

ALNWICK WILDLIFE GROUP.

NORTHUMBERLAND ESTATES BIRD SURVEY.

REPORT FOR APRIL 2014 – FEBRUARY 2015.

Introduction.

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 which the survey may reveal about the local wildlife.

Areas of the Survey. The survey is taking place on four areas, where Northumberland Estates are attempting to increase the population of Red Grouse to a point where sustainable shooting is possible. The Kimmer Lough is leased for private shooting and is under different management.

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 but the number is increasing. 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 more 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 extreme 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 in 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 local trends in population over the last ten years, when the previous Atlas was produced.

There are many factors affecting bird populations, weather is easily shown to be the most important. Periods of severe winters, late and wet breeding seasons have had a devastating effect on some species in the period 2009/11 and it is interesting to see how these may have increased with better conditions which have been experienced since then.

Breeding Period Results of Target Species. 2007-2014.

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

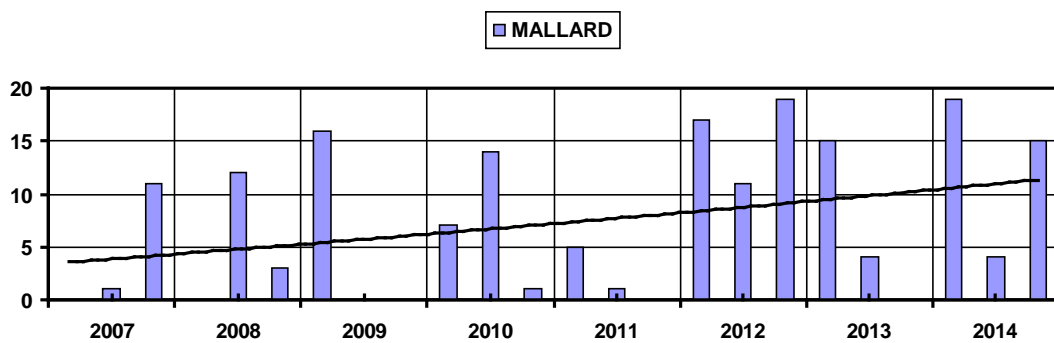
Amber. Those for which there is some concern.

Red. For those at greatest risk.

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

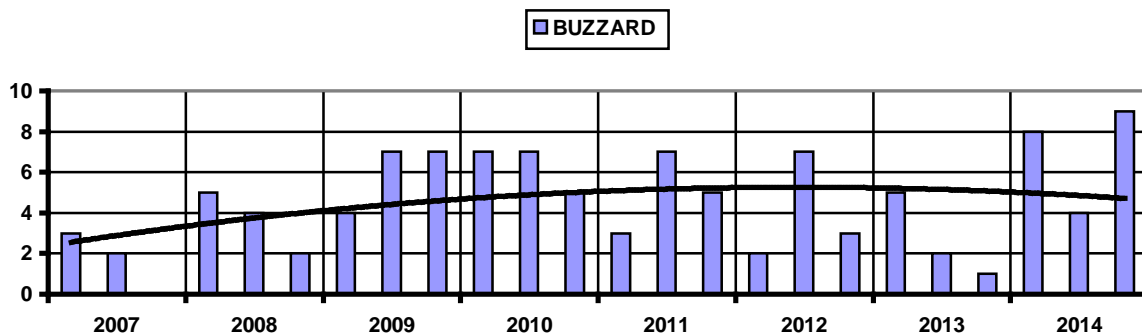
(B) An estimated% rise or fall over the period 2013-2014

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

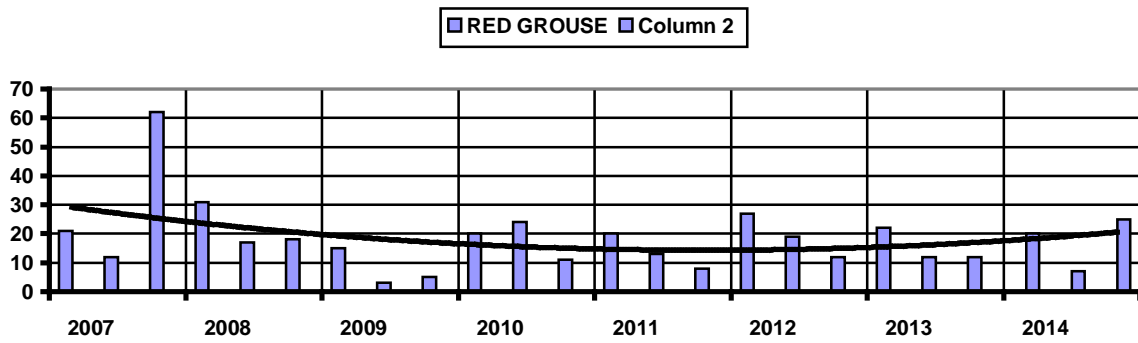


Mallards have been recorded in very irregular numbers, which may include young birds at some counts and therefore may not give a true picture of their breeding status but it would seem that there has been a gradual increase in counts during the survey period. The Bird Atlas shows no real change in recent years.

