

ALNWICK WILDLIFE GROUP.

NORTHUMBERLAND ESTATES BIRD SURVEY.

REPORT FOR APRIL 2013 – FEBRUARY 2014.

Introduction.

It is felt that a brief recap of the Aims and Methodology of the survey would be a useful reminder to all concerned.

Aims of the Survey. The basic aim is to attempt to measure the effects of Northumberland Estates management on the wild bird population in the area of the survey, also to record any other points of interest in the local wildlife.

Areas of the Survey. The survey is taking place on five areas, where Northumberland Estates are attempting to increase the population of Red Grouse to a point where sustainable shooting is possible. These areas are:- Post Office Pylon.

Black Lough.

Alnwick Moor.

Hulne Moor.

Kimmer Lough.

All these areas are on the Fell Sandstone ridge. All except the Kimmer Lough rise to about 250 metres and have a typical upland vegetation of heather on shallow peat but also a variety of other habitats. The average size is approx 120 hectares. The Estates management is mainly heather burning to improve its feeding value for Red Grouse and suitability for breeding cover. More intensive control of some predators is carried out, improved water availability for dry periods and provision of limestone grit etc. Hulne and Alnwick Moors form the area of highest Grouse population, followed by the Post Office Pylon, which is a mile away, and the Black Lough at two miles. here there are only one or two pairs of breeding Red Grouse. Kimmer Lough is more distant and at a lower level. The shooting here is let and the management of the moor is less intensive. No Red Grouse have yet been recorded as having bred at the Kimmer Lough.

Methodology of the Survey. The five sites are visited five times annually, three during the breeding season and twice in the winter. All birds are recorded but a small number have been selected as the “target species”, which are commonly found in these areas and are most likely to be affected by the Estate management. In an attempt to produce comparable results specific routes are used at each visit and approx. the same time spent there. Visits are made when weather is reasonable since recording is impossible in very wet or windy weather.

Analysis of Data. The counts of the Target species from each area are totalled and graphs produced from these results. To achieve the aims of the survey a comparison with population counts over the larger area must be made. An attempt is made to compare our figures with national averages produced by BTO. Some figures are given for North East of England but, unfortunately, these are not complete. National figures can often be misleading when used as a direct comparison to any one local area and these facts have to be taken into consideration when reviewing the results. The recently published “Bird Atlas” also gives very useful information when comparing the results.

There are many factors affecting bird populations, weather being the most important. Periods of severe winters, late and wet breeding seasons have had a devastating effect on some species in recent years and it will be interesting to see if their recovery in the survey area can be helped by the local management.

Breeding Period Results of Target Species. 2007-2013.

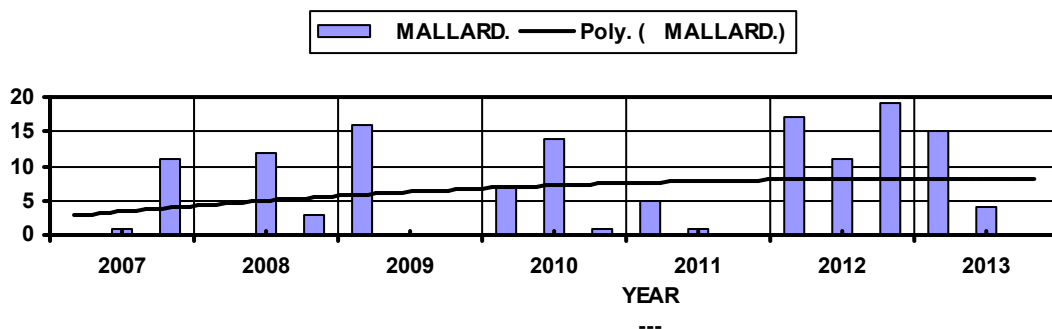
Falling populations of many British birds in recent years have resulted in the grouping of species into three bands:- **Black.** For those not endangered.

Amber. Those for which there is some concern.

Red. For those at greatest risk.

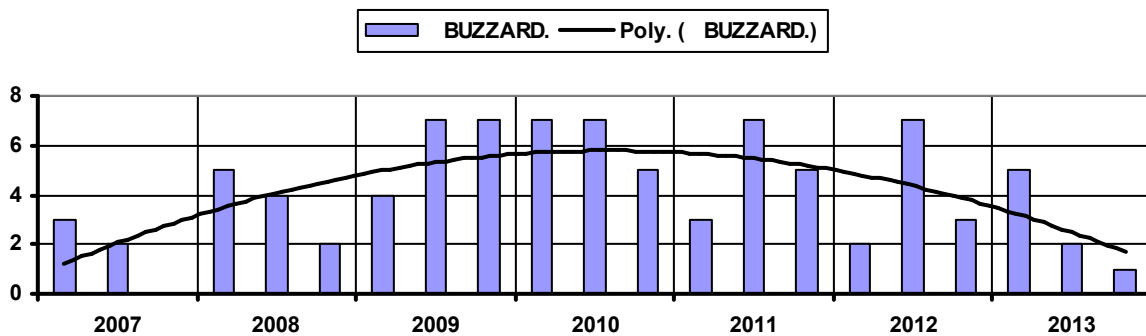
BTO. National figures give:- (A) an average % rise or fall over the period 1995 – 2011
 (B) an estimated % rise or fall over the period 2011-2012

