

The Hooded Crow in Lincolnshire and Kent

Corvus cornix

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Summary

In the nineteenth century and until about 1930, the Hooded Crow was an abundant passage migrant to both Lincolnshire and Kent. Numbers were not reported but are assumed to have been in the hundreds or thousands in Lincolnshire, and probably smaller but still in hundreds in Kent. Terms such as 'extremely abundant' and 'exceedingly common' were used to describe their status at the time. The largest numbers were found in coastal areas but smaller concentrations were found inland, especially in open farmland.

By the 1950s, a decline was well under way. Annual peak counts in Lincolnshire were still in the low hundreds, but in Kent they were no more than 50. The decline continued until the mid-1990s, by which time the two counties had been attracting similar numbers each winter for around 20 years. For most of the recent 25 years, Hooded Crow has been a rare winter visitor; the annual totals for each county have not exceeded seven, with the notable exceptions of 19 in winter 2018/19 and 12 in 2019/20 in Lincolnshire.

The seasonal pattern of occurrence has changed little from early times. Despite the small numbers now occurring, it is still possible to detect higher numbers during the passage periods of October-November and March-April. Summer records are rare. Also, as before, the majority of Hooded Crows are found along the coasts or estuaries, with far smaller numbers inland.

In Britain and Ireland, crows of both species are highly sedentary, and the Hooded Crows occurring along the east coast of England in winter are believed to come from the more migratory populations of Scandinavia. The decline in numbers here may be due to birds remaining in continental Europe rather than crossing the North Sea to Britain.

Introduction

The Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix* was once a common passage migrant and winter visitor to much of eastern and southern England. While it was probably always more abundant near the coast than elsewhere, it was also locally numerous inland in the more open landscapes. In the coastal counties, the species' status has gone from common to scarce or rare since the mid 20th century and it is now mostly very rare inland in England. Hooded Crow has been on the list of description species for both Lincolnshire Bird Club and Kent Ornithological Society for about 20 years. This article summarises the changes and current status of the Hooded Crow in those two counties.

Hooded Crows breed in Ireland, the Isle of Man and western and northern Scotland, but most of their distribution lies in Scandinavia, eastern Europe and western Asia. The closely related Carrion Crow *Corvus corone* is found in the rest of western Europe and, separated by the Hooded Crow's range, in eastern Asia (a different subspecies). The taxonomic treatment of Hooded Crow has ebbed and flowed. Historically, although Hooded Crow and Carrion Crow are known to hybridise within a narrow zone (a few tens of miles wide), it was regarded as a separate species, and that remained the case until 1956 when the British Ornithologists' Union lumped Hooded with Carrion Crow. Fortunately, during the period when the two were treated as subspecies, the LBC and KOS in common with most recording bodies continued to keep separate records. The BOU split the two once more from 2002 (Parkin *et al.* 2003).

The species has always been viewed as distinct and has gathered a wide range of other vernacular names. One is the Royston Crow, after the town in Hertfordshire, where there is still a local newspaper named the Royston Crow and the town football team is nicknamed the Crows. Foster (1914) described it as not infrequent in parties of two to five in north Hertfordshire from November to March, and evidently it was at least as numerous as Carrion Crow, which was described as rare in the district. There is still extensive open chalk farmland around Royston – but no Hooded Crows; the last record in Hertfordshire was as long ago as 1985. Other vernacular names listed by Cordeaux (1872) for Lincolnshire are Hoodie, Grey-backed and Denmark Crow, while Ticehurst (1909) for Kent includes Queenborough, Dun, Grey, Scotch and Kent Crow, and Saddleback.

Sources

The choice of counties was determined by the ready availability of information, since I hold series of county bird reports for these but not other counties. As it turns out, they were a good choice. In the past few years, Lincolnshire has been in the core area for wintering Scandinavian migrants to Britain, while Kent is at the southern limit of regular occurrence – thus they form a good basis for looking at the changes of status.

The main sources of information used have been:

- Lincolnshire Bird Reports 1979-2018,
- Kent Bird Reports 1952-2018,
- Digital databases of both Lincolnshire Bird Club (1997 onwards) and Kent Ornithological Society (1979 onwards),
- The digital dataset of Gibraltar Point Bird Observatory from 1949-2018.

