolputt included the Wood Warbler in their “List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood” (1871) but this list covered an area of six mile radius from Folkestone town hall, which extends further inland than the current Folkestone and Hythe area, and so this does not provide conclusive evidence of its occurrence here.

Harrison (1953) wrote that its distribution “does not appear to have altered materially since Ticehurst” and found it to be “common” in some areas in the west of the county. However, “in the eastern and south-eastern part of Kent it may be said to occur on migration only, and Major G. E. Took [writing in 1947] says that it is doubtful whether it now breeds in south-east Kent, where of course it was never common as a breeding species”.

Taylor *et al.* (1981) noted that it “is still most numerous in the west of the county, but it is very thinly distributed, even there”. In the first county atlas (1967-1973) probable breeding was noted by D. E. Chittenden in tetrad TR13 N, where he recorded birds at Sandling Park in late April 1970 and at Heane Wood in June 1973.

Henderson (2020) described how its range “became increasingly restricted to areas near Sevenoaks and Tunbridge Wells”, where “there were still reports of territorial pairs and even successful nesting, ... and occasionally elsewhere, until the 1980s”. He then noted that “the last record of young being fledged was from east Kent in 1988, and the last report of a nest was from the west in 1990”. Today, “singing males are still sometimes found in suitable woodland, though not every year, but mostly they are now present for only a day or so”.

The latest national atlas showed a 37% range retraction since 1988-1991, with most losses from lower ground in south and eastern England (Balmer *et al.* 2013). Clements *et al.* (2015) considered that it was “seemingly in terminal decline in Kent”, with an estimated 20-30 pairs breeding in 1988-1994, but with little evidence of successful breeding since. The last territorial male in the county was recorded in 1997 and there were no indications of breeding in the latest atlas, with the few instances of “possible breeding” relating to singing males present on single dates (including one in Kiln Wood on the 1st May 2009), which were thought likely to have been birds on migration. For the sake of completeness its presence within the three county atlas periods is shown below. The confirmed and probable breeding categories have been combined to account for differing definitions of these in the first atlas (Taylor *et al.*; Henderson & Hodge 1998).

Breeding atlases	1967 - 1973		1988 - 1994		2007 – 2013	
Possible	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	1	(3%)
Probable/Confirmed	1	(3%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
Total	1	(3%)	0	(0%)	1	(3%)
Change			-1	(-100%)	+1	(--%)

The decline, which has been widespread across Europe since 1980, Clements *et al.* thought was perhaps linked to changes in climate or land-use in the wintering grounds in tropical West Africa.

Taylor *et al.* cited both the earliest and latest dates for the county within its review period (1952-76) as being at Hythe: singles seen by D. E. Scott-Robinson on the 5th April 1953 and by Geoffrey Munns on the 27th September 1965. Geoffrey Munns noted a further two at Hythe, on the more usual date of 30th July in 1966, but there are no other documented reports until 1981, when Russell Heselden saw one in Folkestone Warren on the 3rd August. Since 1985 there have been a further 23 records across the 38 years, as shown in figure 1.