Amber listed. (A) +17% (B) -4%

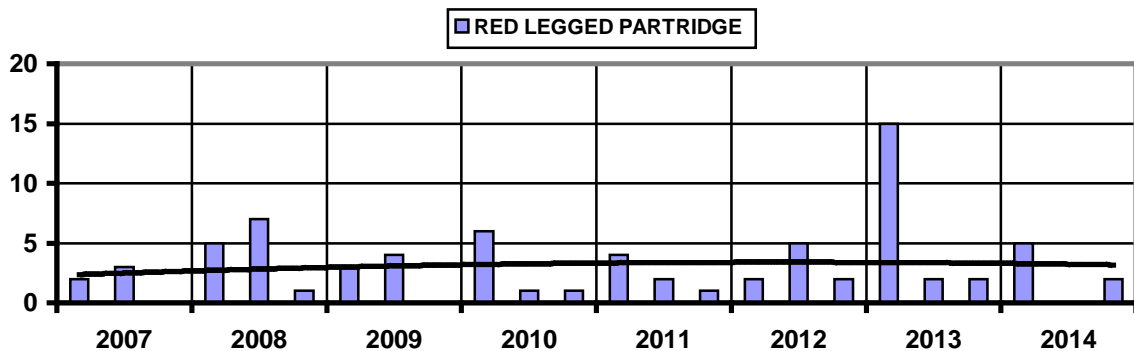


The decline in numbers during 2011/12 was attributed to a levelling off due to pressure on available breeding territories. The very cold and prolonged spring in 2013 will also have affected breeding results but counts have increased again in 2014 possibly due to improved breeding conditions. The increase 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)+79% (B)- 12%



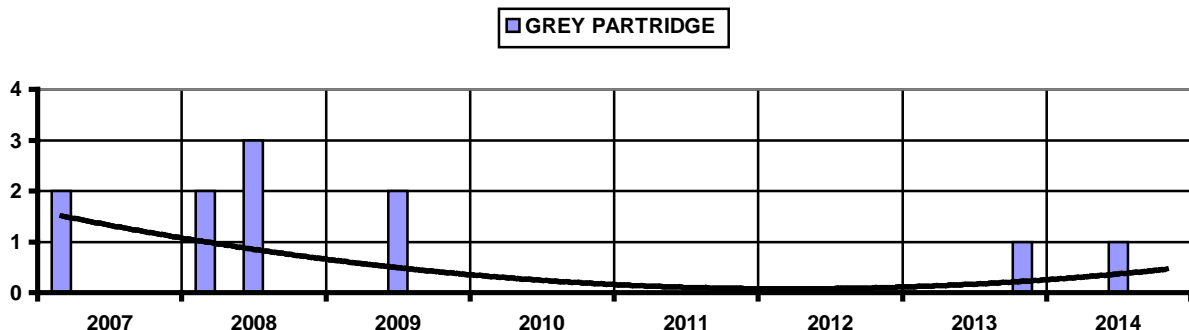
Weather conditions have helped during the breeding period of 2014. There has been some shooting in 2014 and it would appear that a reasonable breeding stock remains. One or two pairs bred successfully on the Black Lough area but it is thought that these birds moved to the Post Office Pylon area, joining the larger population there.

Amber listed. (A) +13% (B) -19%



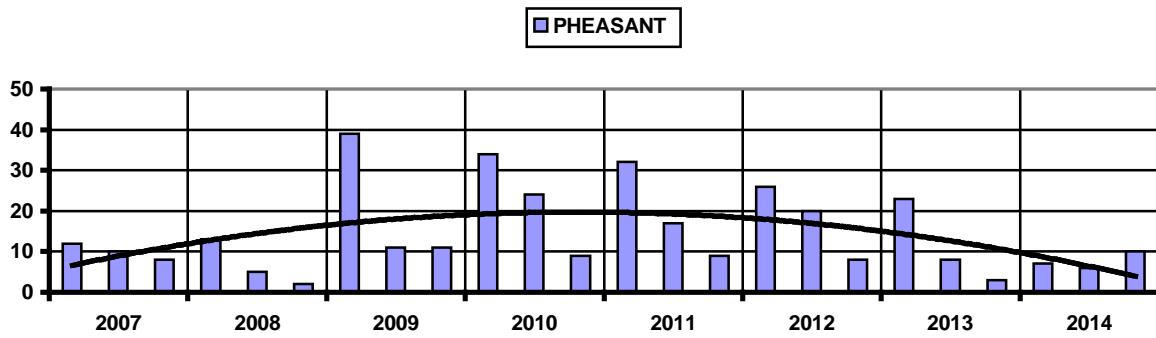
Red Legged Partridge in the survey areas are probably the remnants of birds released here in previous years or from releases on neighbouring estates. Hand reared birds released for shooting do not make good breeding stock in the wild. The increase in national figures is largely attributed to hand reared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

