

Cirl Bunting

Emberiza cirlus

Category A

Formerly resident, now extinct locally

Breeds across the south-west of Europe, from France south through Iberia into North Africa, and south-east through Italy and the Balkans into Greece and Turkey. In Britain spread through southern counties throughout nineteenth century to a peak in the 1930s, but has since declined considerably, with a contraction noticeable from the 1950s, and the main range confined to south Devon by the late 1980s. Range contraction was also witnessed at a similar time in northern France, Belgium, Luxembourg and Germany. It has since shown some recovery in England with a national survey in 2009 revealing an estimated population of 862 breeding pairs in the South-west. Most populations are essentially sedentary.

It is curious that Ulyett, in his *Rambles of a Naturalist Round Folkestone* (1880), did not include it in the list of species recorded in the neighbourhood of Folkestone, as Ticehurst in his *A History of the Birds of Kent* (1909) stated that the area in which the Cirl Bunting is "perhaps most numerous is the chalk country about Folkestone and Dover. In the areas in which it breeds a few pairs may generally be found at no great distance from each other, and here they are locally more numerous than the Yellowhammer, which they to a large extent replace".

He went on to report that "in the south, Mr C. J. Alexander has found scattered pairs about Hythe and thence along the Royal Military Canal as far as Bonnington" (presumably along the Hythe Roughs and beyond from his statement that it "is probably to be found throughout [the Royal Military Canal's] whole length, wherever it runs under the sand-cliffs that represent the old north bank of the Rother estuary").

The Cirl Bunting was probably already declining by the time of Harrison as, in his *The Birds of Kent* (1953), he only lists a few breeding records and widespread occasional winter records, and just one locally seen between Folkestone and Dover by Mr Howard Benthem on the 18th October 1916.

The later *Birds of Kent* (1981) stated that the range of the Cirl Bunting in Britain has contracted considerably in recent years and this has been reflected by a clearly-marked decline in the county, with the last known breeding occurring in 1958 (at Bluebell Hill). There were a few records in Kent into the 1960s, with just three in the 1970s and the last at Conningbrook, Ashford in 1983.

The most recent records locally (and only ones that are dated apart from the 1916 sighting) are of a pair that frequented Coolinge Lane, Folkestone for several days at the end of July 1953 (Folkestone Natural History Society annual report for 1953, per H. M. Rowland) and of a male seen in broom behind George Shannon's garden in Hythe on the 20th June 1954. At the time he was resident at "Selborne", 6 Cannongate Road, which is a property on the northern side of the road and which would have backed on to the Sene golf course.

The dated records are as follows:

1916 Between Folkestone and Dover, one, 18th October (H. Benthem)

1953 Coolinge Lane, Folkestone, pair, "several days at the end of July" (per H. M. Rowland)

1954 Hythe, male, 20th June (G. Shannon)