These figures and the colour classification are given with the graph of each of the target species.



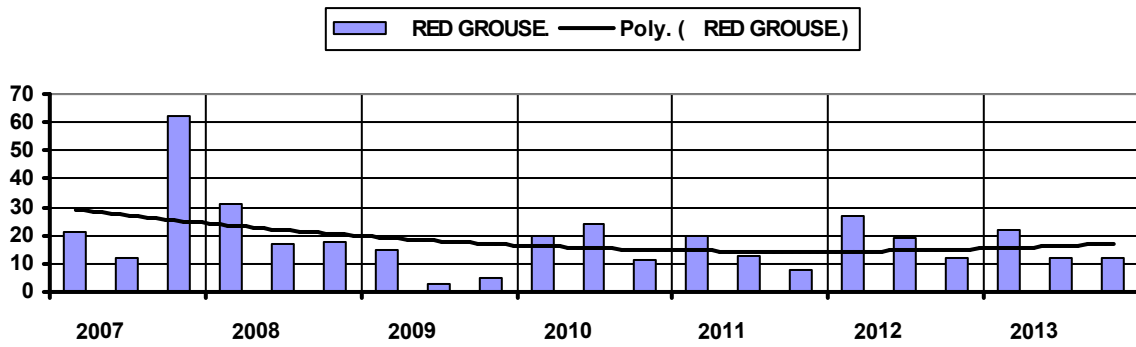
Mallards have been recorded in very irregular numbers, which may include young birds at some counts and therefore not give a true picture of their breeding status.

Amber listed. (A) +20% (B) -5%



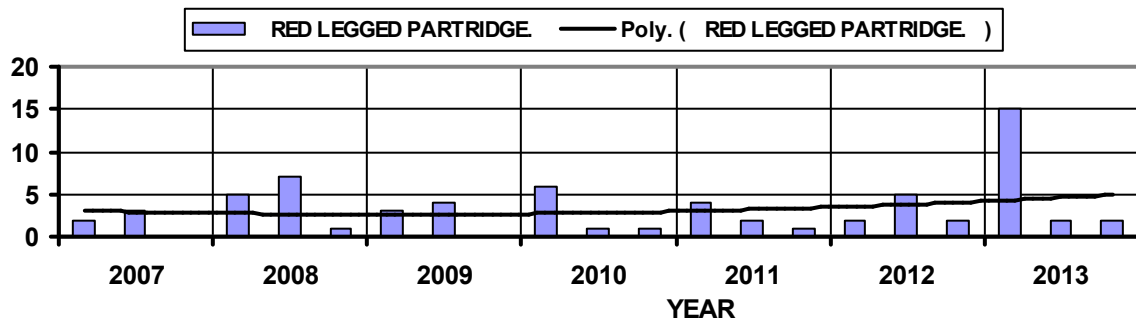
The decline in numbers during 2011/12 was attributed to a levelling off due to pressure on available breeding territories. The very cold and prolonged spring in 2013 will also have affected breeding results. The increase in national figures during the last few years caused by the movement of breeding territory towards the eastern counties is illustrated in our graph which began with very low counts.

Black listed.. (A) +80% (B) +6%



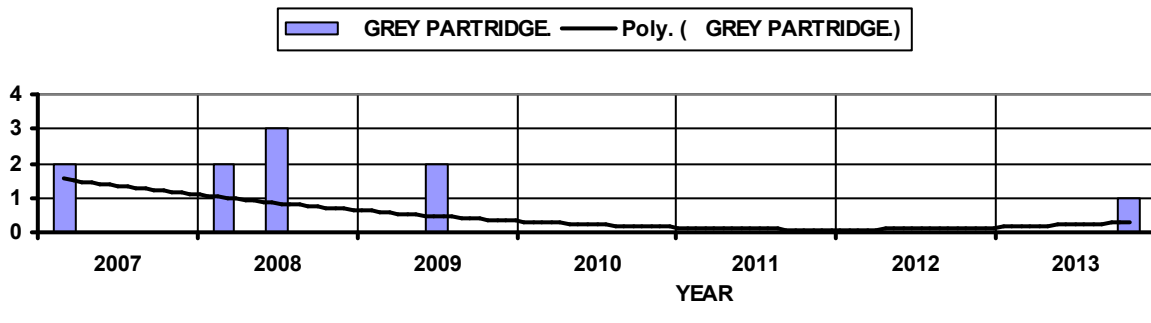
Weather conditions have not helped during the early breeding period of 2013. There has been some limited shooting in 2013 and it would appear that a reasonable breeding stock remains. One or two pairs bred successfully on the Black Lough area but it is thought that these birds moved later to the near by Post Office Pylon area.