Black listed. (A) +19% (B) -10%



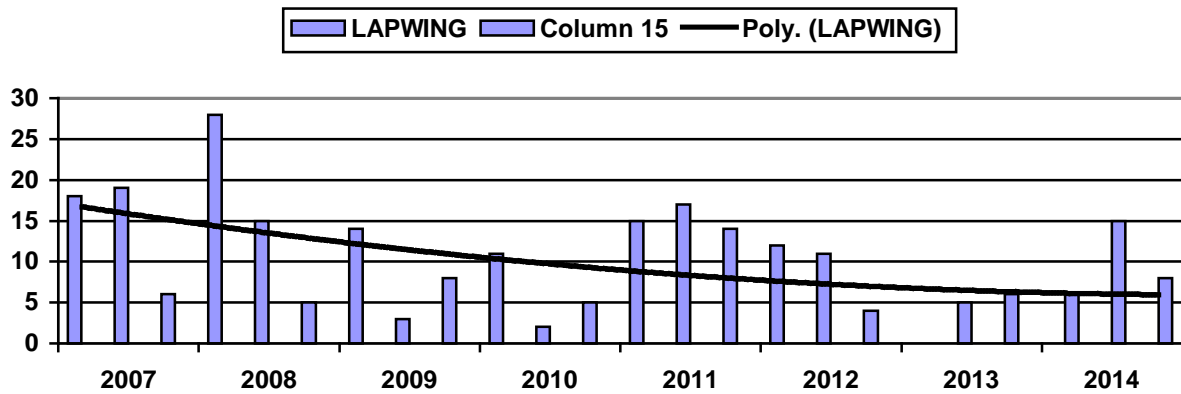
The areas covered by the survey are not natural habitat for Grey Partridge, it is therefore not surprising that the population has more or less disappeared.

Red listed. (A) -56% (B) -31%



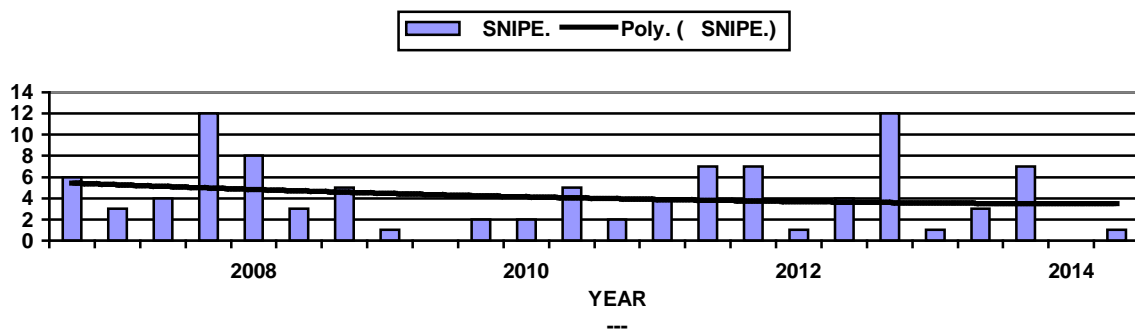
Counts of Pheasant will always vary where they have been released for shooting. There are only two release pens affecting the survey which are on the border of Hulne Moor and at the Kimmer Lough.

Black listed (A) +32% (B) +2%

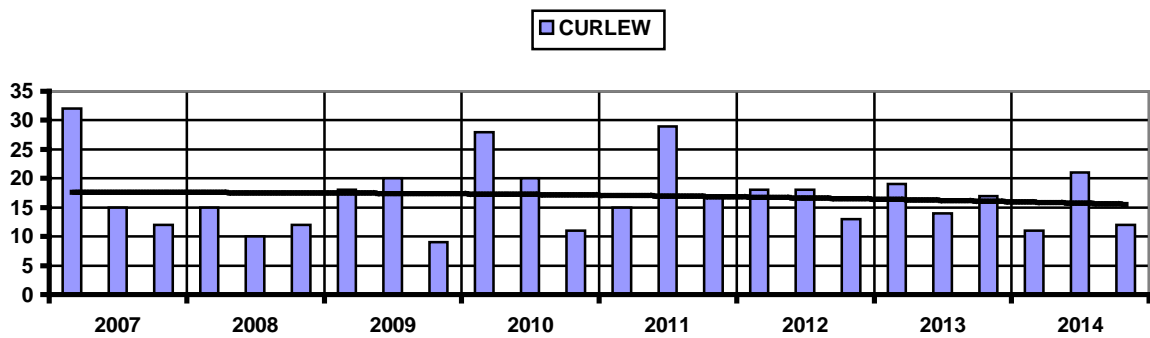


Increased counts in 2014 may show an improving situation after poor numbers recorded in 2013. Highest losses nationally have been from the western side of the country but also from our area, and southern Scotland. Here they appear to be following the national trend.

