

Marsh Harrier

Circus aeruginosus

Category A

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

Breeds across much of Europe and Asia. Most European countries have reported recent increases following earlier declines (Snow & Perrins, 1998). 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 (Holling *et al*, 2019). Otherwise it is a regular passage migrant in the county (KOS, 2020).



Marsh Harrier at Donkey Street (Brian Harper)

There do not appear to have been any local sightings before 1990, when Ian Roberts saw an immature/female bird flying over Mill Point on the 13th May, 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.

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.

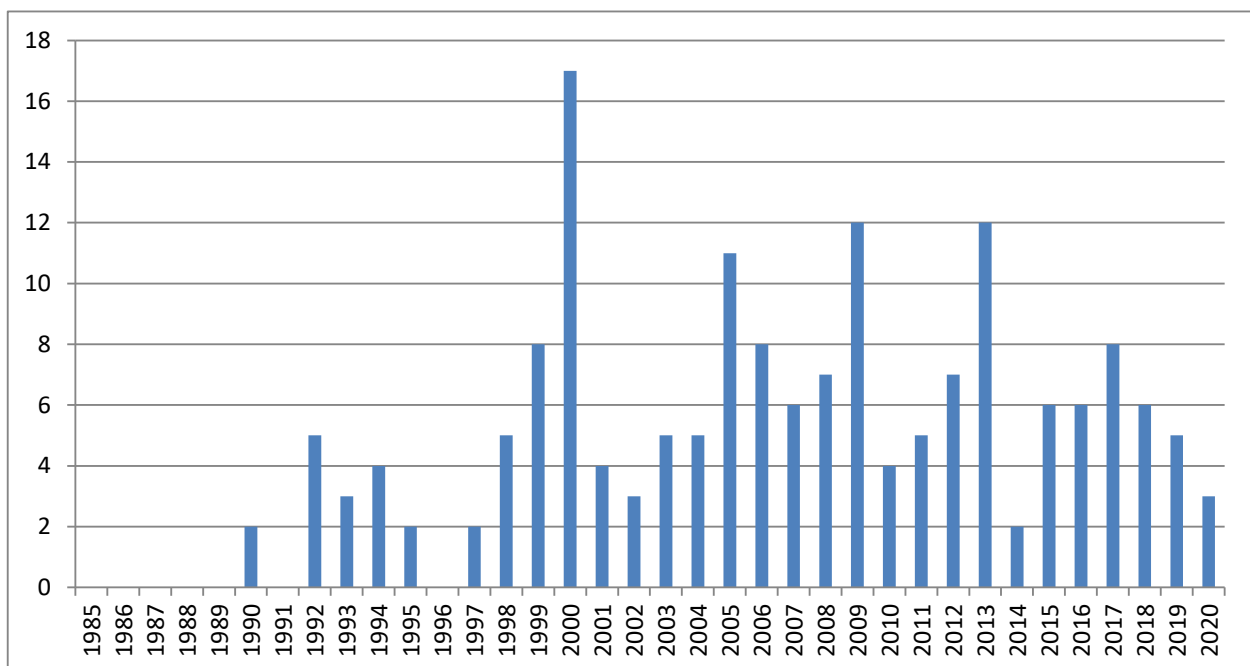


Figure 1: Migrant Marsh Harrier records at Folkestone and Hythe

There have been a total of 173 records since the first in 1990, an average of 5.6 per year. The majority (62%) of these were seen at the cliffs between Capel-le-Ferne and Samphire Hoe, with a further 15% 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 (40%).

The records of migrant birds by week are given in figure 2.