For winters 2018/19 and 2019/20, the main sources have been supplemented by records listed by online platforms including BirdGuides (www.birdguides.com/Species-Guide/ioc/corvus-cornix), and provided by Kevin Wilson at Gibraltar Point Bird Observatory. These have not necessarily been accepted by the relevant county committees but fit the patterns of accepted records. BirdGuides data, along with summaries on BirdTrack (www.bto.org/our-science/projects/birdtrack), have been used to obtain background information on recent occurrence elsewhere in the winter range of Hooded Crows in Britain. Data

for these winters and especially 2019/20 (not ended at the time of writing) may be incomplete.

Historical status

Lincolnshire

Cordeaux (1872), writing of the Humber district, described Hooded Crow as 'an autumn visitant, and extremely abundant in all the coast district, and along the Humber shore'. They were typically present from early October to March or April, though earlier and later birds did occur. Smith & Cornwallis (1955) reported similar status for Lincolnshire, though with recently decreased numbers, especially inland where in any case numbers had been much smaller than on the coast.

Lorand & Atkin (1989) stated that in Lincolnshire 'until the 1930s, flocks totalling hundreds or occasionally thousands occurred on the coast in autumn. Numbers have declined considerably since then and most records in recent years have referred to single birds or small parties. Analysis of recent data illustrates the later part of that decline, and the establishment of its status in the county as a very scarce bird.

There have been three known nesting attempts. The first was in 1900, when an adult was shot from the nest at Market Stainton (Blathwayt 1915); Blathwayt also reported a claim that the species occasionally bred in the Spalding district. Others recorded by Lorand & Atkin (1989) involved a nest at Crowland Wash in 1954 (though only one adult was seen and it could have been a mixed pairing with Carrion Crow), and an unsuccessful breeding attempt by a pair at Grainthorpe in 1976.

Kent

Ticehurst (1909) described Hooded Crow as a common winter visitor to Kent, found most commonly round the coast, but also abundant on the fields of the chalk downs especially near Dover and Folkestone and through to the Stour valley, but with only scattered birds further inland. The numbers that arrived in autumn were 'sometimes immense'. Power (1866) said they were 'exceedingly common' in winter in the Rainham area, delighting in fields where sprats had been used as manure. Typically, birds were present between mid-September-mid November and mid-February-mid April, with some birds passing through the county to winter elsewhere. In keeping with the period, no numbers are given, but the use of terms such as 'abundant' and 'immense' suggests that counts would have been in the hundreds at least.

By the time of Gillham & Homes (1950) and Harrison (1953), numbers had greatly diminished in the county, and it was largely confined to the coast and its associated marshland. It occurred in varying numbers, and while hard winters sometimes produced larger arrivals, there was no clear correlation. For example, several hundreds were seen at Swalecliffe in January 1948, which was in a mild winter. Taylor *et al.* (1981) reported the continuing decline of passage and wintering

numbers during 1952-1976. Numbers varied from year to year, and winter totals were usually under 50.

There are two records of mixed breeding in Kent (Ticehurst 1909, Harrison 1953). The first involved a pair that nested at Hothfield in spring 1899; both were shot. In May 1933, adults of each species were seen with a young hybrid near a nest on Holmstone Beach, Lydd.



Hooded Crow, 12th May 2012, Abbotscliffe. *Brendan Ryan*

Recent status

Thanks to the existence of the long-term computerised dataset at Gibraltar Point Bird Observatory, it is possible to summarise trends for that area for a long period, from 1949 onwards, using the maximum count for each winter. For Kent, similar analysis of winter maxima is possible for the whole county for almost the same period, using data from Kent Bird Reports which started in 1952. Note that, since Hooded Crow is a winter visitor, annual totals in all cases are shown for July-June years rather than calendar years.

A more detailed analysis, based on annual totals rather than maxima, has used records for Lincolnshire and Kent for the period from 1979 onwards. Records have been extracted from Lincolnshire Bird Reports, and from the LBC's recent (post 1997) computerised data. For the early years in the period, especially 1979-1981, the information in LBRs is not precise, and it has been necessary to make some assumptions about numbers present, and how many remained from one calendar year to the next, from the summaries, but this is unlikely to have affected the overall description of the trend. Likewise, Kent data have been extracted from the Kent Bird

Reports, and from the KOS's computerised data which, in the case of Hooded Crow, begin in 1977, with some judgements necessary regarding minor discrepancies between the two sources.