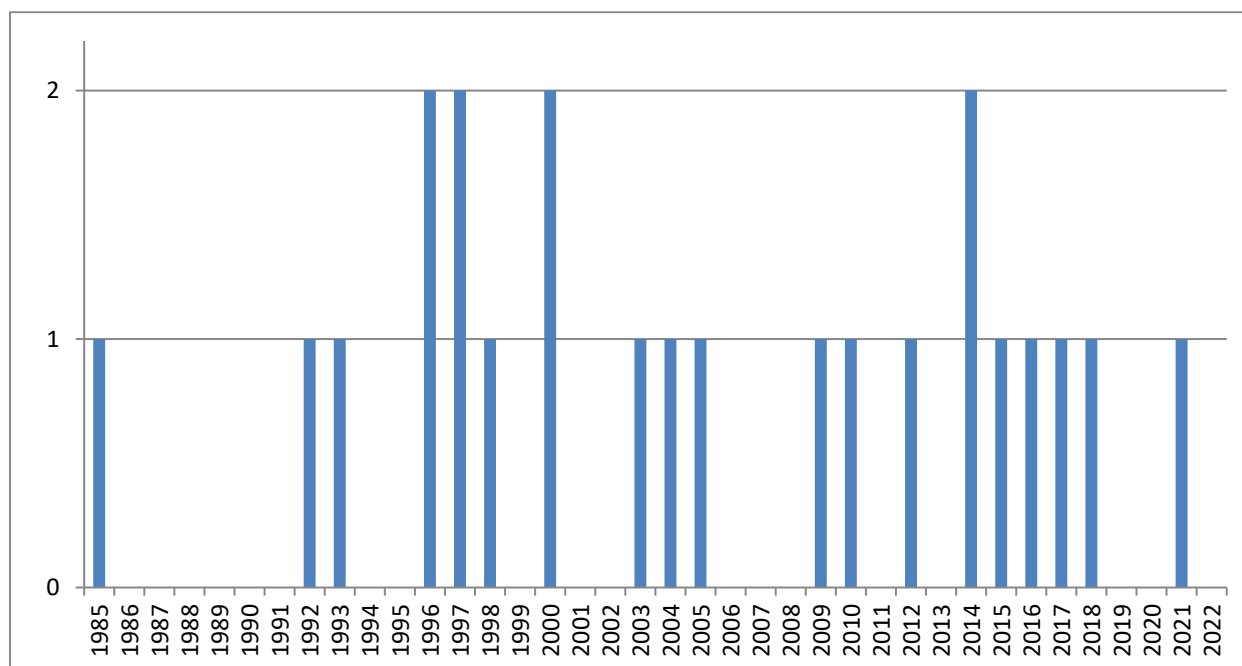


Figure 1: Wood Warbler records at Folkestone and Hythe since 1985

Henderson noted “relatively high numbers of migrants [in the county] between about 1983 and 1996”, before a “decline to the current scarce status”, but this is not reflected in the local statistics, where perhaps any decline has been masked by increases in coverage.

The records by week are given in figure 2. The observations of Ticehurst, that it was the latest of the ‘leaf-warblers’ to appear, generally arriving in late April or early May, and that it began to leave in late July, with most having departed by the late August, holds true to the present day.