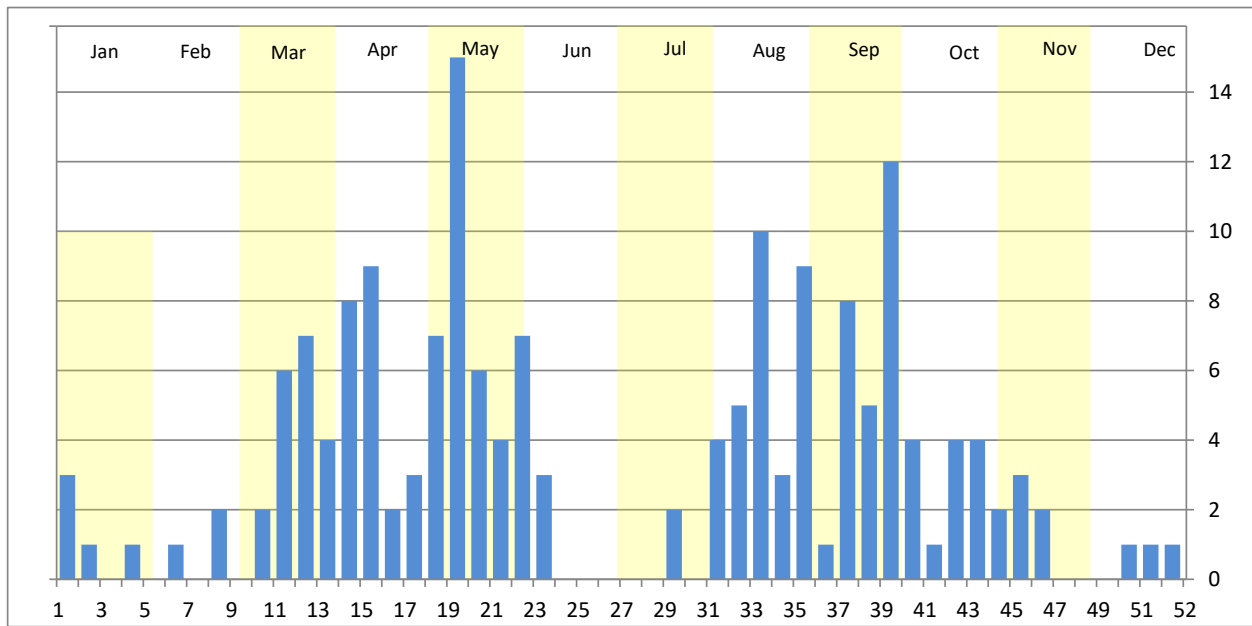


Figure 2: Migrant Marsh Harrier records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

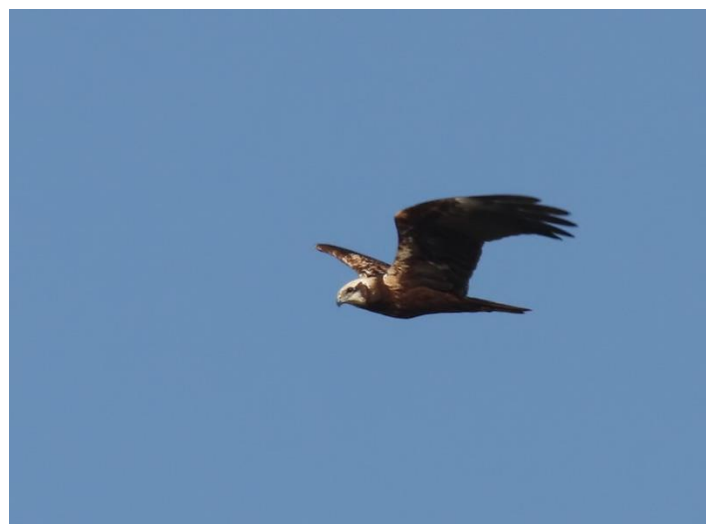
At least one bird was noted on several occasions at Nickolls Quarry, Botolph’s Bridge and Donkey Street in the 2009/2010 winter, with at least two present intermittently in the 2010/2011 and 2011/12 winters. There were sightings again in the 2012/2013 winter, including a count of three (a male and two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