Red listed. (A) -42% (B) +6%

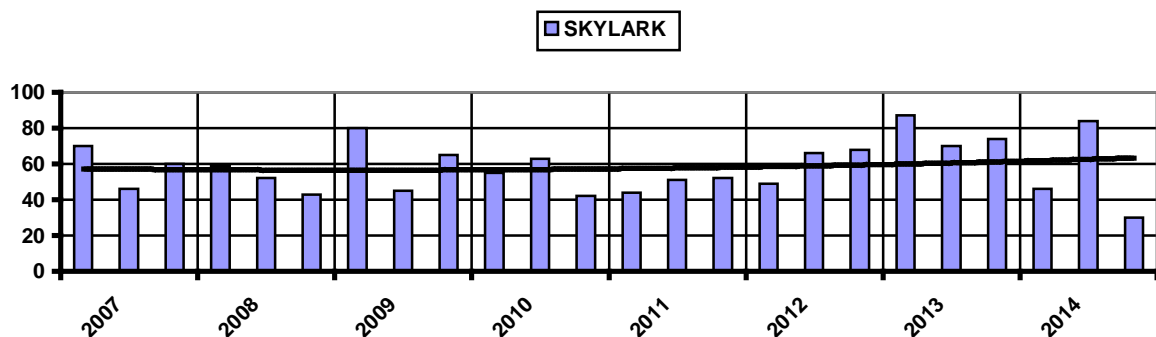


The higher counts in the earlier part of most seasons may be because some birds were still on passage. Counts made later in the season would indicate a small but regular population of breeding birds. Bird Atlas results indicate that there has been a reduction in the lowland breeding habitat. Amber listed.



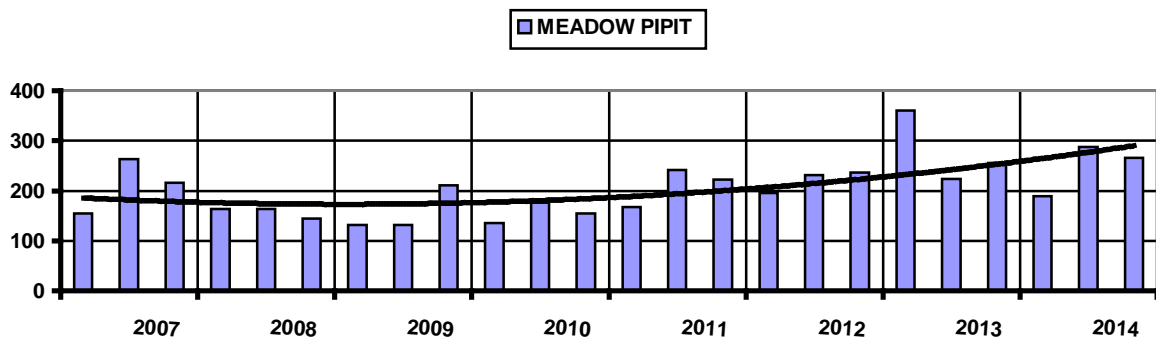
Curlew are managing to maintain a very level population in the survey area. This would appear to be a better result than the national average where most losses have been from the North West and from Ireland with a more stable population in the east.

Amber listed. (A) -43% (B) -11%



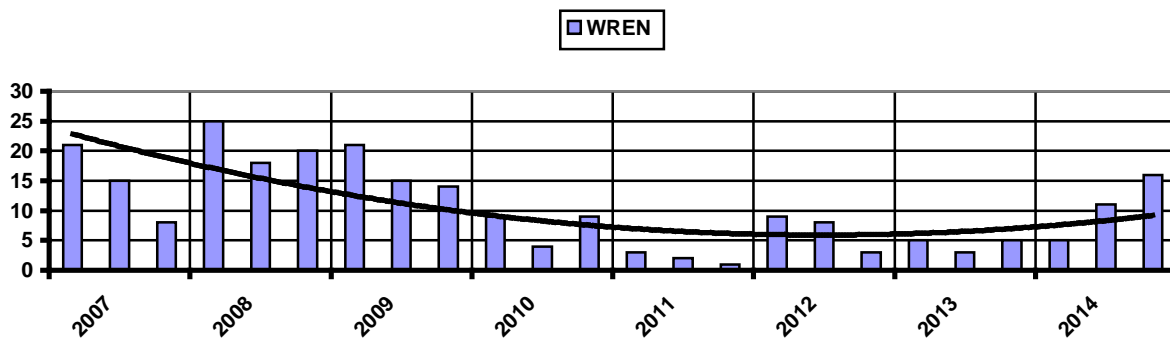
Skylarks in our area appear to have increased slightly over the last three years, a better result than national averages. One of the commoner species in the survey area, they are therefore more likely to show the results of local management. The biggest losses have been in Ireland. Losses in England are mainly associated with more intensification in arable farming areas with the change from spring sown to winter sown crops.

Amber listed. (A) -24% (B) -13%



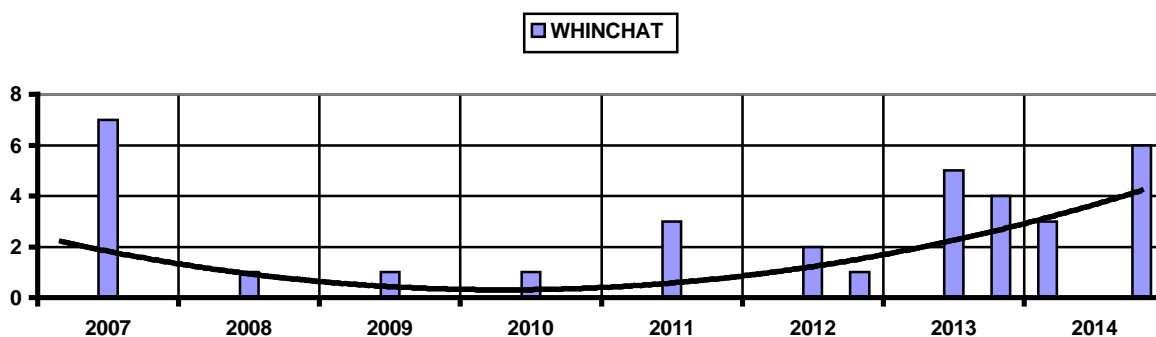
Meadow Pipits are the commonest species in the survey area and are more likely to indicate any change in population. In this area they would appear to have followed the national trend with a fall in the early years of the survey but a better than average rise in the last four. In the British Isles there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

