

# Swallow

*Hirundo rustica*

Category A

Breeding summer visitor and passage migrant.

Breeds virtually throughout Europe and Asia except the extreme north, also across much of North America. Most European birds are long-distance migrants, crossing the Sahara to winter, but small numbers remain in North Africa and southern Spain. There are occasional, but increasingly frequent, records further north to Britain in the winter months (Snow & Perrins, 1998).

Nationally the Swallow has the most extensive distribution of any summer migrant in Britain and Ireland (Balmer *et al*, 2013) and it is a common and widespread summer visitor and passage migrant in Kent (KOS, 2020).



Swallow at Saltwood Castle (Brian Harper)

## Breeding distribution

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

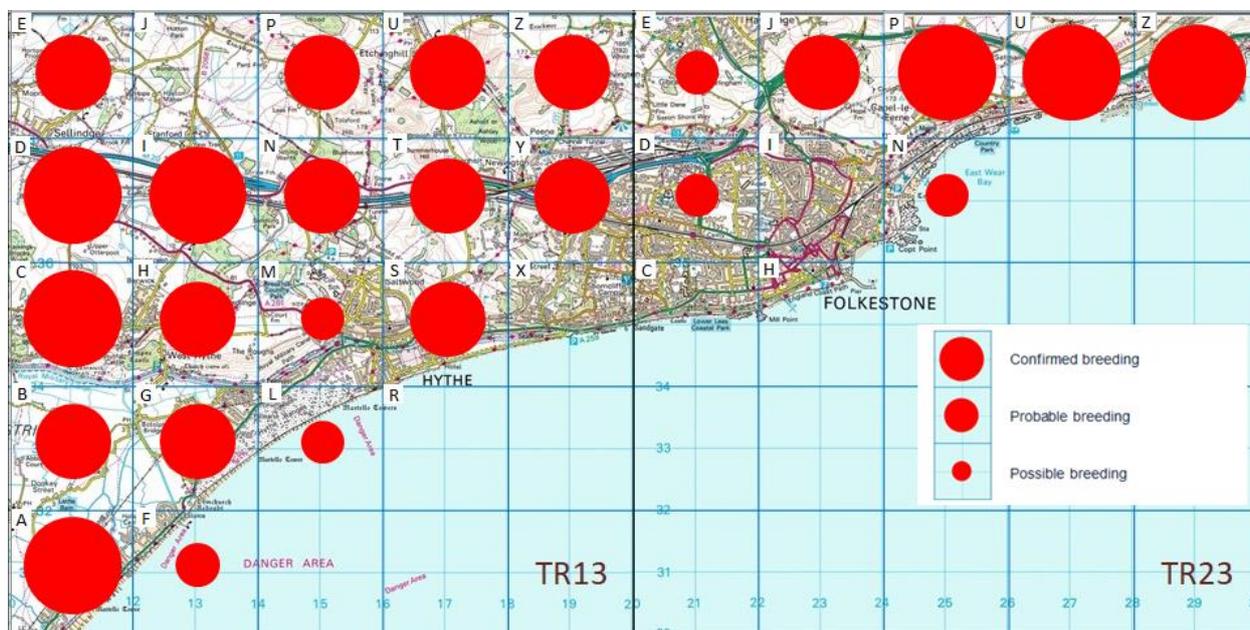


Figure 1: Breeding distribution of Swallow at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad (2007-13 BTO/KOS Atlas)

Breeding was confirmed in seven tetrads, with probable breeding in 12 more and possible breeding in six 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	2	(6%)	7	(23%)	6	(19%)
Probable/Confirmed	18	(58%)	21	(68%)	19	(61%)
Total	20	(65%)	28	(90%)	25	(81%)

Henderson & Hodge felt that the full distribution map from the second atlas disguised a downward trend in numbers, citing unfavourable climatic conditions and a reduction in suitable nest sites, but Clements *et al* (2015) remarked upon the BBS trend since then, which has shown a slight upturn (with a 19% increase in south-east England between 1995 and 2012).

They presented a very similar position in the most recent atlas in terms of total occupied tetrads (with just a 2% reduction) however the tetrads with probable/confirmed breeding had decreased by 18%.