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

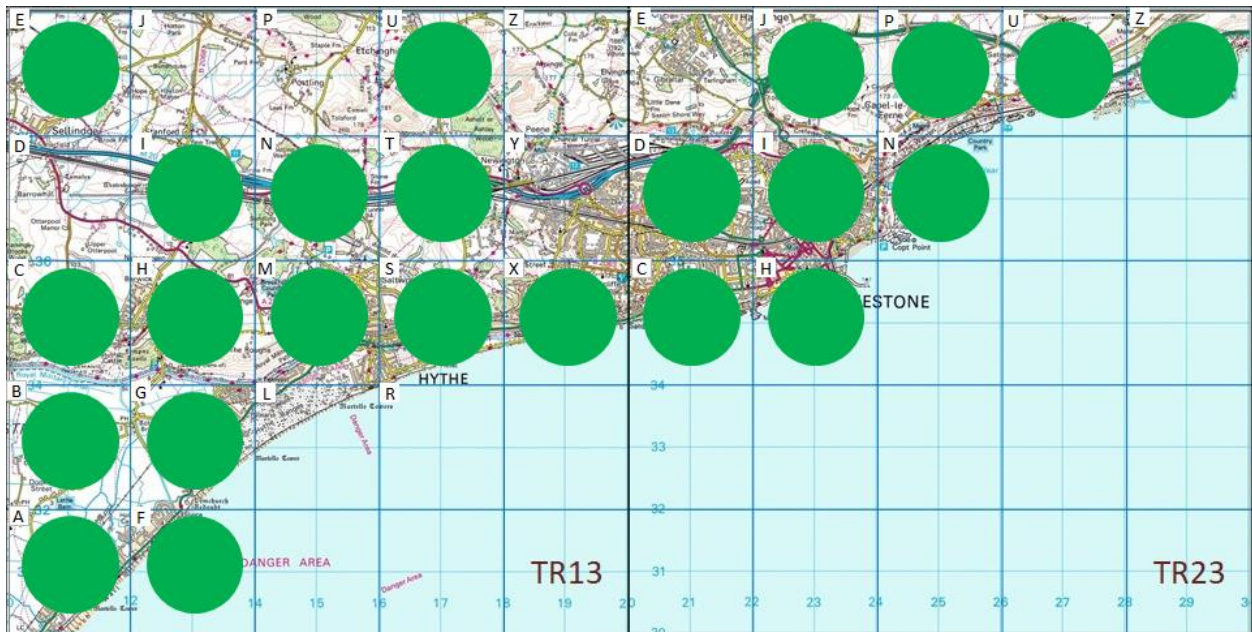
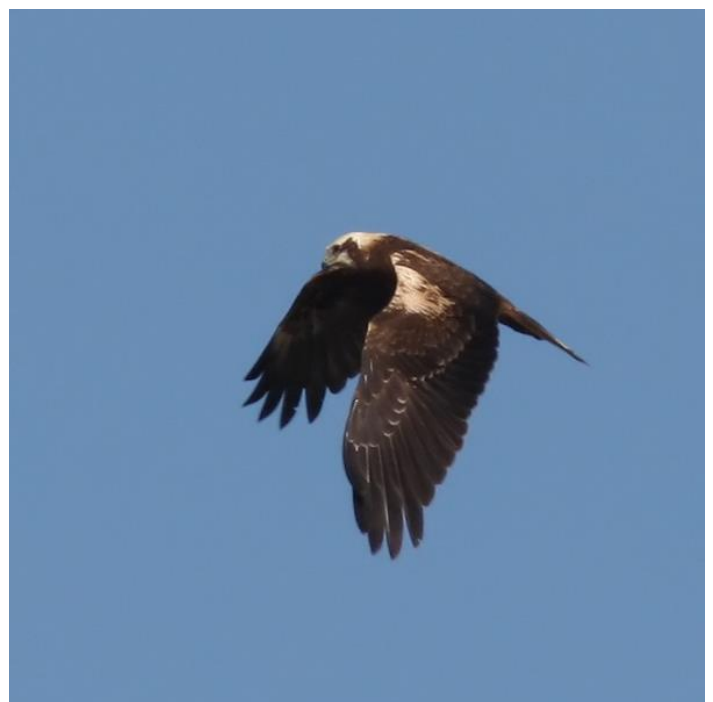


Figure 3: Distribution of all Marsh Harrier records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

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



Marsh Harrier at the Willop Basin (Brian Harper)



Marsh Harrier at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)

References

Holling, M. & the Rare Breeding Birds Panel, 2019. Rare breeding birds in the UK in 2017. *British Birds*, 112: 706-758

Kent Bird Reports. Kent Ornithological Society

Snow, D. & Perrins, C.M., 1998. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Oxford University Press.

Acknowledgements

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Marsh Harrier at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)