Amber listed. (A) +6% (B) -6%



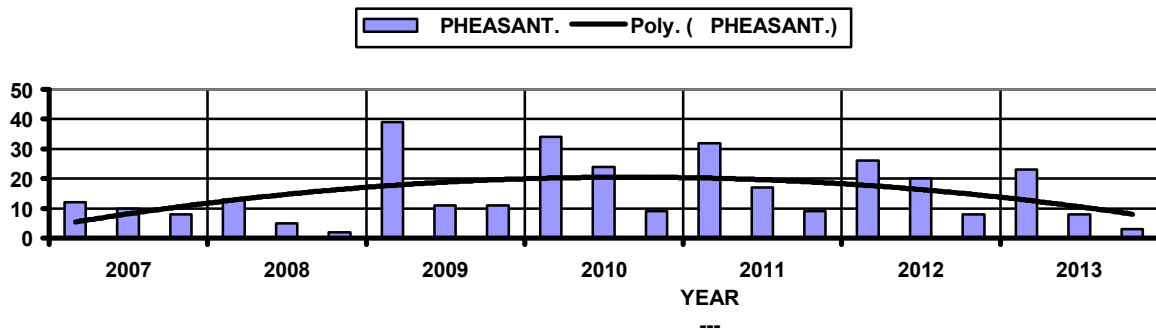
Red Legged Partridge in the survey areas are probably the remnants of birds released here in previous years or from releases on neighbouring estates. Hand reared birds released for shooting do not make good breeding stock in the wild. The increase in national figures is largely attributed to hand reared birds released for shooting.

Black listed. (A) +24% (B) -5%



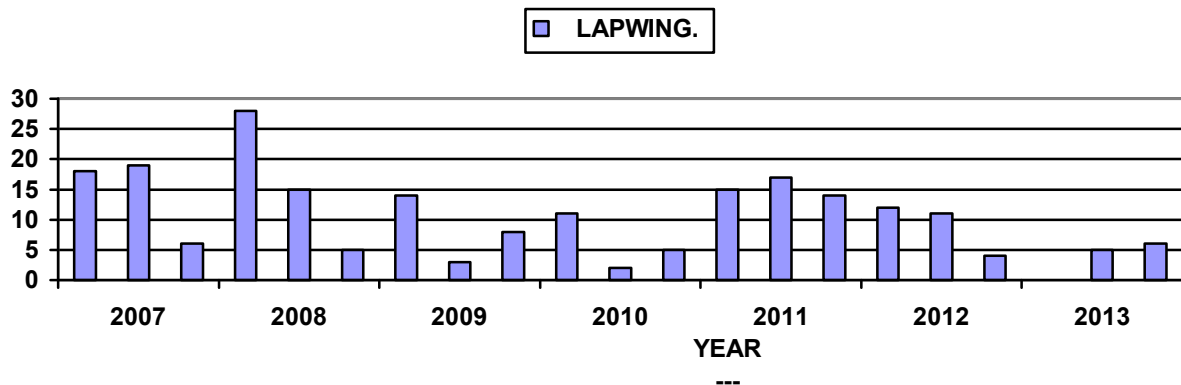
The areas covered by the survey are not natural habitat for Grey Partridge, it is therefore not surprising that the population has more or less disappeared.