Amber listed. (A) -17% (B) -13%



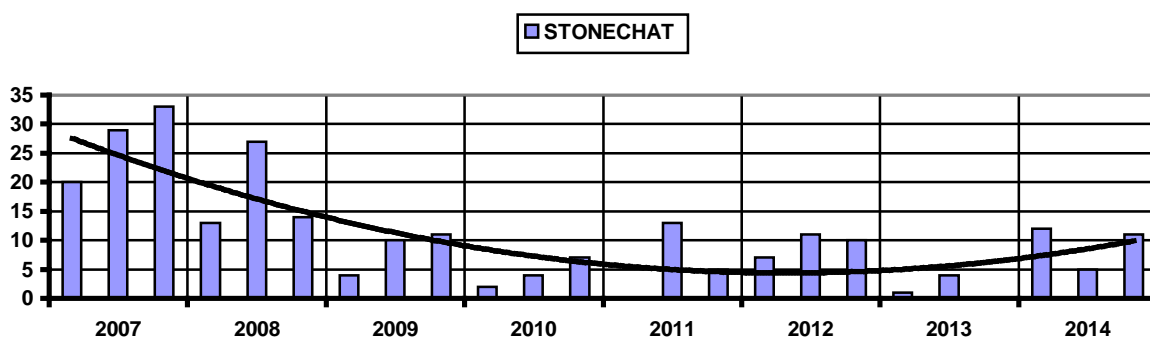
After the catastrophic fall in Wren numbers due to weather conditions in 2010 to 2012, it would appear that counts are now showing a dramatic improvement. This is typical of their ability to bounce back with large numbers of young produced when conditions allow.

Black listed. (A) -3% (B) -4%



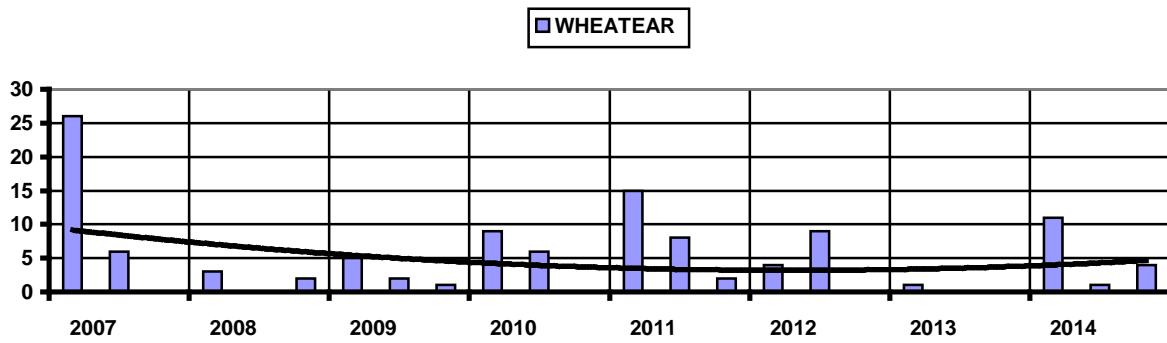
Whinchats have had two better years in this area, with sightings of successful family groups on several occasions. National losses have been general throughout the British Isles over a long period, a trend which appears to have been reversed in the survey areas.

Amber listed. (A) -55% (B) +12%



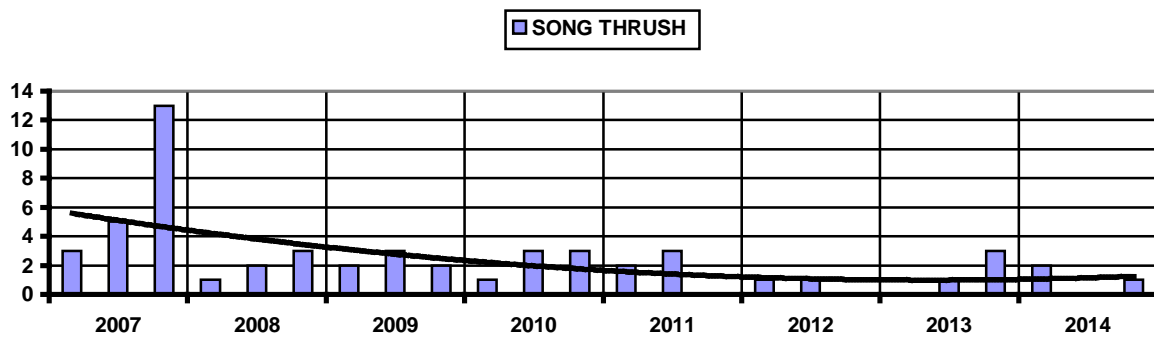
Another poor survey year for Stonechats. Numbers have not increasing after the bad years as we had hoped. Although the national figures show an overall decline, in the North of England there has been a general increase recorded as their breeding range spreads eastward.