Balmer *et al* (2013) described how the abundance change map derived from the latest atlas results showed a pattern common to several long-distance migrants, including House and Sand Martin, whereby tetrad occupancy has increased in many parts of Ireland and northern Britain but decreased in south-east England. The causes of these regional differences are unclear. Ockendon *et al* (2012) stated that given that this regional pattern is shared by several long-distance migrants with differing breeding ecology, it seems likely that factors acting on migration or in the wintering grounds are important. Climatic changes could also be a contributing factor.

Any decline locally has been far less apparent to date than with the other hirundines and the Swallow is by far the most common and widespread species, only absent as a breeding bird from the most built up areas.



Swallow at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)



Swallow at Saltwood Castle (Brian Harper)



Swallow at Saltwood Castle (Brian Harper)

## Non-breeding distribution

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

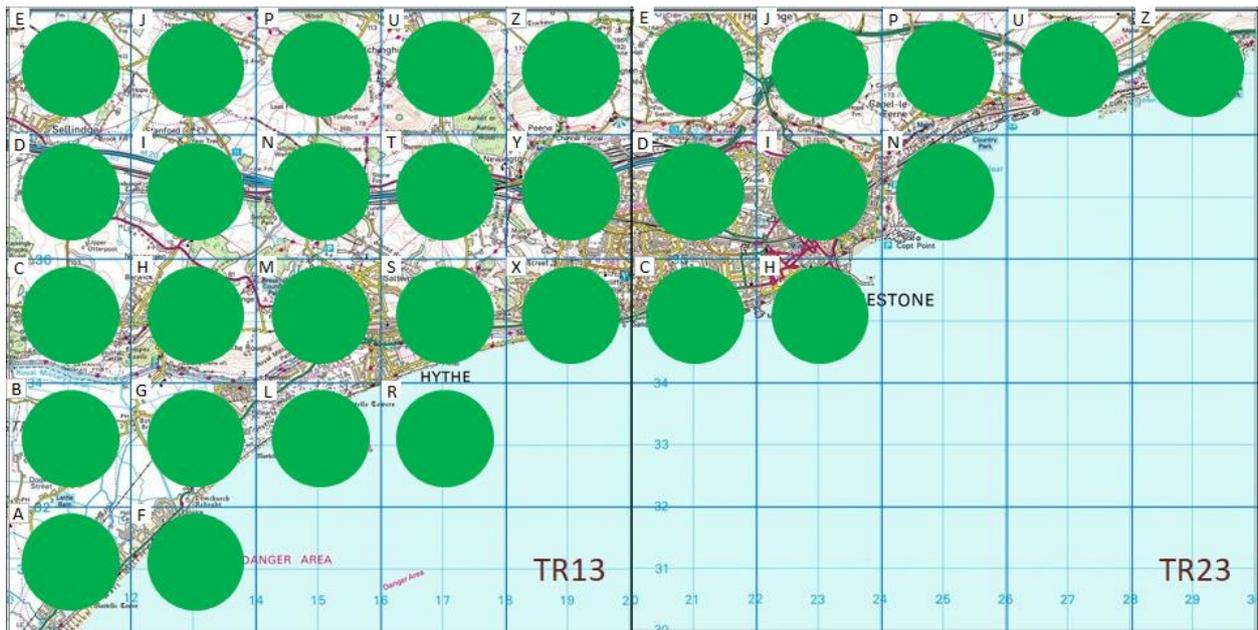


Figure 2: Distribution of all Swallow records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The earliest ever arrival date involved one seen at Hythe by Katharine Daniells on the 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2019. This was an exceptionally early appearance but part of a significant influx into Britain at this time which actually commenced in mid-February and saw ten arrive in Kent in that month, with several others in the county in early March. This broke an extremely long-standing record which had stood since 1952, when Colonel R. V. Argyle saw one at Hythe on the 10<sup>th</sup> March 1952.

Other early arrivals have involved two at Folkestone on the 12<sup>th</sup> March 2015, one at Nickolls Quarry on the 18<sup>th</sup> March 2002, singles at Nickolls Quarry on the 20<sup>th</sup> March 2005 and along the canal at Seabrook on the 20<sup>th</sup> March 2015, and singles at Hythe on the 21<sup>st</sup> March 2011 and along the canal at Seabrook on the 21<sup>st</sup> March 2015. One along the canal at Seabrook on the 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2015 and two at Lympne on the 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2016 were also noteworthy.