Red listed. (A) -55% (B) +15%



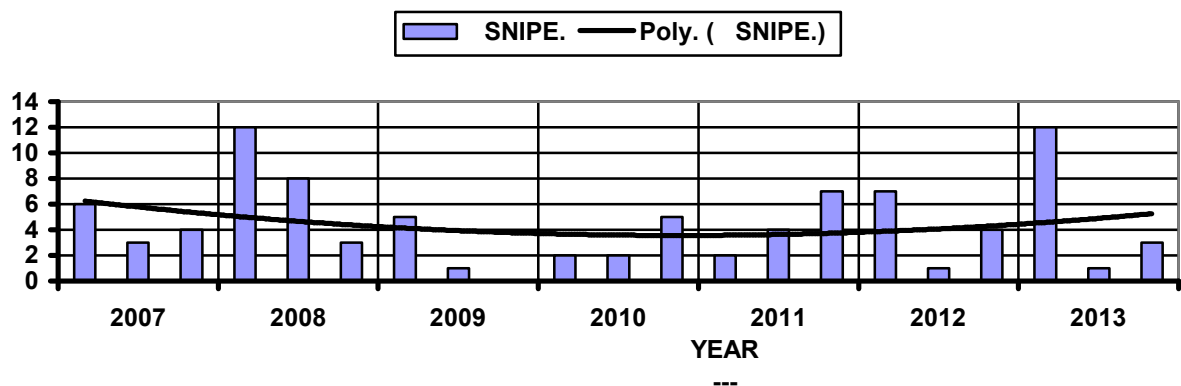
Counts of Pheasant will always vary where they have been released for shooting.

Black listed (A) +32% (B) -4%



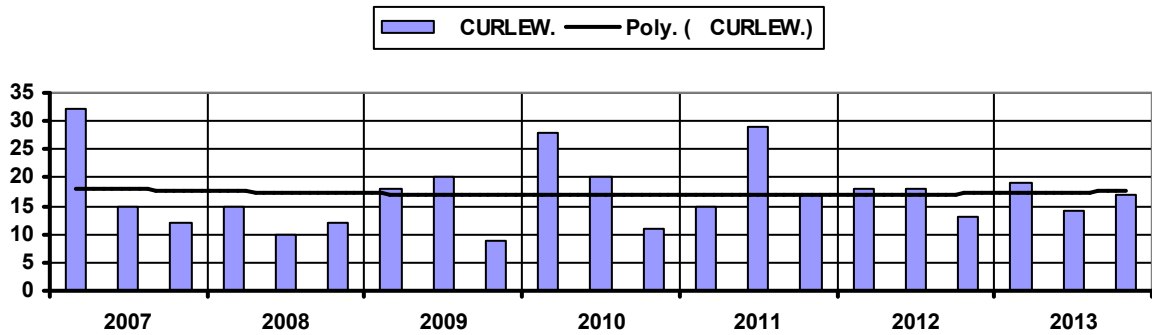
Disappointing counts through out the breeding season of 2013. The lowest number since the start of the survey. Highest losses nationally have been from the western side of the country but also from our area, and southern Scotland. Here they appear to be following the national trend.

Red listed. (A) -41% (B) -3%



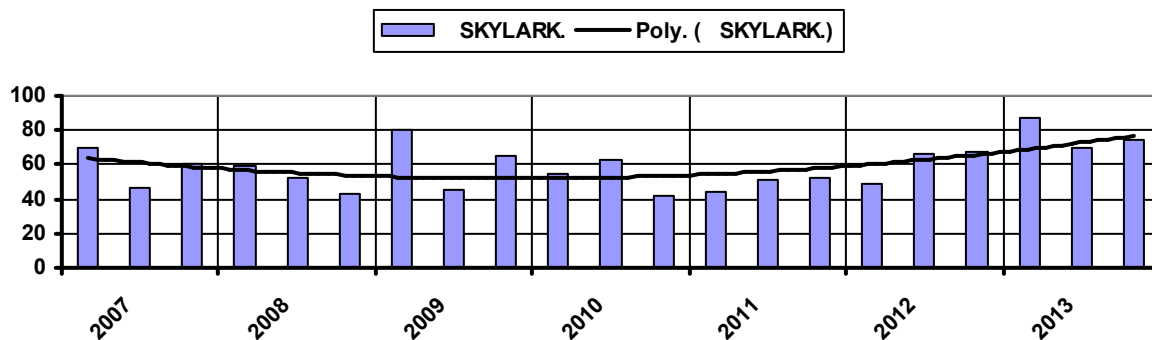
The higher counts in the earlier part of the season may have been because some birds were still on passage. Bird Atlas results indicate that there has been a reduction in the lowland breeding habitat over the last few years.