Only very few records since 1979 have been described as hybrid Carrion x Hooded Crows in the county records. In Kent, there was one at Dungeness on 21st May 2001 and another also at Dungeness on 2nd April 2020, while in Lincolnshire, there was one at Sutton Ings on 20th July 2001. A photograph of one at Mablethorpe on 14th January 2020 was placed on the LBC Twitter feed. Two spring 2018 records in Kent were described as possible hybrids. There may well have been others, where the hybrid status was not recognised or reported; I think I recall hearing about some such examples in both counties but this information is not in the bird reports or databases. The hybrids have been included in the analyses here, since they derive from populations close to the main range of Hooded Crow.

Seventy-year trends

The first two charts below show the highest count each year at Gibraltar Point, Lincolnshire (Fig. 1), and in Kent as a whole (Fig. 2). Note that the first three winters in the Kent sequence have no values: this is because the years preceded the publication of the county reports rather than absence. The charts are presented with x and y axes to the same scale to make them visually comparable.

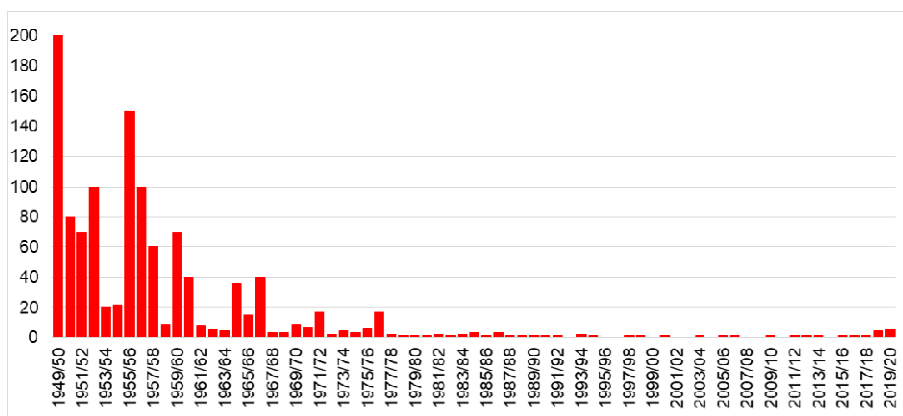


Figure 1. Annual Hooded Crow maxima at Gibraltar Point, 1949/50-2019/20

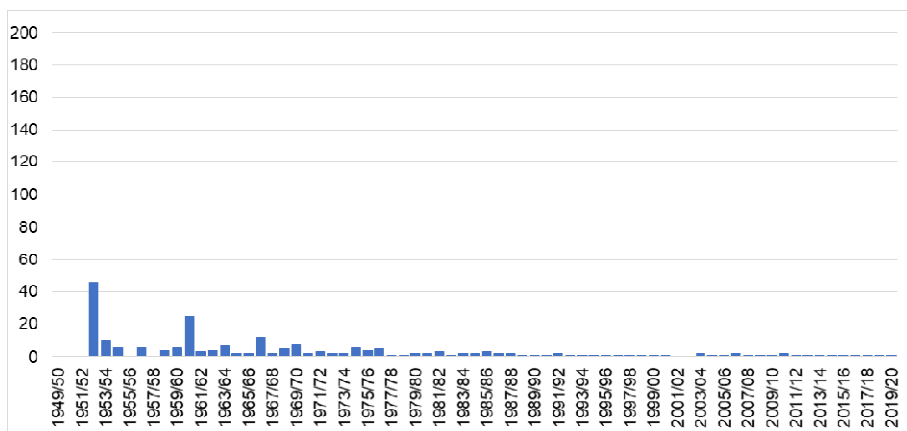


Figure 2. Annual Hooded Crow maxima in Kent, 1952/53-2019/20

These charts illustrate the end of the decrease from the earlier period, when hundreds or thousands of birds occurred, to the present status of only one or two per year in each area. For both areas, there has not been any count of more than three since the winter of 1976/77, with the exception of four at Gibraltar Point in 2018/19 and five (all passage birds) there in 2019/20.

