

## Marsh Warbler

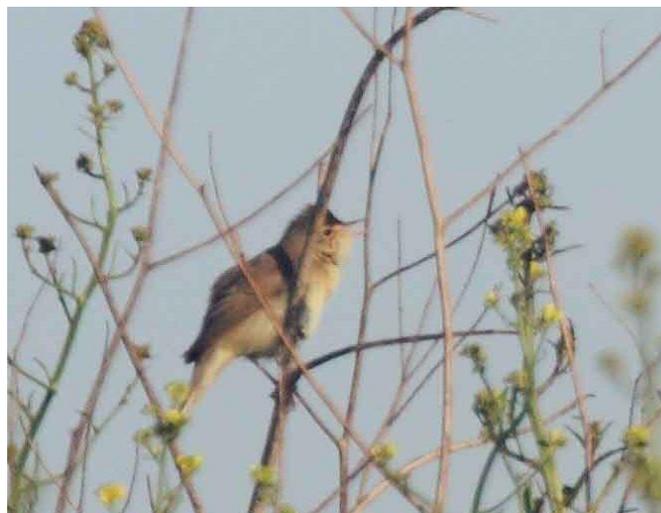
*Acrocephalus palustris*

Category A

Rare summer visitor and passage migrant. 19 records

Breeds across mid-latitude Europe, from northern France eastwards into Russia, with only a very few pairs in Britain. Winters mainly in south-east Africa. Adults leave the breeding grounds soon after the young are independent, juveniles departing about two weeks later, with some local dispersal first.

Marsh Warblers formerly bred in southern England, in scattered locations, but with a stronghold in Worcestershire. Following a long-term decline, they became extinct in this area, but a new population became established in south-east England in the 1970s, chiefly in Kent. The Kent population had been expanding and by 1993 there were over 25 pairs in at least four sites. However, the population then began to decline due to unknown factors (knowledge of the ecology of the species in Britain is poor), possibly related to climatic conditions here and in the winter quarters. By 2008 there was just one singing male holding territory in Kent and the Rare Breeding Birds Panel report for that year concluded that “it appears that the species is no longer able to maintain a toehold in Kent”.



Marsh Warbler near Botolph's Bridge Road  
(Paul Edmondson)

The UK Government agreed a Biodiversity Action Plan for this species in 1998 though, as it is on the edge of its breeding range here, there is little that can be done in terms of effective conservation action.

The Marsh Warbler is now considered to be a rare opportunistic breeder in coastal areas, and that it is perhaps late migrants that find a mate and stay to breed, as there seems to be little consistency in distribution over recent years. There is an exception however in neighbouring Sussex, where there have been breeding pairs for the three years up to 2010 at least (Rare Breeding Birds Panel report).

Breeding Marsh Warblers were discovered in the Folkestone and Hythe area in 1987 though may have been present prior to this, and remained locally established until 2006. The population appeared to be transitory in nature, using sites for a few years before ceasing to occupy them, even though they appeared to remain suitable. In total four sites were occupied during this period, two of them simultaneously in 1991 when the local population peaked at 8-9 singing males.

The sites used by Marsh Warblers are not publicised to reduce the risks from egg collectors or disturbance from birdwatchers, and so are not detailed here in case they are ever occupied again. Details are only provided where it is clear that migrant individuals outside of suitable breeding habitat have been involved.

First arrival dates have typically been in late May or early June, exceptionally as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> May (in 1990), and it appears that arrivals can continue well into June.

There is only one confirmed record of a migrant bird in autumn – at West Hythe on the 18<sup>th</sup> September 1994 – however it has been suspected on the cliffs on a couple of occasions (for example at Abbotscliffe on the 9<sup>th</sup> August 1998) but the identification could not be confirmed. It is a difficult species to identify in autumn without good prolonged views.

The full list of records is as follows:

**1987** Site A, pair bred, with additional singing male in June and a total of six males singing in July

**1988** Site A, five reported in late May, with at least one pair summering and probably breeding

**1990** Site A, singing male, with two birds present in July

**1991** Site A, two to three singing males

**1991** Site B, six singing males

- 1992** Site B, two singing males  
**1994** West Hythe, one, 18<sup>th</sup> September (K. Shepherd)  
**1995** Site C, pair bred, raising 3-4 young  
**1997** Site C, pair bred successfully, possibly a second singing male present on a single date  
**2000** Site D, three singing males  
**2001** Site D, pair probably bred, additional male present on 3-4 dates  
**2002** Site D, one singing male  
**2003** Site D, one singing male  
**2004** Site D, one singing male  
**2005** Site D, pair bred successfully, two additional singing males held territory, possibly paired  
**2005** Nickoll's Quarry, singing male, 2<sup>nd</sup> June (I. A. Roberts, R. K. Norman)  
**2005** Nickoll's Quarry, singing male, 4<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> June (I. A. Roberts, R. K. Norman), probably different to above  
**2006** Site D, one singing male held territory, possibly paired, additional male on a single date  
**2012** Near Botolph's Bridge Road, singing male held territory from 5<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> June, though not thought to be paired (I. A. Roberts *et al*)  
**2013** Site E, one singing male, 17<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> June (M. Kennett, I. A. Roberts)



Marsh Warbler near Botolph's Bridge Road (Ian Roberts)