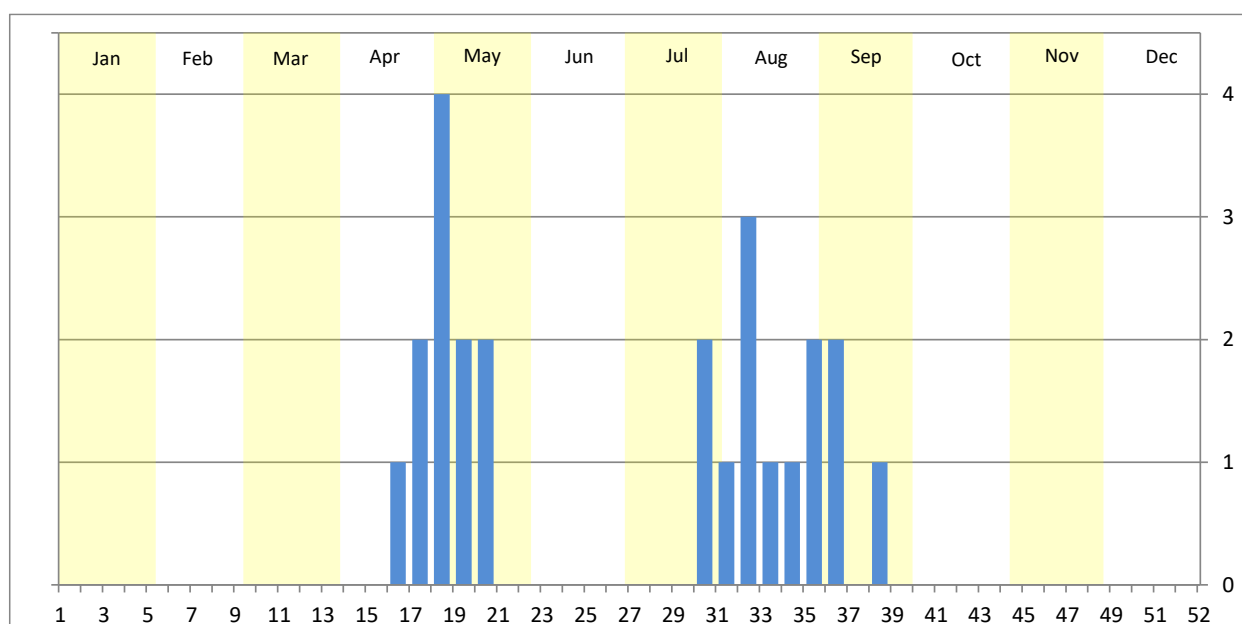


Figure 2: Wood Warbler records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Figure 3 shows the location of records by tetrad. 16 of the recent records have occurred at the cliffs between Folkestone Warren and Samphire Hoe, or just inland in the Church Hougham/Hougham Court area, with the others at Beachborough Lakes (2), the Pond Hill Road/Shorncliffe Military Cemetery area (2), West Hythe, Kiln Wood and Seabrook.



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

The full list of documented records is as follows:

- 1953** Hythe, one, 5th April (D. E. Scott-Robinson)
- 1965** Hythe, one, 27th September (G. F. A. Munns)
- 1966** Hythe, one, 30th July (G. F. A. Munns)
- 1970** Sandling Park, one, 25th April (D. E. Chittenden)
- 1973** Heane Wood, one, 4th June (D. E. Chittenden)
- 1981** Folkestone Warren, one, 3rd August (R. G. W. Heselden)
- 1985** West Hythe, two near the dam, 7th August (N. C. Frampton)
- 1992** Capel-le-Ferne Café, singing male, (D. A. Gibson)
- 1993** Folkestone Warren, one, 5th to 6th September (D. A. Gibson)
- 1996** Capel Battery, one, 17th August (I. A. Roberts)
- 1996** Capel-le-Ferne Green Lane, one, 1st September (I. A. Roberts)
- 1997** Capel Battery, singing male, 3rd May (D. A. Gibson, I. A. Roberts)
- 1997** Church Hougham, one, 7th August (M. Kennett)
- 1998** Church Hougham, one, 28th July (M Kennett)
- 2000** Capel-le-Ferne Café, singing male, 11th May (D. A. Gibson, I. A. Roberts)
- 2000** Church Hougham, one, 6th August (M. Kennett)
- 2003** Capel Battery, singing male, 24th April (I. A. Roberts)
- 2004** Capel-le-Ferne Café, singing male, 18th May (I. A. Roberts)
- 2005** Capel Battery, singing male, 30th April (I. A. Roberts)
- 2009** Kiln Wood, singing male, 1st May (I. A. Roberts)
- 2010** Hougham Court, one, 27th July (I. A. Roberts)
- 2012** Samphire Hoe, one, 2nd May, photographed (I. A. Roberts)
- 2014** Shorncliffe Military Cemetery, 21st April, photographed, sound-recorded (M. P. Sutherland, I. A. Roberts *et al*)
- 2014** Pond Hill Road (Cheriton), one, 25th April (M. P. Sutherland)
- 2015** Samphire Hoe, one, 7th September (per D. E. Smith)
- 2016** Beachborough Lakes, one, 24th August (S. Tomlinson)
- 2017** Seabrook, one, 18th September (D. A. Gibson)
- 2018** Beachborough Lakes, one, 31st August (S. Tomlinson)
- 2021** Abbotscliffe, one, 7th May (I. A. Roberts)



Wood Warbler at Shorncliffe Military Cemetery (Brian Harper)

Click [here](#) to listen to a short audio recording of one at Shorncliffe Cemetery on the 21st April 2014 (Ian Roberts).



Wood Warbler at Samphire Hoe (Ian Roberts)

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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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Wood Warbler at Shorncliffe Military Cemetery (Ian Roberts)