

Marsh Harrier

Circus aeruginosus

Category A

Passage migrant and winter visitor. Possibly bred on one occasion recently.

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998; Holling et al. 2019):

Breeds across much of Europe and Asia. Most European countries have reported recent increases following earlier declines. In Britain it was reduced to a single breeding pair in 1971 but has since undergone a considerable recovery, with around 370 pairs nesting in 2017. Most nest in eastern and south-eastern England, with at least 33 pairs in Kent, which is about 10% of the British population.

Kent status (KOS 2022):

It is also a regular passage migrant in the county.

The Marsh Harrier was not included in Knight and Tolputt's "List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood" (1871) and Ticehurst (1909) considered it to be "only a very casual visitor to the county", noting that "really very few have been recorded". Harrison (1953) found it to be an "annual visitor as a passage migrant ... or as a winter visitor", and also recounted the first instance of nesting in the county (in 1942) but made no reference to any local records.

Taylor *et al.* (1981) described it as an "annual passage migrant in increasing numbers" but gave no further accounts of nesting, nor of any local occurrences, so the first documented area record involved an immature/female bird seen flying over Mill Point by Ian Roberts on the 13th May 1990, but the second followed quickly, with one at Church Hougham on the 11th August of that year.

There were no less than five sightings in 1992, one in March, three in May and one in September, all of which were at Abbotscliffe or Capel-le-Ferne. Regular coverage of the area, particularly the cliffs, has produced records in every year since except 1996.



Marsh Harrier at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)



Marsh Harrier at the Willop Basin (Brian Harper)



Marsh Harrier at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)

Until 2009 it continued to be a scarce migrant but since then there have been regular records from Nickolls Quarry and the surrounding area, mainly in the winter period. The figures below exclude these records and present the migrant totals from other sites (with Nickolls Quarry sightings included up until late 2009). Figure 1 shows the records by year.