The highest counts at Gibraltar Point from 1949 onwards were 200 on 31st October 1949, 150 on 6th November 1949, and 150 on 26th November 1955. The last three-figure count was 100 on 18th November 1956, and the last two-figure count was 17 on 5th November 1976. It is noteworthy that most of the highest counts fall during October-November. There are only three counts of 50 or more outside those months, in the Januaries of 1950, 1957 and 1958.

In Kent, there had been a report of 'several hundreds' at Swalecliffe in January 1948 but, from 1952 onwards, the highest counts were 18 W at Swalecliffe on 9th November 1952, 46 on farmland north of Deal on 15th February 1953, and 25 at Sandwich Bay on 25th March 1961. Unlike the case of Gibraltar Point, these high counts are not restricted to autumn, and may indicate that birds filtered southwards after arriving further north on the east coast, and also that spring passage was more pronounced in Kent. It is noteworthy, though, that maxima are far smaller for Kent than for the relatively small area of Gibraltar Point, at least until the mid-1970s, despite the counts coming from the whole county.

Forty-year trends

For both counties, it is possible to show annual total numbers of Hooded Crows (taking into account the assumptions described above) for the period from 1979 onwards. As can be seen in Figure 3, totals continued to decline until the early 1990s, albeit with much variation from year to year. Since then, numbers have continued to vary a little from year to year but until 2018/19 there hadn't been a winter with more than seven in either county for 25 years. In Lincolnshire, there were five winters with no records. It could be that this partly reflects poorer reporting

during 1997-2007 when no Lincolnshire Bird Reports were published; however, recording effort at Gibraltar Point remained fairly consistent through that period, and none were seen there. In Kent, there were two such winters, successive to one another in 2001/02 and 2002/03 and thus close to blank years in Lincolnshire.

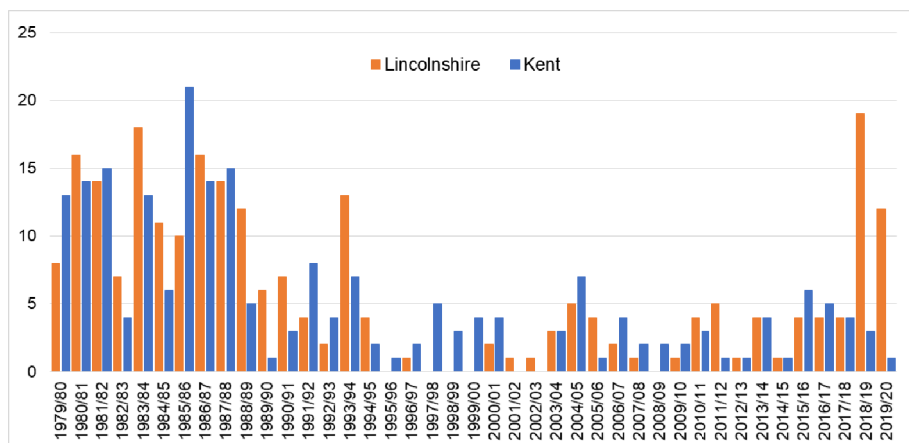


Figure 3. Annual Hooded Crow maxima in Lincolnshire and Kent, 1978/79-2019/20

One interesting observation from this chart is that the pattern of totals through the years is, on the whole, similar in the two counties. This presumably reflects the varying scale of immigration from year to year along the whole of the east coast of England. Some of that variation may be due to winter temperatures on the continent but, as noted above for the historical period, that does not appear to be a major factor. For example, the most recent severe winter in 2010/11 shows barely elevated totals. It is also evident that (until 2018/19) Lincolnshire has no longer attracted more than Kent, as was the case until the 1960s.

The similarity in patterns of totals over the forty years contrasts with the earlier years of the seventy-year charts (Figs. 1 and 2), which show no clear correlation in totals between Gibraltar Point and Kent.

