

# The Hawfinch in Kent

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Formerly so common as to be classified as an agricultural pest, Hawfinch numbers have shown a catastrophic decline in Kent over the past thirty years, with the looming possibility of extinction as a breeding species. In this paper, I review our knowledge of the decline, and summarise my survey-work in their stronghold area over the past fifteen years.

The Hawfinch was considered a rare winter visitor in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, but Ticehurst (1909) suggests it was well established as a breeding species by 1876, when fifty nests were recorded at Cobham. Winter flocks of several hundred birds were noted at Loddington (near Maidstone) in 1900, while Harrison (1953) records flocks of 80-100 birds at Boxley and Tunbridge Wells around 1920. In more recent times, *Birds of Kent* (Taylor et al 1981) identified two main areas where winter roosts had become established, with up to 60 birds at Shorne Woods in March 1971 and 100 birds counted at Bedgebury in January 1975. Flocks of 20 or more birds were also noted at Lullingstone, Burham, Maidstone and Lyminge Forest, suggesting that the species was widespread throughout the county.

## MEASURING THE DECLINE

Period	Possible	Confirmed	Total
1967-73	37	46	83
1988-94	53	46	99
2008-13	7	7	14

**Table 1.** Hawfinch: Occupied Tetrads over three Atlas periods

The data presented in Table 1 gives some idea of the extent of the decline in Hawfinch numbers since the first Atlas period. During 1967-73, coverage was much poorer than in the two more recent periods, especially on the North Downs where the main population existed. Despite this, Hawfinches were recorded as possible or confirmed breeders in 83 tetrads, and were probably present in many more. No estimate was suggested, but the breeding population may have been 500 pairs or more. The 1996 Breeding Birds Atlas noted that Hawfinches had disappeared from Hamstreet Woods and were close to extinction in the Blean Woods. The population was estimated at 125-175 pairs, which in retrospect may have been too conservative. The 2008-13 Atlas period recorded Hawfinches from 14 tetrads, with only 7 confirmed breeding. Four of the confirmed breeding records came from TQ95, indicating the importance of this area on the North Downs. Of the other three confirmed breeding tetrads, by 2013 breeding had definitely ceased in two of them and probably ceased in the other. The New Atlas suggests a population of 50-70 pairs during the 2008-13 period, though even that figure assumes that breeding continues unrecorded at a few locations outside the stronghold area.

## Evidence from the Kent Bird Reports

The annual Kent Bird Reports only present a very incomplete picture for an elusive species such as Hawfinch. Nevertheless, the trend indicated by the Atlas data is reflected both in the reduction in sites recorded and maximum counts at well-watched sites such as Bedgebury, where roosting numbers reached around 100 birds in the 1970s.

### 1990-1999

The 1993 KBR recorded Hawfinches from 18 sites, with a maximum count of 32 at Bedgebury. It noted the decline at Blean Woods RSPB Reserve from 11 breeding pairs in 1988 to none in 1993.

The 1994 KBR records peak winter counts of 40 at Bedgebury, 21 at Shorne and 18 at Walderslade.

The 1999 KBR notes that that Hawfinch numbers recorded in that year were only 40% of the 1977 total.

### 2000-2009

Maximum count at Bedgebury was 17 in 2000, with no more than 6 over the period 2006-2009.

Highest counts elsewhere were 14 at Platt Woods in 2004, 12 at Newnham in 2001 and 12 at Eastling in 2006. Although there were reports from coastal sites every year, there was evidence of an autumn influx in 2005, with a report of 11 at St. Margaret's Bay on 22<sup>nd</sup> October. To what extent these coastal migrants join resident wintering birds or perhaps even stay to breed is unknown. Ringing recoveries from Wales indicate that there is movement between sites in this country, and the presence of birds from northern Europe within the wintering flocks.

### 2010-2014

The 2011 KBR reports a maximum count of 9 at Bedgebury and 12 at Denge Woods. In 2013, there were briefly 20 birds at Bedgebury, probably reflecting the influx noted in Surrey and other counties.

## TQ95 THE STRONGHOLD AREA

I first started regularly visiting the area of the North Downs to the south and east of Sittingbourne in the late 1990s, originally in search of Common Buzzards, as they began to colonise Kent after many years of absence. I found wintering Hawfinches in many of the woods in that area, but beyond counting some of the larger flocks, I put in few records to the KOS. As evidence of their decline within south-east England grew, I began a more systematic effort to record the numbers wintering, and looked for proof of successful breeding in April/June. Over this period, there has been a retraction towards

one core area, with wintering and breeding ceasing in many of the woods where I originally found them. By 2010, the wintering population numbered between 50-100 birds, with the largest group, 30-40 birds, occupying a small area of dense Yews in mixed deciduous woodland. Counting Hawfinches in dense woodland is never easy, but over twenty/thirty visits each winter, it was possible to get a fairly accurate picture of the numbers present. The largest single flocks recorded in this period were typically 15-20 birds. In addition to this site were two recognisable satellite groups, about 3-4 kms away, one to the north and one to the south, with 10-20 birds in each group. All three groups were found using varied semi-natural woodland, with Hornbeam, Beech, Wild Cherry and Yew among the tree species present. They were observed feeding on the ground under Hornbeam, often amongst Chaffinches, foraging in the tops of mature Yew, and picking off Beech buds.

