

Corncrake

Crex crex

Category A

Very rare vagrant,
formerly regular

3 recent records

Breeds across mid-latitude Europe, wintering in sub-Saharan Africa. There has been a long-term downland trend since the late nineteenth century, which accelerated from the 1950s, and was widespread by the 1970s. The main causes are loss of habitat and agricultural intensification, including destruction of nests through earlier harvesting. The 2010 Rare Breeding Bird Report gave a five year mean of just over 1,200 pairs in Britain, primarily across northern and western Scotland, but with 21 singing males in the Nene Washes, Cambridgeshire. A former breeding species in Kent, but now just a rare passage migrant.

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 here.

Ticehurst (1909) recorded how the Corncrake 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 however "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, but there has been no confirmation of nesting in Kent since.

Roger Norman recalls 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 Nickoll's Quarry".

He 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 22nd August 1959.

The Birds of Kent (1981) documents a "striking further decrease" in records in the county during their review period (1952-76), and there have been just 31 records since (up until the end of 2009).

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

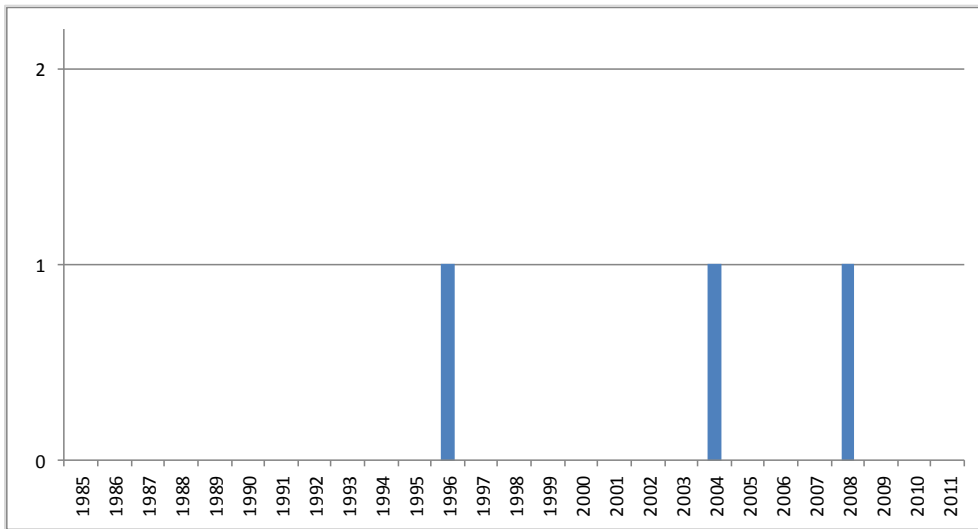


Figure 1: Corncrake records since 1985 at Folkestone and Hythe

All dated records have occurred in autumn, between 22nd August (week 34) and 16th October (week 42), with two in week 37. The records by week are given in figure 2.

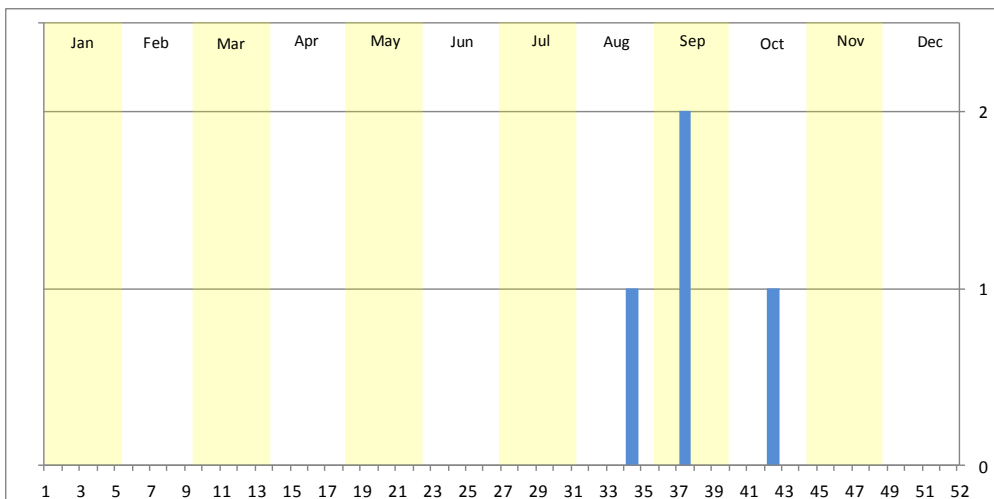


Figure 2: Corncrake records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

All modern records are from Abbotscliffe. The full list of these is follows:

1996 Abbotscliffe, one, 10th September (D. A. Gibson)

2004 Abbotscliffe, one, 16th October, (I. A. Roberts)

2008 Abbotscliffe, one, 13th September, (D. A. Gibson, J. A. Gibson)