



M. Richards / RSPB-images.com

## Nightjar - *Caprimulgus europaeus*

**N**ightjars are 26-28cm long, of which 10-11cm consists of their tail; the wingspan is 57-64cm. They are similar in size and shape to a small falcon such as a merlin. They have a large head with a discrete bill. The plumage is a range of mottled browns, which provides excellent camouflage and, when viewed close up, the markings are extremely fine and detailed. The throat has a white band and male birds have white wing bars and tail spots, which are particularly prominent in flight. As nightjars are nocturnal birds, they are more often heard than seen. The male has a very distinctive churring trill that can be heard from as far away as 600m.

Nightjars feed on various different insects, mainly moths and beetles that they catch in flight by hunting below the tree line with a continuous aerial pursuit.

Nightjars are summer migrants in the UK, arriving in late April from Africa and returning in August and September. They are ground nesting birds and require open dry habitat such as heathland, moorland, woodland clearings and recently

felled forestry. They occur in greatest numbers in southern England but can also be found in Wales, northern England and southern Scotland. Nightjars have declined both in geographical range and in population size; the range has decreased by 52% in the period 1972-1992 and, although the population increased from 2100 males in 1981 to 3400 males in 1994, the species is declining across much of northern and northwest Europe. In Kent nightjars occur in the west, south-western, eastern and central areas of the county where suitable habitat occurs. At present it is thought that the population in Kent is in decline.

The decline of nightjars corresponds with the reduction of lowland heath across the UK. It is estimated that approximately 40% of England's lowland heath has disappeared since the 1950s as a result of agricultural encroachment, afforestation and building construction. In addition a lack of appropriate heathland management has seen some areas of suitable habitat become succeeded by woodland species. Other possible contributing factors include a lack of suitable feeding habitat in close proximity to breeding areas, particularly uncultivated land and the increased use of



pesticides in agriculture reducing the amount of food available for nightjars. Nightjars have also become increasingly dependent on young forest plantations and areas of clear fell. These habitats are only suitable for a comparatively short period and as such it is possible that local declines occur when the habitat can no longer support breeding populations.

The nightjar is on the Red List of the Birds of Conservation Concern in the UK and is mentioned in the Kent Red Data Book as vulnerable.

The UK Biodiversity Action Plan aims to increase the UK breeding population of nightjars and to halt the decline in the species range and restore the population in areas where it previously occurred. Studies and population monitoring are being undertaken to establish habitat management practices that can be implemented to encourage breeding nightjars. Heathland management and environmental grant schemes will also add to the long-term aims in conserving nightjars.

## FURTHER INFORMATION:

UK Biodiversity Action Plan: [www.ukbap.org.uk](http://www.ukbap.org.uk)

English Nature: [www.english-nature.org.uk](http://www.english-nature.org.uk)

Kent Wildlife Trust: [www.kentwildlife.org.uk](http://www.kentwildlife.org.uk)

Kent Biodiversity Action Plan: [www.kentbap.org.uk](http://www.kentbap.org.uk)

The Kent Red Data Book, available from  
Kent County Council: [www.kent.gov.uk/biodiversity](http://www.kent.gov.uk/biodiversity)

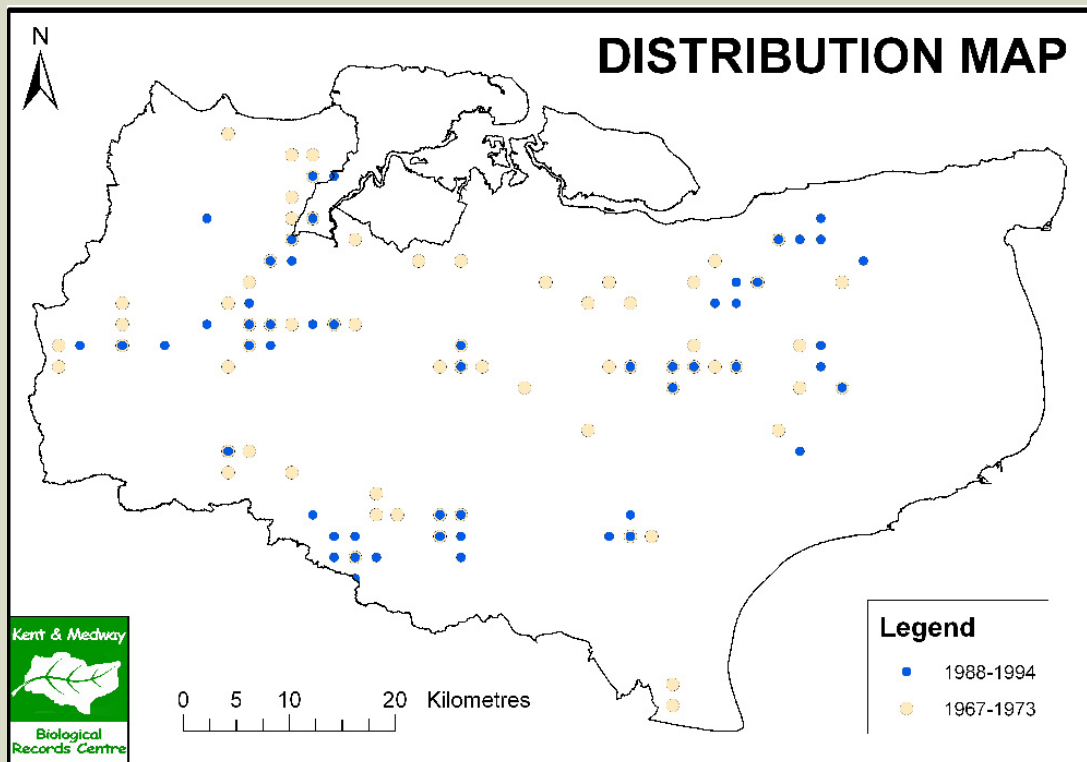
Kent Ornithological Society: [www.kentos.org.uk](http://www.kentos.org.uk)

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds:  
[www.rspb.org.uk](http://www.rspb.org.uk)

British Trust for Ornithology: [www.bto.org.uk](http://www.bto.org.uk)

Kent Landscape Information System:  
[www.kent.gov.uk/klis](http://www.kent.gov.uk/klis)

Kent and Medway Biological Record Centre:  
[www.kmbrc.org.uk](http://www.kmbrc.org.uk)



Data courtesy of Kent Ornithological Society