The three groups numbered 50-80 birds in total, although, since it was possible that other small groups occurred in the area, I used 50-100 birds as a population figure. Numbers were similar in 2011, when I made an effort to locate breeding pairs. In late April I located 15 pairs within the core area and re-visited in June, finding evidence of successful breeding at nine nests. I searched the same location in 2012 and 2013, finding similar numbers holding territory in April, but no evidence of breeding success at later visits. Failure may have been due to exceptional wet weather in 2012, but predation by Jays or other predators is another explanation for both years. It is possible that these birds re-locate and breed successfully elsewhere, but it seems more likely that this high failure rate is driving the rapid decline noted in Kent and other south-east counties.

The 2012/13 winter was unusual in that there were more Hawfinches present in the core area. Flocks of 36 and 45 birds were recorded, with a likely total of 70-80 birds present. The sudden jump in wintering numbers could have been a consequence of a successful breeding season in 2011, but a more likely explanation is that Hawfinches from elsewhere in Britain (or the Continent) had joined the flock. The presence of 100 or more Hawfinches at Box Hill in Surrey at the same time, and a rise in numbers at Bedgebury support this latter theory. Failure of food crops at other British sites was thought to be a potential reason for these movements (Will Kirby RSPB pers comm)

In 2013/14, numbers were back to normal, or if anything rather lower, with around 30 birds in the core area, and flocks of 5-10 and 10-15 noted at the other two sites.

#### **A NATIONAL POPULATION ESTIMATE**

The 1988-91 National Atlas (Gibbons et al 1993) suggested that the GB population numbered 3,000-6,500 pairs. An RSPB Workshop in 2000, convened to discuss the apparent decline, published a report based on information from county recorders (Langston et al 2002) which tried to quantify the numbers present in those counties. However, the report lacked data from some of the most important sites, and the published figure was not intended as a population estimate. By 2011, when the Workshop re-convened, a clearer picture of Hawfinch distribution was apparent. Based on information from the attendees, a new population estimate of 500-1,000 pairs was published (Clements 2012.) Further work, as yet unpublished, especially in the New Forest, suggests that this figure is too low, with Hawfinch numbers consistently under-estimated in the core areas. Away from the three main centres of Hawfinch population (the New Forest, Wye Valley/Forest of Dean and Merioneth) the Kent population, estimated at 50-70 pairs, was clearly the most important amongst the south-east counties. The Rare Breeding Birds Panel added Hawfinch to their list of monitored species in 2006, although the information received annually from county recorders is fragmentary, with fewer than 80 pairs reported most years.

#### **A KENT POPULATION ESTIMATE**

The current population estimate, 50-70 pairs, published in the Kent Breeding Birds Atlas (in press) is based on limited information. The stronghold area in TQ 95 appears to hold three groups, totalling 50-100 birds. Away from this area, there is evidence of a small colony of Hawfinches around Wye on the more easterly part of the North Downs. There are still regular reports of 1-2 birds in the breeding season, and a winter roost of up to a dozen birds at Denge Woods. In the High Weald, Hawfinches are still reported in small numbers and Bedgebury still holds wintering birds, though there is no certainty that those birds breed in Kent. Beyond this, there have been persistent reports of winter and breeding season birds from a large area to the west of the Medway Gap, which includes much formerly-used habitat on the North Downs. Finally, there are occasional records from the little-watched woodland to the west and south of Ashford. I think it unlikely that any large colonies (20+ pairs) remain undiscovered in Kent. Despite their elusive nature in the breeding season, Hawfinches in winter are noisy and obvious birds which tend to visit the same feeding sites year after year. The records away from TQ95 might only refer to wandering individuals or wintering migrants, but based on my experience in the core area, I think it most likely that some at least refer to local breeding birds. I think it possible that 20-30 pairs still breed outside TQ95. Adding an assumed 25-50 pairs breeding within TQ95, gives a range of 45-80 pairs.

The remaining Kent population is relatively isolated from the stronghold areas of western Britain where there is some indication that the Hawfinch populations are stable. It remains to be seen whether the Kent birds can maintain their population or the decline continues to inevitable extinction as a breeding species. KOS members are encouraged to report to the Society any sightings of Hawfinch to enable us to continue to monitor this fascinating species.

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