Amber listed. (A) +8% (B) +19%



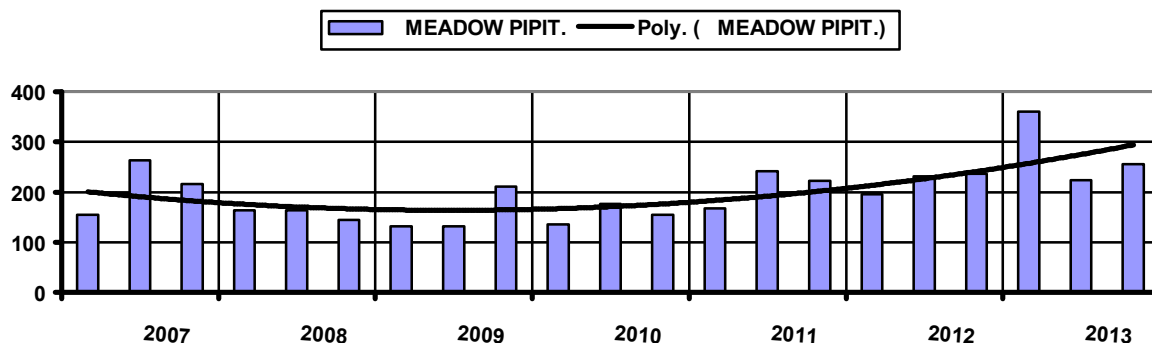
Curlew are managing to maintain a very level population in the survey area. This would appear to be a better result than the national average. Nationally most losses have been from the North West and from Ireland.

Amber listed. (A) -45% (B) +9%



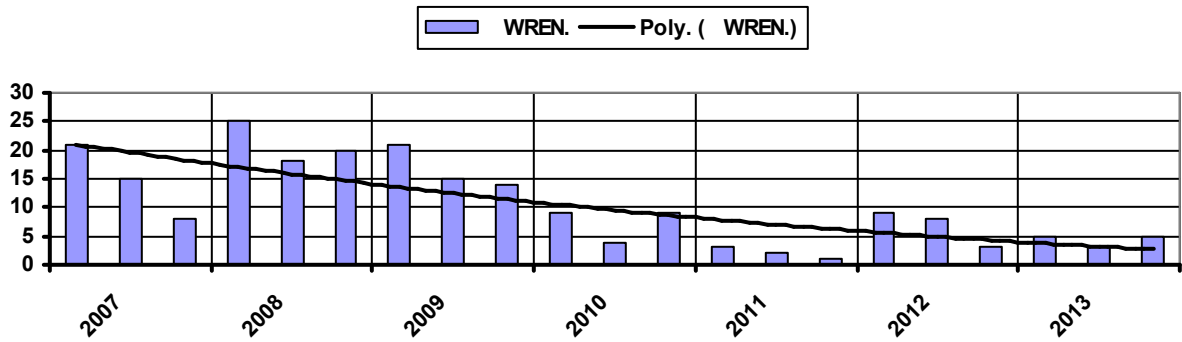
Skylarks in our area, appear to have increased over the last two years, a very satisfactory result compared to the national average. Birds breeding later in the 2013 season will have benefited by the good weather later in the season. One of the commoner species in the survey area, they are therefore more likely to show the results of local management. The biggest losses have been in Ireland. Losses in England are mainly associate with more intensification in farming and the change from spring sown cereal crops to winter sown.

Amber listed. (A) -22% (B) +5%



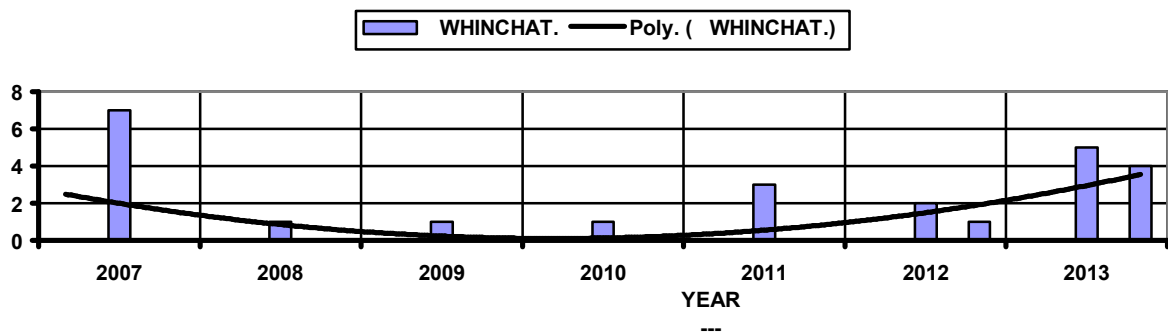
Meadow Pipits are the commonest species in the survey area and are more likely to indicate a change in population. In this area they would appear to have followed the national trend with a fall in the early years of the survey but a better than average rise in the last three. In the British Isles there has been a loss of numbers mainly in Ireland and the west coast of the UK.

