

Short-eared Owl

Asio flammeus

Category A

Passage migrant.

Breeds mainly across northern Europe and Asia, and also in the Americas. The range varies considerably in the Western Palearctic due to population fluctuations (thought to be linked to rodent numbers), with irregular breeding south of the main range.

Northern populations are migratory, moving further and in larger numbers in some years. It can also be nomadic in all seasons (Snow & Perrins, 1998).

The British population is thought to be somewhere between 600 and 2,150 breeding pairs, mainly on open moorland (Woodward *et al*, 2020), or in Kent on flat grazing marsh (Clements *et al*, 2015).



Short-eared Owl at Princes Parade (Nigel Webster)

Ticehurst (1909) regarded the Short-eared Owl as an autumn and winter visitor which occasionally stayed on to breed after a winter invasion. This remained the case until the 1950s when there was a run of breeding years, with up to 14 pairs in 1957, although in most years there were fewer than five. It did not breed from 1979 to 1988, but then resumed with two or three pairs on the Isle of Sheppey in most years until 2002. Since then Clements *et al* (2015) were only able to report on one further record of confirmed breeding, in 2011.

The species was included in Knight and Tolputt's "List of birds observed in Folkestone and its immediate neighbourhood" (1871). This list covered an area of six mile radius from Folkestone town hall. This range extends further inland than the current Folkestone and Hythe area and so this does not provide conclusive evidence of its occurrence here.

The first documented record locally is of one found by Roger Norman at Hythe Ranges in October 1949, with singles "seen irregularly" there until April 1950, followed by others in January and March 1951. An interesting record from nearby Nickolls Quarry in 1956 involved one seen over the "old airfield" on the unusual date of 17th June prompting Roger to speculate that it "lends belief to the possibility of nearby breeding". There were no further indications of nesting, but there were several further records at Hythe Ranges and Nickolls Quarry in the 1950s, between November and early April.



Short-eared Owl at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)

There was little coverage of the area in the 1960s or 1970s, but there were records of two at Nickolls Quarry on the 17th January 1970 and the 20th November 1974. In the 1980s two were seen at Abbotscliffe on the 30th October 1985, with one at Nickolls Quarry on the 23rd December 1985, one at Cheriton Hill throughout March 1988 and two at Abbotscliffe on the 21st July 1988.

Two were seen at Nickolls Quarry on the 17th November 1991, then one or two were hunting regularly there until the 20th February 1992, and there have been almost annual sightings thereafter, as demonstrated by figure 1. The annual variability is marked, with three 'blank' years (in 1999, 2001 and 2009) compared to an exceptional influx in 2015 when there were 17 records involving a total of 22 birds, with a mean of 3.9 records per year over the last 30 years.

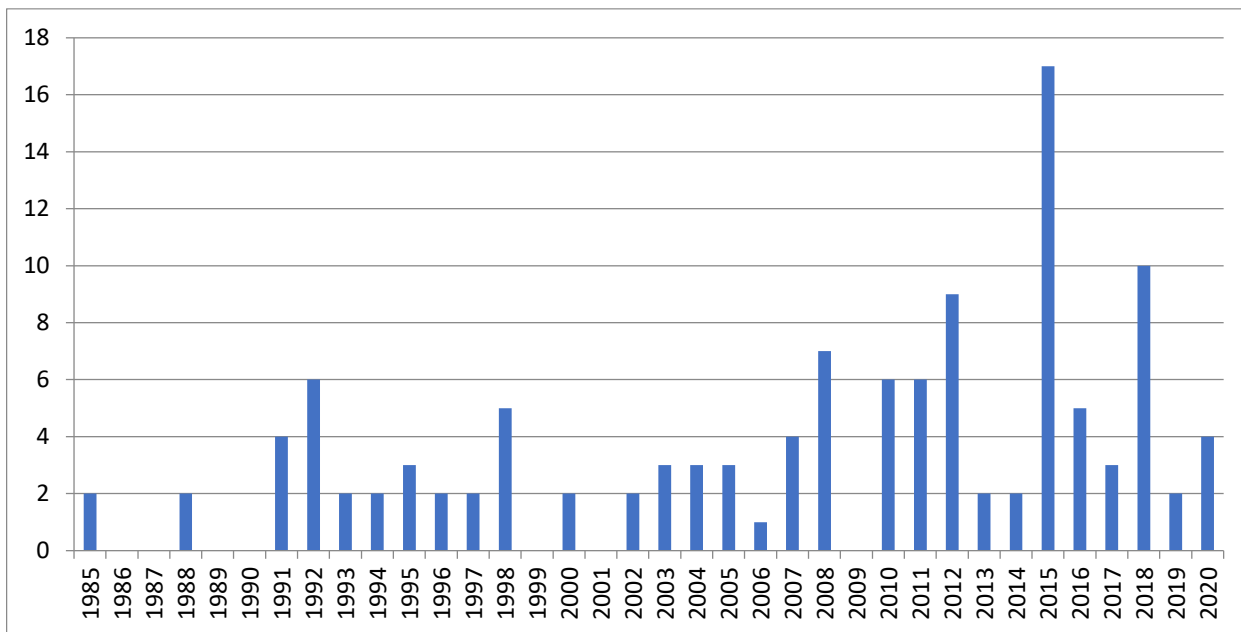


Figure 1: Short-eared Owl records at Folkestone and Hythe since 1985

The records by week are given in figure 2.

