

Feral Pigeon

Columba livia

Category C4

Breeding resident.

A widespread resident across much of Europe and the rest of the world. Feral Pigeons are almost ubiquitous in Britain, nesting in rural as well as urban habitats, and avoiding only the highest ground. No distinction can realistically be drawn between feral birds of domestic origin and true wild-type Rock Doves, although birds of wild-type plumage still predominate on some more-remote Scottish islands. In field conditions, it is often not possible to distinguish between pure native Rock Doves, wild-nesting Feral Pigeons, semi-captive dovecote breeders, and passing racing pigeons (Snow & Perrins, 1998, BTO, 2020).



Feral Pigeon at Samphire Hoe (Ian Roberts)

Balston, Shepherd & Bartlett (1907) stated that the Rock Dove was seldom seen in Kent and that it was “supposed that they used to breed in the higher cliffs between Dover and St. Margaret’s Bay, but the Peregrine no doubt put a stop to their existence in that locality”. Harrison (1953) includes the species only within square brackets in his county list and considered that its disappearance was “as much, indeed to a far greater extent, probably due to the Rock Dove’s promiscuity with the tame pigeons” which frequented the same habitat.

Knight & Tolputt (1871) included the “Rock Dove” in their “List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood” and it seems possible that pure, wild birds might at one time have frequented the cliffs between Folkestone and Dover before intergrading with feral birds occurred.

Breeding distribution

Figure 1 shows the breeding distribution by tetrad based on the results of the 2007-13 BTO/KOS atlas fieldwork.

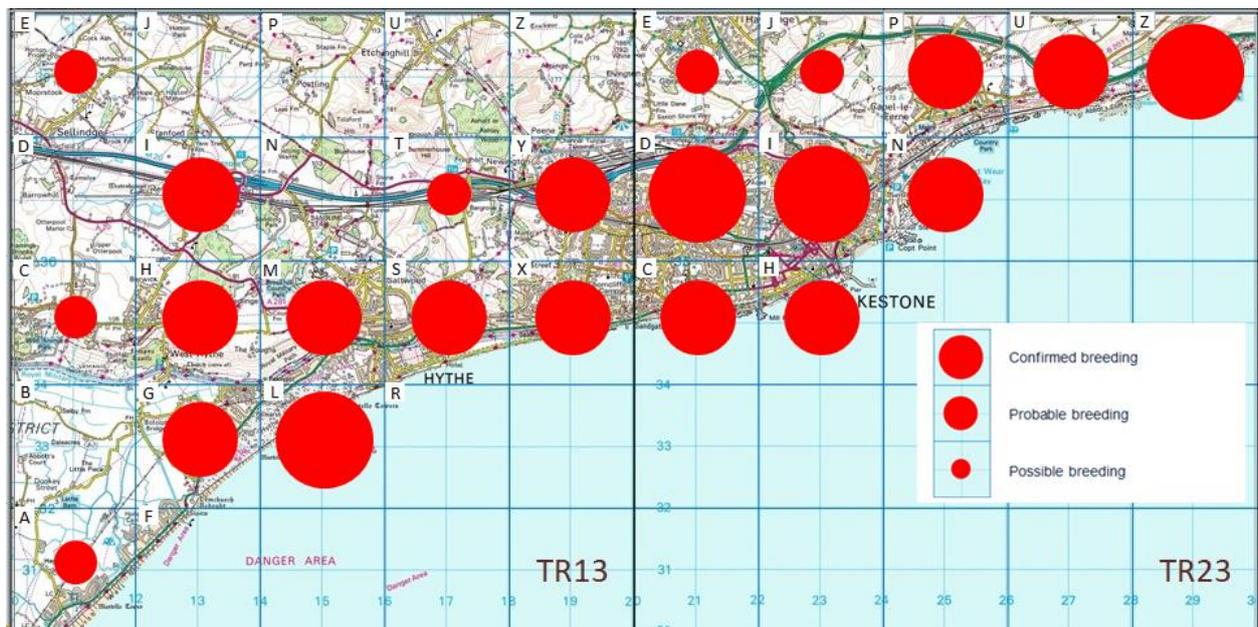


Figure 1: Breeding distribution of Feral Pigeon at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was confirmed in 4 tetrads, with probable breeding in 12 more and possible breeding in 6 others. 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	-	-	5	(16%)	6	(19%)
Probable/Confirmed	-	-	15	(48%)	16	(52%)
Total	-	-	20	(65%)	22	(71%)

The Feral Pigeon had long been neglected in Kent and did not feature at all in the first county atlas, nor was it included in "The Birds of Kent" (Taylor *et al*, 1981), despite the county population being estimated at around 5,000 breeding pairs by the time of the second atlas.