Amber listed. (A) -21% (B) +10%



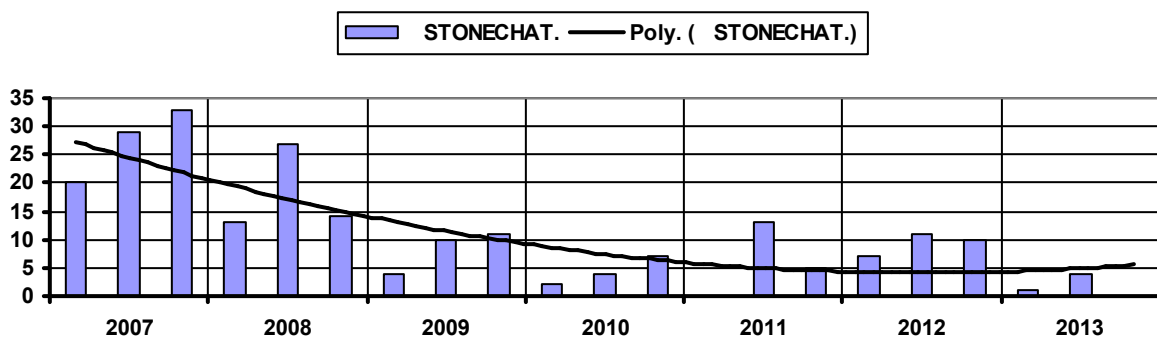
After the severe weather pattern during the last few winters and breeding periods, Wren numbers in the upland areas of the survey seem to be only just maintaining themselves at a low level. Seasonal changes due to adverse weather are normal for this species and they can be expected to increase again given better conditions. It is estimated that 50% of Wrens are lost in a normal winter. As you would expect, the population density in upland areas is much lower than in the lowlands.

Black listed. (A) -5% (B) +29%



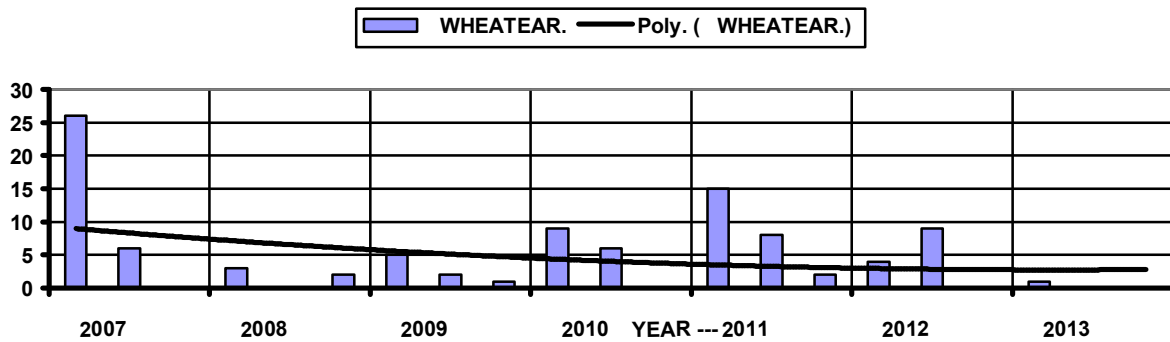
Whinchats have had a better year in this area, with sightings of family groups. National losses have been general throughout the British Isles over a long period.

Amber listed. (A) -60% (B) -12%



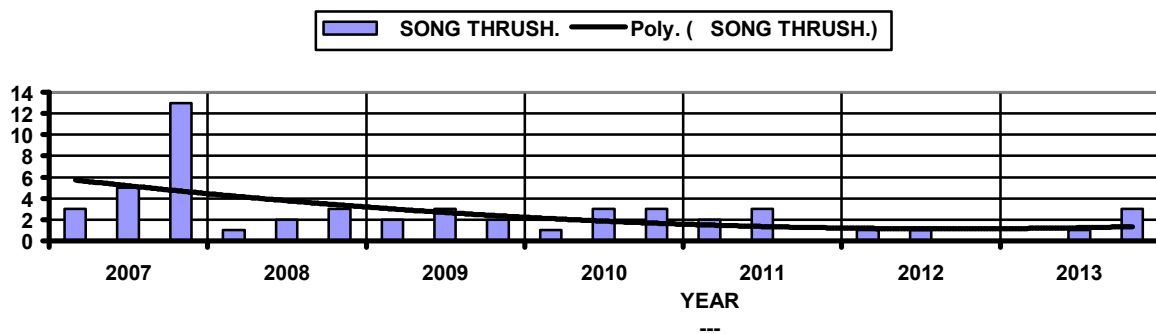
A poor survey year for Stonechats and numbers are not increasing after the bad years as the national average suggests they have. In the North of England there has been a general increase recorded as their breeding range spreads eastward.