Black listed. (A) -3% (B) -27%



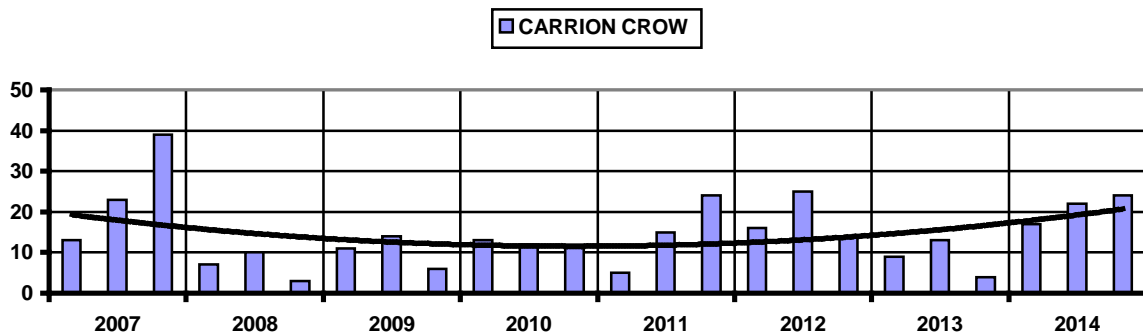
After last years near blank for Wheatear, at least a few have been recorded in 2014. The national average records a continued fall in their numbers. Losses appear to have been mainly from the periphery of their upland breeding areas. Most records of Wheatear in this area seem to be of birds on passage in either early spring or autumn.

Amber listed. (A) +2% (B) -10%



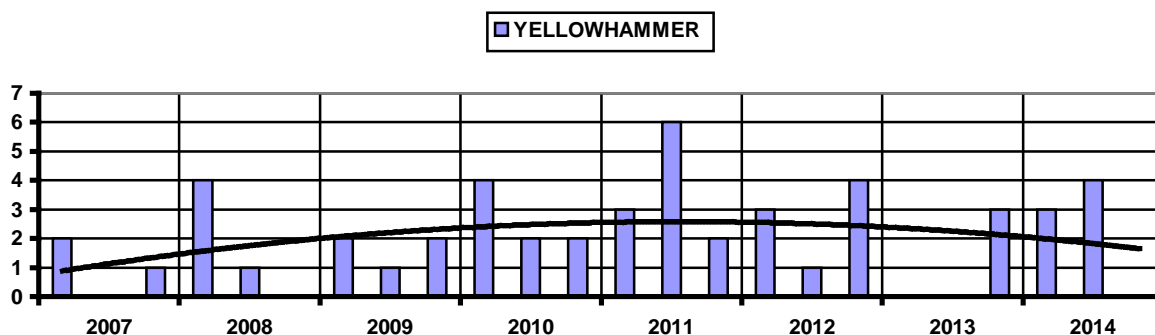
Song Thrush continue to be seen in very small numbers. Most records are made at the edges of the survey areas where forestry plantations form the boundary. More of these trees have now been removed, which will obviously have an effect on numbers recorded. Nationally there is a small increase in numbers,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

Red listed. (A) +5% (B) -3%



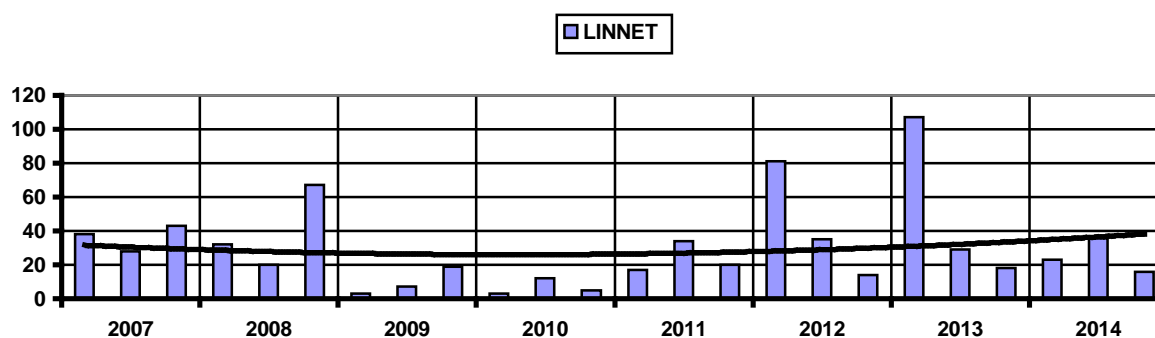
After last years lower counts, 2014 has returned them to a more normal population. Little change in the national average, the increase shown below is more due to a spread in their breeding range to the north of Scotland.