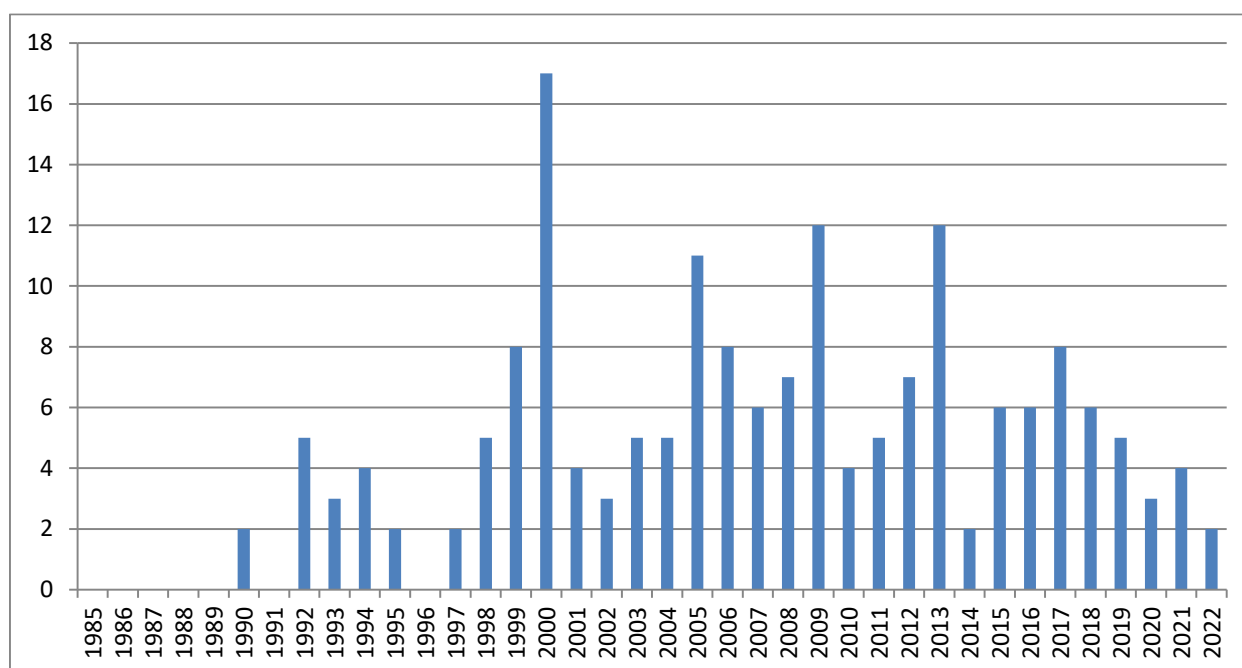


Figure 1: Migrant Marsh Harrier records at Folkestone and Hythe

There have been a total of 179 records since the first in 1990, an average of 5.4 per year. The majority (63%) of these were seen at the cliffs between Capel-le-Ferne and Samphire Hoe, with a further 14% noted over Cheriton/Folkestone.

Figure 2 shows the records by week. Most records fall into two distinct periods, March to May (46%) and August to October (41%).

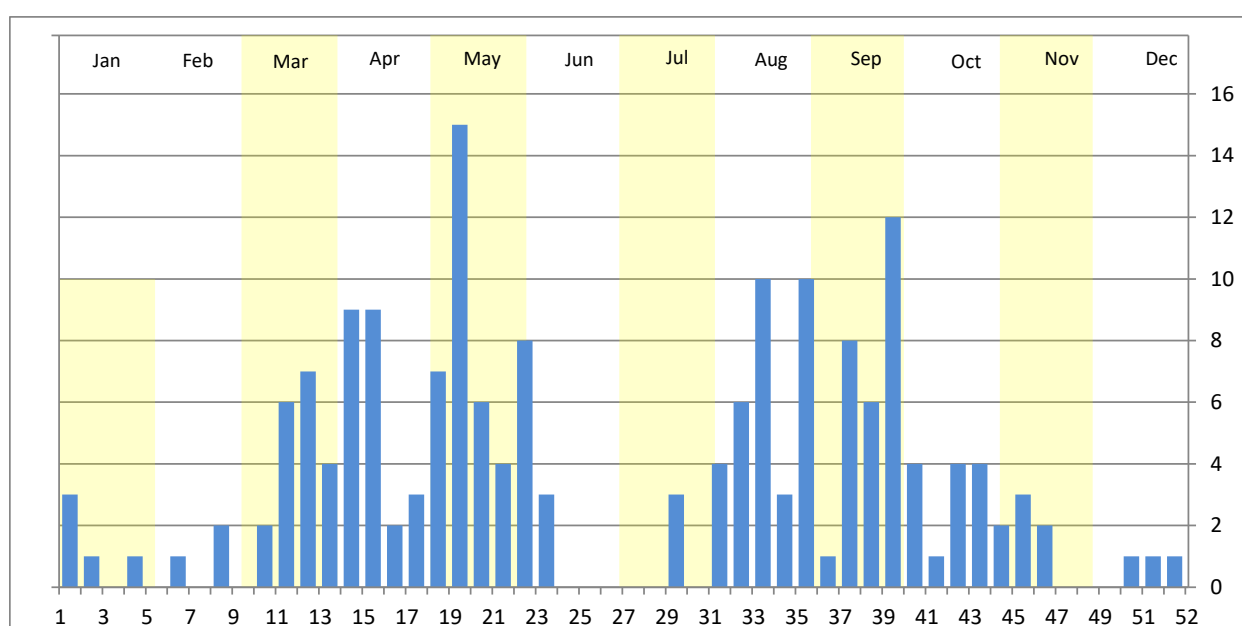


Figure 2: Migrant Marsh Harrier records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

At least one bird was noted on several occasions at Nickolls Quarry, Botolph's Bridge and Donkey Street in the 2009/2010 winter, with at least two present intermittently in the 2010/2011 and 2011/12 winters. There were sightings again in the 2012/2013 winter, including a count of three (a male and two immatures/females) at Nickolls Quarry on the 26th January 2013.