Black listed. (A) +3% (B) +43%



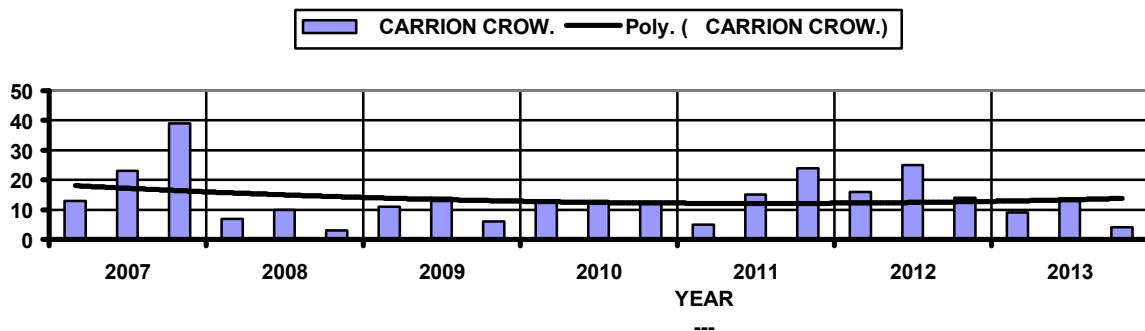
Only one Wheatear was recorded in the breeding period of 2013. The national average also records a continued fall in their numbers. Losses appear to have been mainly from the periphery of their upland breeding areas. Most records of Wheatear in this area are of birds on passage in either early spring or autumn.

Amber listed. (A) -1% (B) -12%



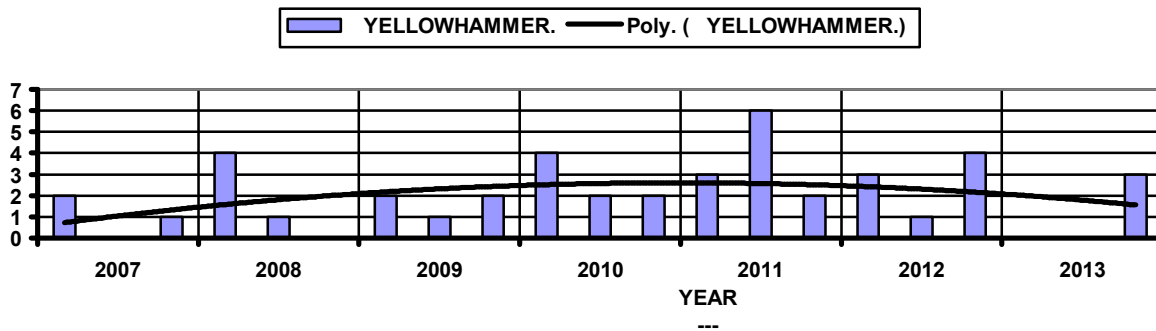
Song Thrush continue to be seen in very small numbers. Most records are made at the edges of the survey areas where forestry plantations form the boundary. Some of these trees have now been removed, which will obviously have an effect on numbers recorded. Nationally there is a small increase in numbers.

Red listed. (A) +7% (B) +11%



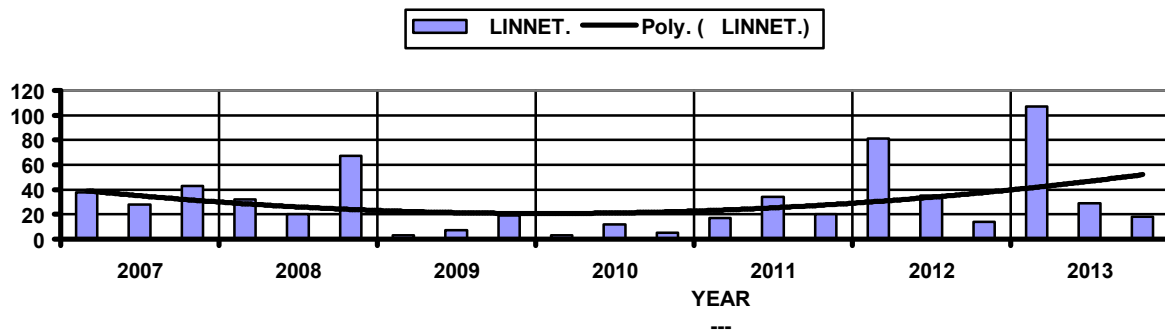
Slightly reduced numbers seen in this breeding period. Little change in the national average, the increase shown below is more due to a spread in their breeding range to the north of Scotland.