The chart below (Fig. 4) shows the weekly pattern of occurrence (first dates) over the forty-year period. Kent records are all attributable to precise dates, but for Lincolnshire this is not always the case. Especially for 1979-1981 but also for some later years, records that are attributed in the published reports to periods (such as "1-2 at three sites during January-April") cause difficulties, since it is not possible to make assumptions about the first date of each record; in the example, therefore, all three are attributed to 1st January. Thus, there are marked spikes in the chart on the first dates of several clusters of Lincolnshire records, most markedly on 1st January. This could indicate a second wave of arrival in mid-winter, but is more likely to be a recording artefact.

Despite those difficulties, the pattern is clear and very similar in the two counties: the largest numbers appear, as in the historic period, at passage times, during October-November and March-April. There is some indication that autumn passage may be larger in Lincolnshire than in Kent, and that the reverse is true in spring. Note that long-staying birds are not illustrated in the chart, which shows only the arrival dates. Many birds remain for prolonged periods during the winter, although this is less prevalent now than so few occur.

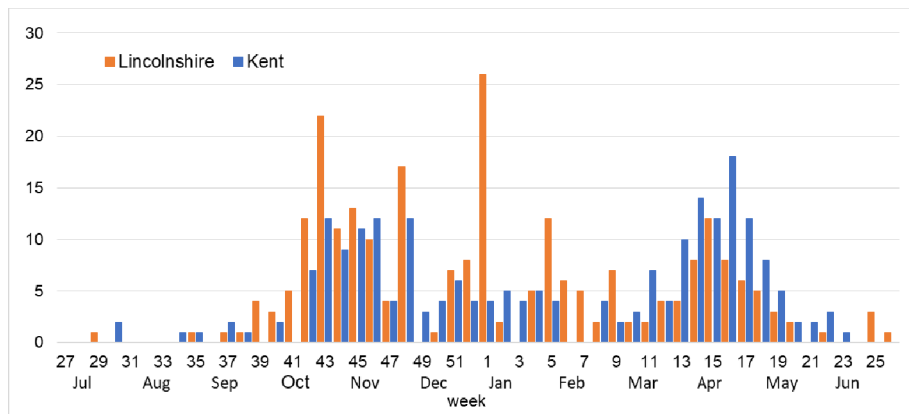


Figure 4. Weekly pattern of Hooded Crow arrivals in Lincolnshire and Kent, 1979/80-2019/20

As can be seen from the seasonal chart, there have been a few records in summer, and these include one bird in Kent that remained throughout two summers. This table lists all those occurring in June-July during 1979-2019:

Lincolnshire	Kent
Grainthorpe, 19 th June 1983	West Blean, 27 th July 1980
Saltfleetby, 20 th -26 th June 1984	Reculver/Minnis Bay, 26 th April 1988 to 2 nd August 1989
North Cotes, 22 nd June 1985	Margate, 26 th July 2007
Anderby Creek, 27 th June 1987	Seasalter, 10 th June 2017
Sutton Ings, 20 th July 2001 (hybrid)	
Croftmarsh, 2 nd June 2013	

The majority of records in both counties during 1979-2019 have come from the coast or estuaries, or within a couple of miles of them. However, some 39 of the Lincolnshire total of about 240 individuals were found further inland, with the Kirkby-on-Bain area (where ten were recorded) contributing more than other sites, no doubt a reflection of the presence of both a rubbish tip and birders. The equivalent

figures for Kent were 15 inland birds out of 220. In both counties, despite the far smaller numbers now arriving, birds are still occasionally found inland.

The high total of 19 in Lincolnshire in 2018/19 was a surprise. It was again above the recent average in 2019/20, although in this case there were no long-stayers as in the previous winter. At the time of writing (early May 2020), I am aware of 11 reports involving 12 individuals for Lincolnshire (including one hybrid), and one bird in Kent (a hybrid). It will be interesting to see if this marks the start of a reversal of the species' fortune in eastern England.

Recent occurrence elsewhere in England and Wales

The presence of around 19 in Lincolnshire in winter 2018/19 is interesting. It was the highest total since a similar number in 1983/84, but there was no sign of elevated numbers in Kent. Examination of reports published online by BirdGuides revealed larger numbers of reports than in the previous two winters along the east coast, especially from Yorkshire to Norfolk. This is not a reliable assessment of status, since (a) not all records will have been submitted to BirdGuides and (b) the inclusion of repeat sightings makes it hard without more detailed analysis to establish numbers present. However, it may well indicate that numbers were indeed higher throughout that area. Counts did also appear to be somewhat higher on the east coast also during January-April 2017, and it was interesting to note that reports on the west coast of England and Wales, often very sparse, were more frequent during spring of each year 2017, 2018 and 2019. BirdTrack summaries (based on inclusion in complete lists) suggests that occurrence in England is more frequent in autumn than in spring, whereas there is a less clear distinction between seasons for Wales. The numbers of birds are small, of course, but the apparent difference of seasonal occurrence on east and west coasts is of interest.