Black listed. (A) +17% (B) +2%



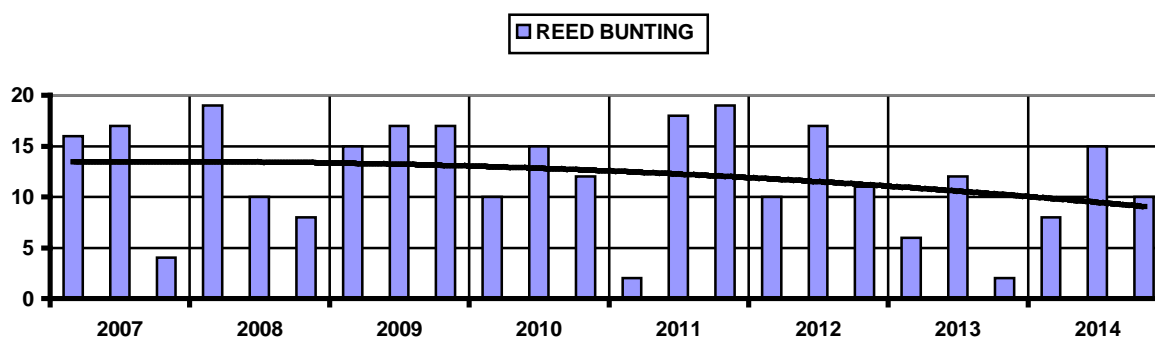
In the survey areas Yellowhammers are only recorded in small numbers during the breeding season as, except for a few places, this is not suitable habitat for them. Over the British Isles, continued losses appear to have happened on the edges of its recognized breeding areas and on high land mainly in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

Red listed. (A) -14% (B) -10%



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.

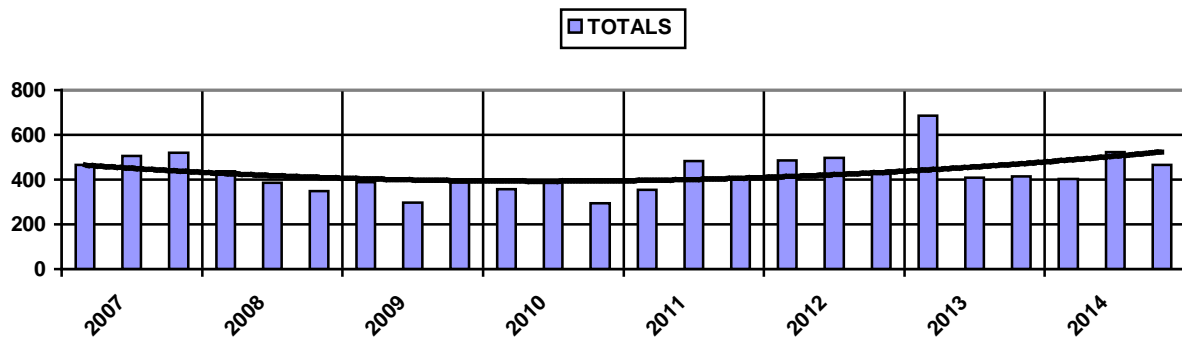
Red listed. (A) -25% (B) -25%



Reed Buntings have more or less maintained their breeding numbers, showing a fall only in 2013. Nationally their population is described as stable.

Amber listed. (A) +14% (B) +10%

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



A slight upward trend is indicated 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 eight 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.

Buzzard.
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.

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

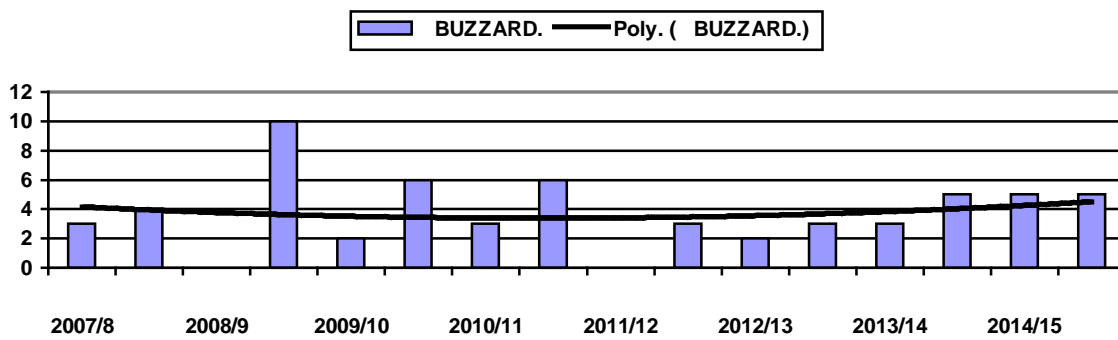
Species with little variation from the National averages.

- 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.)