Black listed. (A) +13 (B) +1%



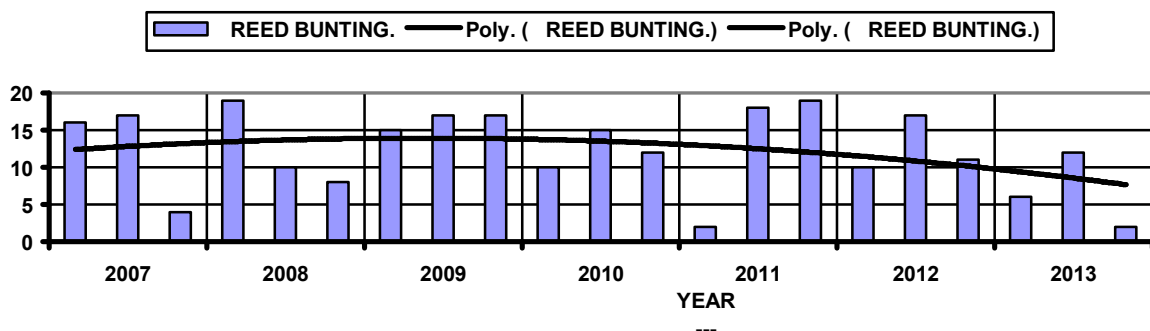
In the survey areas Yellowhammers are only recorded in small numbers during the breeding season as, except for a few places, this is not suitable habitat for them. Over the British Isles, losses appear to have happened on the edges of its recognized breeding areas and on high land mainly in the north and in Ireland.

Red listed. (A) -13% (B) 0%



The higher counts made in the early or late breeding period when Linnets are either still in flocks prior to breeding or are already beginning to gather together after fledging, should be discounted. The breeding population would then appear to be fairly constant. Nationally Linnets have suffered losses in their northern breeding areas but are otherwise stable.

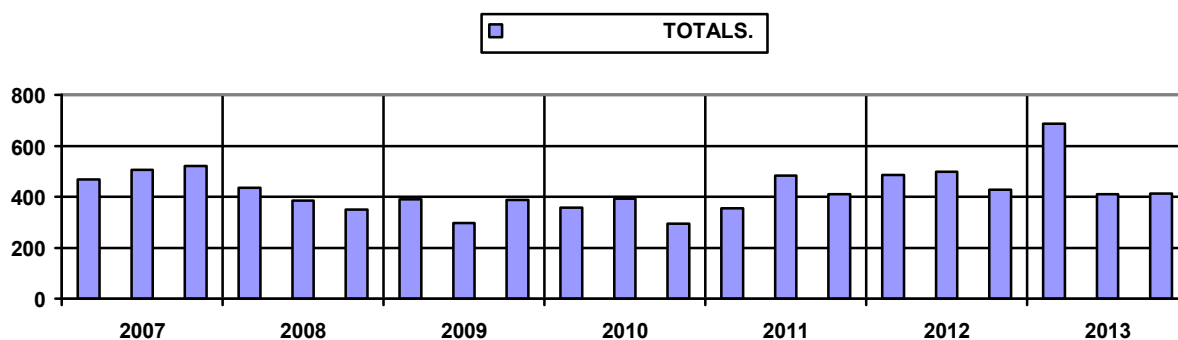
Red listed. (A) -19% (B) 0%



Reed Buntings have more or less maintained their breeding numbers, showing a fall only in the last year. Nationally their population is described as stable.

Amber listed. (A) +18% (B) 0%

Total of all Breeding Period counts. (Target Species.)



Very little change in the totals of the Target species over the period of the survey.

The following list of birds, which were originally included with the target species, have not been recorded in sufficient numbers to enable any useful graphs to be produced for them. They have therefore been excluded from the list, although any sightings are still recorded.

- Merlin.
- Golden Plover.
- Jack Snipe.
- Woodcock.
- Nightjar.
- Raven.

Conclusions.

Despite the relatively small amount of data gathered by the survey, an attempt to compare these with National averages appears to be the only way to achieve the aims of the survey.

Taking into account the seven years of the survey, the following table is a comparison which should be viewed critically.

Species with higher counts of the breeding population than the National averages.

- Red Grouse.(Taking into account numbers shot)
- Curlew.(Based on small counts.)
- Skylark.
- Meadow Pipit.
- Whinchat. (Based on very small counts.)
- Linnet.

Species with lower counts than the National averages.

- Buzzard.
- Grey Partridge.
- Wren. (Weather related.)
- Song Thrush.(Loss of local habitat.)
- Stonechat.
- Reed Bunting.

Species with little variation from the National averages.

Mallard.

Red Legged Partridge.

Pheasant. (affected by birds released for shooting.)

Lapwing.

Snipe.

Wheatear.(Based on small numbers.)

Carrion Crow,

Yellowhammer.(Based on small numbers.)

J C. (20/2/2014.)