Why have Hooded Crow numbers decreased?

The zone of Carrion x Hooded Crow hybridisation in Britain lies in northern Scotland and has shifted north-westwards during the past century (Cook 1975, Parkin *et al.* 2003). It is tempting to think that this might be associated with the decline in numbers of Hooded Crows being seen in England. However, Scottish Hooded Crows are sedentary, and ringing recoveries suggest that our wintering birds are from Scandinavia (Wernham *et al.* 2003), where the population is partially migratory. There have been only ten recorded ringing movements between Britain and the continent (BTO 2019), all of birds ringed on the continent in Scandinavia or northernmost Germany and recovered in Britain. Three of those involved Lincolnshire. These were of nestlings ringed in Sweden in May 1938 and found dead at Grantham in October that year, ringed in Sweden in June 1946 and found at Horncastle in January 1947, and ringed in Norway in May 1951 and shot near North Cotes in October that year. There have been no continental-British recoveries since 1951 – perhaps reflecting the decline – and none at all affecting Kent. It's worth adding that information on movements from ringing is likely to be limited, because relatively few crows are ringed. By 2018, the total number of Carrion and Hooded Crows ringed since the BTO scheme began in 1909 was 20,073; for

comparison, despite being localised and a recent arrival in Britain, 20,638 Cetti's Warblers had been ringed.



Hooded Crow, 26th March 2018, Bockhill. *Brendan Ryan*

The trends in Lincolnshire and Kent are similar to those elsewhere in eastern and southern England, though the timing varies between counties. For example, in Essex, the species had changed from common to scarce by the 1950s, and then underwent a marked drop in frequency in the late 1970s (Wood 2007). That seems broadly similar to Lincolnshire and Kent, though perhaps the change to near-rarity was a little earlier. Further west along the south coast, the decline was definitely earlier. In Cornwall, the species' status is thought to have changed from fairly common to scarce as long ago as the first half of the nineteenth century (Penhallurick 1978). In France, it was common as far south as the Pyrenees in the nineteenth century, but became markedly rare in the first quarter of the twentieth. It was still a regular wintering species in northern parts, especially Nord and Pas-de-Calais, but numbers fell from at least 1,000 to 500 between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s, a trend that continued subsequently (Yeatman-Berthelot 1991).

The decline in wintering numbers in England has been attributed to the Scandinavian populations becoming less migratory as a result of climatic amelioration (Holyoak 1971, Wernham *et al.* 2003). In other words, as temperatures in the breeding area and along the migration route have become warmer in winter, it has become possible for birds to remain there rather than travelling as far as they did before. This short-stopping behaviour associated with climate change has been identified in a range of waterfowl over the past 30 or more years (e.g. Holt *et al.* 2015). The timing of the change in behaviour by Hooded Crows pre-dates the

effects on waterfowl by many years. The earlier commencement of short-stopping by Hooded Crows, in contrast to waterfowl, may well reflect the crows' ability to survive in sub-zero temperatures whereas waterfowl generally are forced to move when water bodies freeze.

Other factors also could be involved. One is the size of Scandinavian Hooded Crow breeding populations. BirdLife International (2004) suggests that numbers in Denmark and Norway were increasing during the latter part of the twentieth century, while there were declines in Sweden and also in Finland. The Swedish trend has been one of decline for at least thirty years (Ottvall *et al.* 2009), possibly attributable to shooting pressure. However, it seems unlikely that the historical Swedish breeding population was so large as to explain the scale of the historical decline of English wintering numbers. Another possible contributory factor is that changing availability of food may have altered the suitability of different areas (in Scandinavia or England), either by provision of abundant food, as at landfill sites, or by its reduction through agricultural change (when was a field last manured with sprats, as mentioned above for north Kent?).

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