The latest atlas results suggest that it is largely stable or possibly increasing in its distribution and has a clear bias towards urban areas and larger villages locally, which mirrors the county position (Clements *et al*, 2015).

Non-breeding distribution

Figure 2 shows the distribution of all records of Feral Pigeon by tetrad, with records in 31 tetrads (100%).

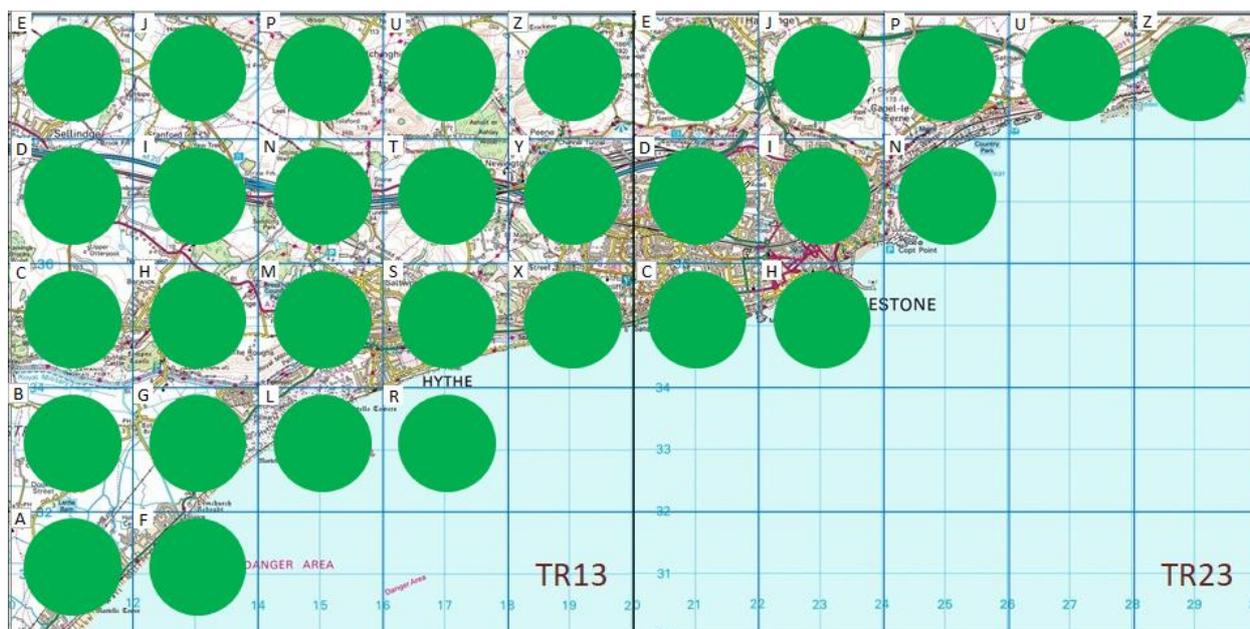


Figure 2: Distribution of all Feral Pigeon records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad



Feral Pigeon at Hythe Ranges (Ian Roberts)



Feral Pigeon at Samphire Hoe (Ian Roberts)

The indifference shown to this species by many observers leads to few counts being recorded, but it can be present in some abundance. It is most frequently associated with urban areas and is a common feature of the built-up areas of Hythe, Cheriton and Folkestone, where counts have included 55 at Radnor Park (Folkestone) in February 2016, 70 at Cheriton in November 2010, 75 in the churchyard at St. Mary and St. Eanswythe's (Folkestone) in January 2017 and 100 in Folkestone in November 2009.

It has long been known to breed at the Dymchurch Redoubt and in the Martello Towers on Hythe Ranges, where there was a peak count of 120 in May 2017.

The largest counts though have been made at more rural locations: in November 2020 a total of 140 were in the Hillhurst Farm area (near Westenhanger) and on the 9th November 2015 about 200 were seen being chased by a pair of Peregrines in the Hougham Valley (near the Plough Inn).

Birds continue to occupy the chalk cliffs which may once have held ancestral Rock Dove nests and congregate on the beach below Abbotscliffe, where there was a peak count of 60 in May 2008.

Large numbers of racing pigeons can sometimes be seen passing though and a movement of c.4,800 east over Capelle-Ferne on the 16th May 2006 appeared to be part of a pigeon race.

References

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Acknowledgements

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