Swallow at Saltwood Castle (Brian Harper)



Swallow at Saltwood Castle (Brian Harper)

A couple of very early arrivals in recent years has reduced the mean arrival date for the last decade to the 22<sup>nd</sup> March and, although there are March records in most years, the first sighting is sometimes not until April. The highest count in March was five at Samphire Hoe on the 24<sup>th</sup> March 2013.

The earliest double-figure count involved 20 at Nickolls Quarry on the 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2008 and counts of over 50 in April have occurred as follows:

- 66 in off the sea at Folkestone on the 28<sup>th</sup> April 1996
- 53 in off the sea at Capel-le-Ferne on the 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2000
- 51 in off the sea at Copt Point on the 27<sup>th</sup> April 2003
- 85 in off the sea at Copt Point on the 29<sup>th</sup> April 2003
- 300 at Nickolls Quarry on the 29<sup>th</sup> April 2012
- 75 at Nickolls Quarry on the 17<sup>th</sup> April 2015
- 60 at Nickolls Quarry on the 24<sup>th</sup> April 2016
- 60 at Nickolls Quarry on the 26<sup>th</sup> April 2017

Spring passage tends to peak in May, when the following counts of over 150 have been noted:

- 188 in/east at Capel-le-Ferne on the 10<sup>th</sup> May 1998
- 153 in/east at Capel Battery on the 15<sup>th</sup> May 1999
- 161 in off the sea at Capel-le-Ferne on the 6<sup>th</sup> May 2003
- 150 at Nickolls Quarry on the 9<sup>th</sup> May 2010
- 160 east at Capel-le-Ferne on the 14<sup>th</sup> May 2011
- 300+ at Nickolls Quarry on the 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2012
- c.300 at Nickolls Quarry on the 24<sup>th</sup> May 2013
- 154 in/west at Abbotscliffe on the 13<sup>th</sup> May 2014

Return passage can be apparent from late July and numbers increase during August, when counts have included 700 flying west at Abbotscliffe on the 30<sup>th</sup> August 1993, c.1,200 flying west at Nickolls Quarry on the 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2006 and c.4,500 flying west at the Dymchurch Redoubt on the 8<sup>th</sup> August 1951, before generally peaking in September. A number of the earlier movements were unfortunately not quantified but clearly involved large volumes of birds: on the 23<sup>rd</sup> September “a continuous stream moved south-west at Hythe Ranges during the morning - over the sea as far as could be seen”, whilst “clouds of birds flew south-west over the sea” there on the 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1958 and 3,000 per hour were passing south over Hythe on the 13<sup>th</sup> September 1969.

On the 29<sup>th</sup> September 1984 a total 4,000 flew west at Copt Point, whilst on the 19<sup>th</sup> September 1992 around 2,000 per hour were moving south-west at Hythe Ranges during the morning. Movements of 3,000 or more in September since have been noted as follows:

- 8,200 east at Abbotscliffe on the 20<sup>th</sup> Sep 1995
- 5,000 east at Abbotscliffe on the 15<sup>th</sup> Sep 1996
- 3,500 west at Abbotscliffe on the 5<sup>th</sup> Sep 2000
- 5,000 at Abbotscliffe on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Sep-00 (2,000 moving south-east and 3,000 feeding)
- 4,000 east at Princes Parade on the 21<sup>st</sup> Sep 2001
- 3,000 west at Abbotscliffe on the 27<sup>th</sup> Sep 2012
- 4,000 west at Samphire Hoe on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Sep 2013
- 4,000 at Abbotscliffe on the 19<sup>th</sup> Sep 2015
- 7,500 west at Abbotscliffe on the 20<sup>th</sup> Sep 2015
- 10,000 at Samphire Hoe on the 20<sup>th</sup> Sep 2015
- c.5,000 south at Beachborough Ponds on the 14<sup>th</sup> Sep 2018 (“at least 10,000 Swallows and House Martins”)
- 3,000 west at Abbotscliffe on the 12<sup>th</sup> Sep 2019

Numbers tend to dwindle during October but 3,000 flew east at Hythe on the 1<sup>st</sup> October 2000, c.5,000 (an “estimated flock of c.10,000 Swallows/martins”) flew east over Hythe “ahead of a weather front” on the 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1984, 2,165 flew east over Cheriton on the 9<sup>th</sup> October 1998, 2,070 flew west at Abbotscliffe on the 10<sup>th</sup> October 1998 and 3,000 flew west at Copt Point on the 16<sup>th</sup> October 1984.