One or two were also noted intermittently in each of the next four winters, before the 2017/18 winter saw a further interesting development, when two birds were seen coming into roost at Nickolls Quarry on the 1st January 2018 (a juvenile and a third-winter male), and a female also used this roosting site during January and February. Two birds were seen arriving at the roosting site on the 23rd October 2018 but, although there were several more sightings in the area in the 2018/19 winter there were no further indications that birds were roosting again.

The 2019/20 winter did not produce any roosting records either, until an adult male was seen coming into roost on the 15th March. This proved to be yet another interesting development as the male remained at Nickolls Quarry into May and was joined by a female from the 27th March, with the pair seen engaging in display and food-passing during April. On at least one occasion in May the pair appeared to be carrying food into the reed-bed and breeding was strongly suspected but there were no further sightings after the end of May. Unfortunately, this avian development coincided with a development of a different kind, with the habitat being bulldozed to make way for a housing estate and it is likely that the birds were disturbed.



Marsh Harrier at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)



Marsh Harrier at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)

Overall distribution

Figure 3 shows the distribution of all records of Marsh Harrier by tetrad.

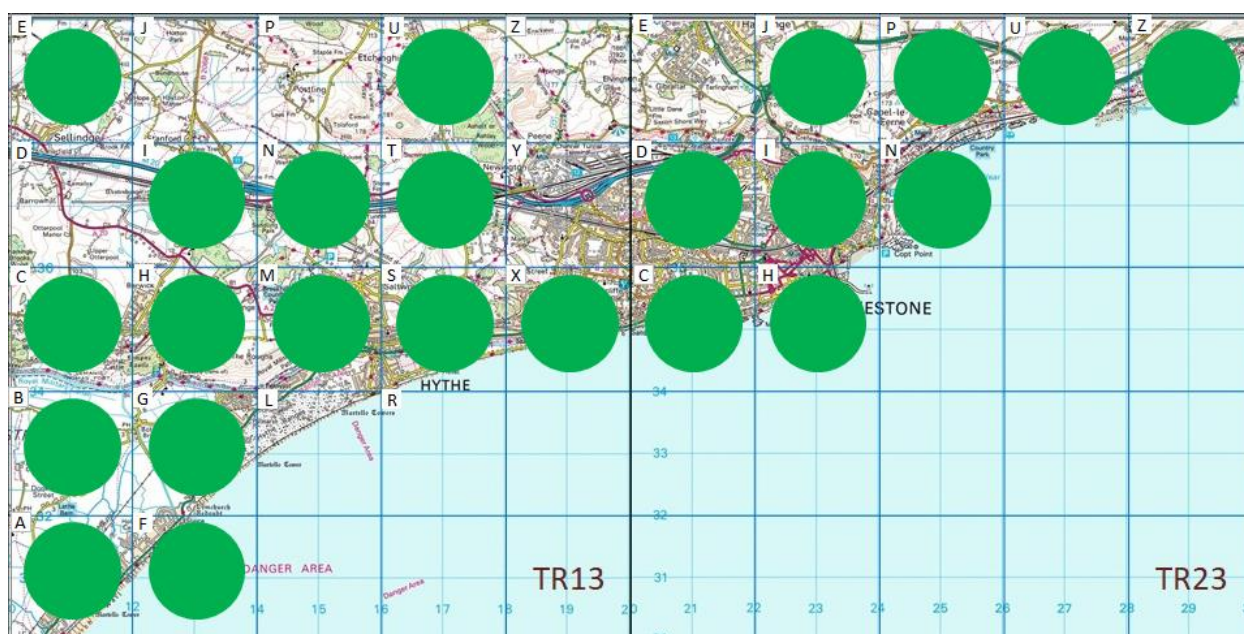


Figure 3: Distribution of all Marsh Harrier records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The Marsh Harrier has been recorded from 23 tetrads (74%), with sightings from most coastal and other well watched areas.

References

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- Kent Ornithological Society (KOS). 1953-2022. *Kent Bird Reports*. Kent Ornithological Society.
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- Taylor, D., Davenport, D. & Flegg, J. 1981. *Birds of Kent*. Kent Ornithological Society.
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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](#).

I am indebted to Andrew Henderson and Tim Hodge for providing access to the Kent Ornithological Society archives.



Marsh Harrier at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)