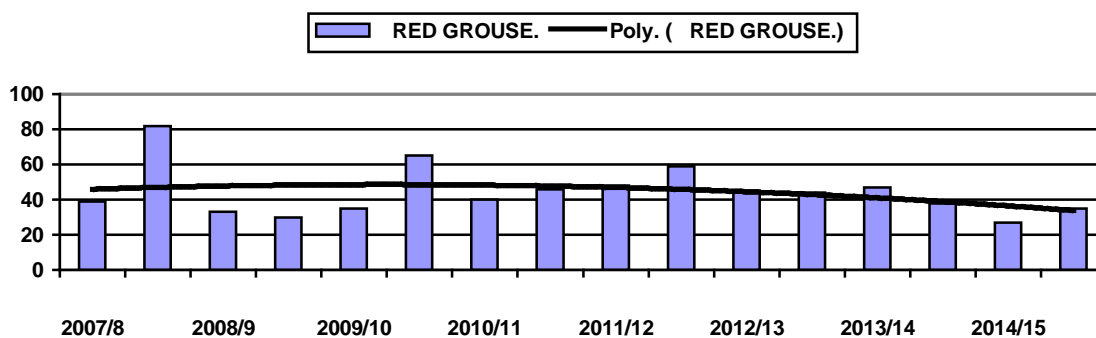
It is interesting to note that most of the species with higher counts than the National average are ground nesting and may have benefited most from the control of predators.

Winter Period Results.

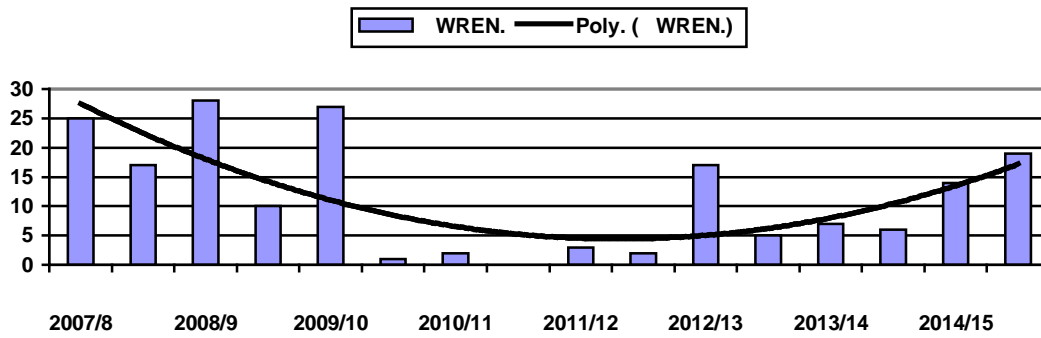
Three species which are mainly winter residents are shown in graph form, although there are no figures by which to make any useful comparisons with national records.



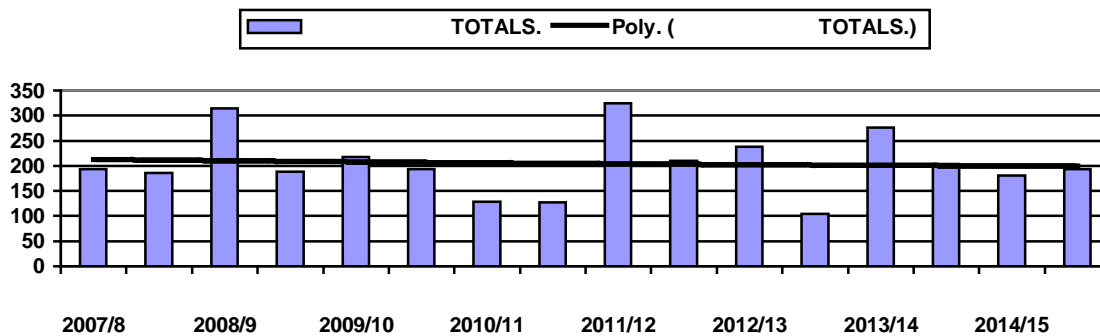
The trend line indicates that there has been a very level population of Buzzards in the winter time over the last eight years. This would suggest that the huge movement to the eastern side of the country is now at a maximum sustainable level.



Regardless of the effects of shooting, there remain a very healthy number of birds to form the next breeding population.



This graph illustrates very well the disastrous effects of two severe winter periods and one very poor breeding season between 2010 and 2012 had on the Wren population. It also shows how the population has bounced back given the better conditions in recent seasons. See also the summer chart for Wrens.



Although individual total counts vary considerably the trend line shows little change over the survey period.

Roundup of the five areas.

At the Black Lough a high proportion of the surrounding woodland has now been felled which will have had an effect on the numbers of some of the woodland species that have previously been recorded there. Red Grouse continue to be seen in small numbers during the breeding period. It is believed that these birds move to the more highly populated parts of Alwick Moor. Very small numbers have been seen here in the winter.

Five species of Bumble Bees have been recorded at the Black Lough. There are also two records of Adders this year.

At the Kimmer Lough higher numbers of Wildfowl have been seen this winter although the counts during the breeding season are still very low. This remains a puzzle since the Lough would appear to be a very attractive location. Could this be caused by Pike or Otters? Insects of interest at the Kimmer Lough are Four Spotted Chaser Dragonflies and 2 Large Heath Butterflies, which are not often seen in this area.

At Freeman's Pool, at Hulne Moor a Little Grebe was recorded for the first time during the breeding season. The Red Deer have been seen in small numbers, including one very pale coloured hind. Green Woodpeckers are becoming uncommon but one was recorded here.