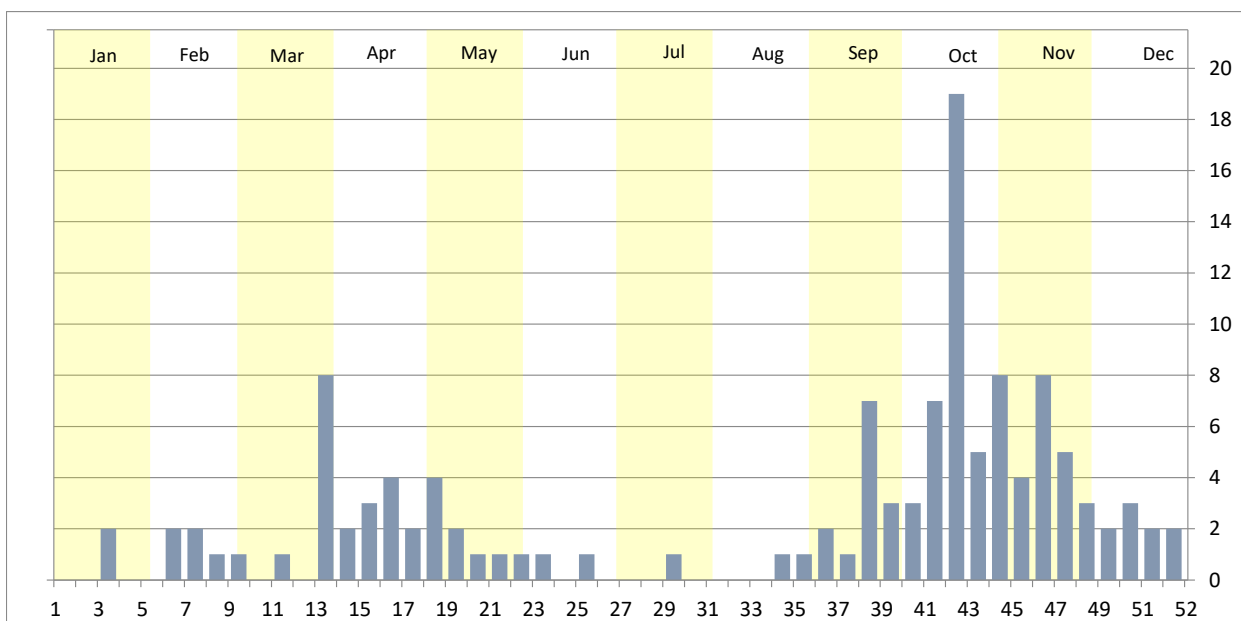


Figure 2: Short-eared Owl records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

The first autumn arrivals can occasionally occur in August, when there have been singles at Abbotscliffe on the 21st August 1993 and Donkey Street on the 27th August 2020, but September records are more typical. As the chart demonstrates records peak in October, including three records (of a total of five birds) on the 18th October 2015 during the exceptional influx in that autumn, and continue into November in many years.

There are occasional winter records but none have lingered for more than a day. The chart shows a smaller peak between late March and May, reflecting an irregular spring passage, with a peak of five records in 2012. Summer sightings are rare. One seen near Rock Cottage on the Botolph's Bridge Road was probably a late migrant but the record from 1956 did perhaps suggest local breeding, particularly as numbers in the county were approaching their peak level at this time. There is also an unusual, isolated record of two at Abbotscliffe on the 21st July 1988.



Short-eared Owl at Abbotscliffe (Ian Roberts)

Figure 3 shows the distribution of all records of Short-eared Owl by tetrad, with records in 14 tetrads (45%).



Figure 3: Distribution of all Short-eared Owl records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

Most sightings have been from the cliffs (between Capel-le-Ferne and Samphire Hoe), with 60% of the records, or from Hythe Ranges/Romney Marsh (26%).

References

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Short-eared Owl at Botolph's Bridge (Russell Edwards)



Short-eared Owl at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)

Acknowledgements

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Short-eared Owl at Botolph's Bridge (Brian Harper)