

Grey Partridge

Perdix perdix

Category A

Declining breeding resident, possibly now extinct.

Knight and Tolputt included the Grey Partridge in their “list of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood” (1871). This list covered an area of six mile radius from Folkestone town hall. Whilst this range extends further inland than the current Folkestone and Hythe area, it is likely that it was present locally, for Ticehurst (1909) described it as numerous and increasing within the county. Both he and Harrison (1953) considered the species to be well distributed, occurring on the upland areas and on the cultivation interspersed in the woodlands, as well as on the low-lying districts and marshlands.



Grey Partridge at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)

Taylor *et al* (1981) considered that its general distribution had probably changed little since those times. They also noted that few estimates of population densities had been recorded, but it was likely that numbers had declined in Kent, as in other parts of Britain.

Breeding 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 Grey Partridge at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was not confirmed in any tetrads, but there was probable breeding in five and possible breeding in one other. 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	4	(13%)	3	(10%)	1	(3%)
Probable/Confirmed	12	(39%)	2	(6%)	5	(16%)
Total	16	(52%)	5	(16%)	6	(19%)

Clements *et al*, reviewing the results of the latest atlas, stated that the map for Grey Partridge showed one of the most striking patterns of decline for any species in Kent. The decline had probably started well before the first Kent atlas and the second atlas showed a 30% decline in the number of tetrads occupied, whilst the most recent atlas showed a 70% decline compared to the first. Locally it could be found in about half of the tetrads at the time of the first atlas (with 14 of these in TR13), decreasing to 16% by the second atlas, but with little change in the most recent.

Balmer *et al* (2013) reported a 46% decline in the number of occupied 10km squares across the UK between the first and third atlas period, which coincides with a 91% population decline during this time (BTO, 2020). The Grey Partridge is one of the most strongly decreasing bird species in Europe, due to the effects of agricultural intensification. One of the key reasons for the decline appears to be the application of herbicides on the food plants of the young chicks' invertebrate prey (Potts, 2012).



Grey Partridges at Abbotscliffe (Ian Roberts)

Non-breeding distribution

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of Grey Partridge by tetrad.

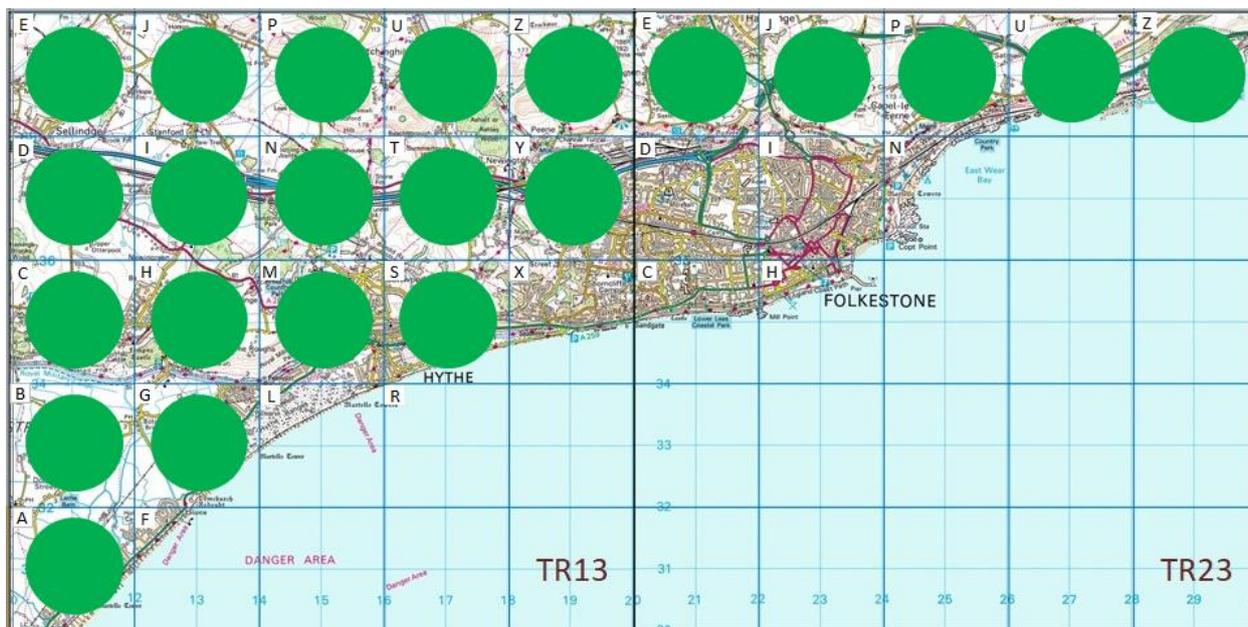


Figure 2: Distribution of all Grey Partridge records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The species was formerly far more widespread and overall there have been records from 22 tetrads (71% of all tetrads). It was only really absent from the built up areas. It was also far more numerous although there are few historic counts on record. H. Schreiber noted in 1959 that at Sandling Park "there was a big increase in the breeding population and 40 pairs nested". In the same year 21 were counted on the old airfield that is now the Nickolls Quarry site in August and up to 14 were noted in winter at the western end of Hythe Ranges in the 1950s. In 1968 six pairs bred on a 300 acre farm "to the north of Hythe".

Good numbers could still be found in the 1990s, with 23 near Botolph's Bridge in December 1993, 20 at Capel-le-Ferne in August 1997 and 20 at Abbotscliffe in October and November 1997. The only counts of 20 or more since have all been from Abbotscliffe, where there were 23 in October 2003, 21 in January 2004 and 26 in January 2010, however the final double-figure count there was in August of the following year.

By the time of the most recent atlas it was restricted to the areas around Blackhouse Hill/Saltwood Castle, Beachborough Park/Summerhouse Hill and between Capel-le-Ferne and Abbotscliffe. However it has since disappeared from these sites, with the last records from Capel-le-Ferne in May 2011, Saltwood Castle in April 2016, Church Hougham in May 2016, and Abbotscliffe and Beachborough in August 2018. There were no local records at all for the first time in 2019 and it has not been noted in 2020 to date.

Although the outlook for this species certainly appears bleak it is possible that it could reappear locally, at least for a time. There had been no sightings on the local section of the Romney Marsh for 12 years until in 2017 a flock of six were present near the Willop Sewage Works in January and two were seen at Donkey Street in April. These were followed by records of a pair at Botolph's Bridge and Donkey Street in May, at the Willop Sewage Works in October and the most recent sighting of a pair on the Botolph's Bridge road near Rock Cottage on the 18th November 2018.



Grey Partridges at Abbotscliffe (IAR)

Harrison (1953) describes some aberrations in birds that were obtained locally: "Mr. F. A. C. Munns sent me a note (8th May 1949) that, on three occasions in that year (1949), Partridges had been shot at Etchinghill in the Folkestone district with the "horseshoe" in white instead of the usual chestnut. This aberration is actually the suppression of the chestnut of the horseshoe, for, if the species is examined closely, it will be found that the chestnut marking, which is subject to much individual variation, being well marked in some and less so in others, may be represented by only a few feathers. In addition to the above note by him, Mr. Munns kindly sent me two such specimens obtained at Burmarsh in the Romney Marsh on 23rd September 1950. Both are females, one in first winter plumage and the other an adult. The latter specimen shows some albescence of the fourth to eighth primaries inclusive, a purely individual finding unconnected with the white horseshoe!".

References

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Acknowledgements

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Grey Partridge at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)