The latest ever four-figure count involved 1,100 flying east at Folkestone on the 25<sup>th</sup> October 1994, whilst the latest three-figure count involved 150 at Mill Point on the 29<sup>th</sup> October 1985 and the latest double-figure count was 10 at Hythe on the 11<sup>th</sup> November 1951.



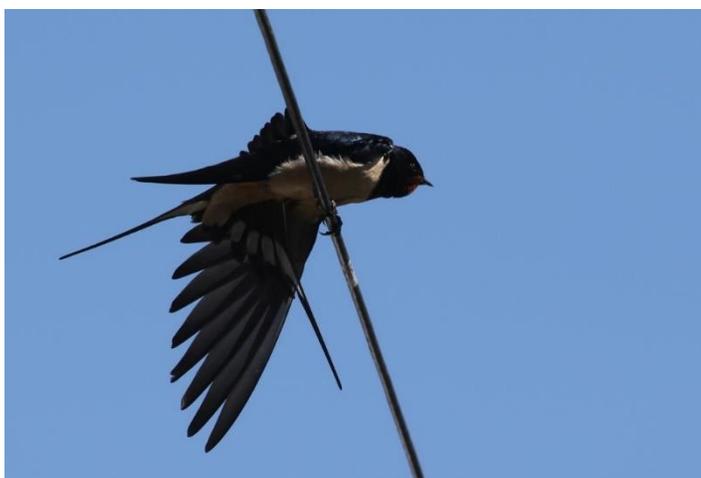
Swallows at Saltwood Castle (Brian Harper)



Swallows at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)

Swallows are comparatively late-departing migrants that are leaving later with growing frequency (Balmer *et al*). The mean departure date over the last decade was the 15<sup>th</sup> November and there have been December records in eight years, with the latest ever sightings on the 8<sup>th</sup> December (in 1955 and 2015):

- Two at Hythe on the 1<sup>st</sup> December 1953
- Two at Sandgate on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1955 and one at Hythe on the 8<sup>th</sup> December 1955
- One at Sandgate on the 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1967
- One at Hythe on the 6<sup>th</sup> December in the “early 1980s”
- One at West Hythe on the 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2002
- Two at Samphire Hoe on the 5<sup>th</sup> December 2012
- One at Princes Parade on the 8<sup>th</sup> December 2015
- One at Botolph's Bridge on the 6<sup>th</sup> December 2020



Swallow at Hythe (Ian Roberts)



Swallow at Casebourne Farm, Horn Street (Ian Roberts)

## References

Balmer, D., Gillings, S., Caffrey, B., Swann, B., Downie, I & Fuller, R. 2013. *Bird Atlas 2007-11: The Breeding and Wintering Birds of Britain and Ireland*. British Trust for Ornithology

Clements, R., Orchard, M., McCanch, N. & Wood, S. 2015. *Kent Breeding Bird Atlas 2008-13*. Kent Ornithological Society

Henderson, A. & Hodge, T. 1998. The Kent Breeding Bird Atlas 1988-94. *Kent Bird Report* 1996: 134-272.

Kent Bird Reports. Kent Ornithological Society

Ockendon, N., Hewson, C. M., Johnston, A. & Atkinson, P. W. 2012. Declines in British-breeding populations of Afro-Palaearctic migrant birds are linked to bioclimatic wintering zone in Africa, possibly via constraints on arrival time advancement. *Bird Study* 59: 111-125.

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

Taylor, D., Davenport, D. & Flegg, J. 1981. *Birds of Kent*. Kent Ornithological Society

### ***Acknowledgements***

The tetrad map images were produced from the Ordnance Survey [Get-a-map service](#) and are reproduced with kind permission of [Ordnance Survey](#).



Swallow at Nickolls Quarry (Brian Harper)