

BIRD SURVEY - FIELDHOUSE AND TOWNFOOT.

REPORT FOR NOVEMBER 2016 TO OCT. 2017.

This Survey is carried out by members of the Alnwick Wildlife Group.

This report covers the eighth year of the survey.

Aims of the survey.

This survey is aimed at assessing the effects on the wild bird population made by Northumberland Estates' gamekeeping and farm management, in an area of mainly arable land which is under an Agricultural Environmental Scheme. Fieldhouse and Fownfoot farms are part of an area where an attempt is being made to encourage the Grey Partridge to a point where some sustainable shooting can be carried out.

Methodology.

In order to make comparative counts as accurate as possible, recording is carried out by walking the same routes and spending the same time at each visit. Six visits are made each year. In the winter period these are in Nov. Jan. and Feb. and monthly during the breeding period from late April to early July.

Visits are made on days which are not too windy or wet, when observation is much more difficult and comparative counts are impossible. Recording is carried out by visual observation or song and call recognition. Although all species are recorded, the "target" species for the survey are those which normally feed and breed on arable land and the adjoining hedges and hedgerow trees. Also included are those predators which may have some effect on these populations, eg. Sparrowhawk and Buzzard etc.

General Observations.

The survey is affected by many factors, one of which is the continuing changes made to the farming rotation and the increase and repositioning of some game plots which alter the habitats covered by the survey routes. These changes are in themselves of interest and show that in the case of Lapwing, the nesting area can follow favoured conditions eg. Spring sown crops or bare stubbles. If none of these are available the local population is severely reduced as they move further away. An added complication is that if spring cultivations are delayed by weather conditions, many early nests can be destroyed, reducing their breeding success.

The habitats on Townfoot and Fieldhouse are different, Townfoot having more hedges and hedgerow trees for cover and nesting than Fieldhouse, which includes the large more open area of the old airfield. The difference is illustrated by the counts of some of the target species, numbers of Blackbirds, Chaffinch and Dunnock are usually much higher at Townfoot than at Fieldhouse where Meadow Pipit, Skylark and Lapwing are often found.

Achieving the Aims.

The aims of the survey will only be achieved if a reasonable comparison can be made between the results of this survey and average populations in similar areas. An attempt is being made to do this. More useful information is now available and it is hoped that the conclusions made will be increasingly accurate. The most important factor is the comparison of counts during the breeding period.

Graphs.

Graphs can easily mislead. Six visits each year produce only a small amount of data on which to base any conclusions, taking into account all the vagaries of weather and the many other changing conditions which can affect counts.

Breeding period graphs of Target Species.

The counts of the target species from both farms are totalled and graphs produced from these results. To achieve the aims of the survey we are attempting to make a comparison between our figures and national averages produced by BTO. from the annual results of their Breeding Bird Survey.

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

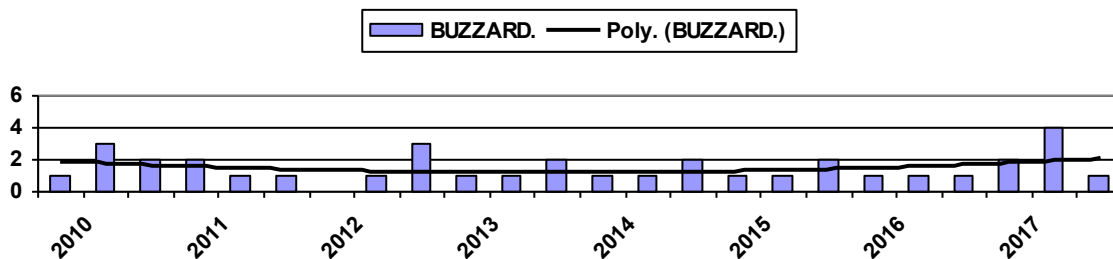
Amber. Those for which there is some concern,

Red. For those at greatest risk.

BTO. National figures give:- **(A)** an average % rise or fall over the period 1995 – 2014
(B) an estimated % rise or fall over the period 2014 – 2015

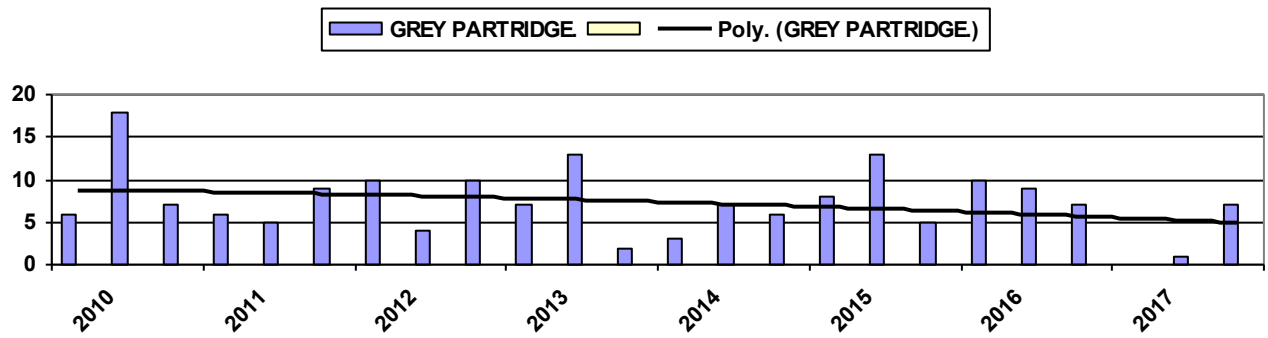
These figures, which are the most up to date available, and colour classification are given with the graph of each of the target species.

Further information is available from the latest Bird Atlas for the UK from the British Trust for Ornithology **(BA)** and the Northumbria Bird Atlas from the Northumberland and Tyneside Bird Club **(NBA)**. Unfortunately these are now several years out of date and are therefore now of decreasing value.



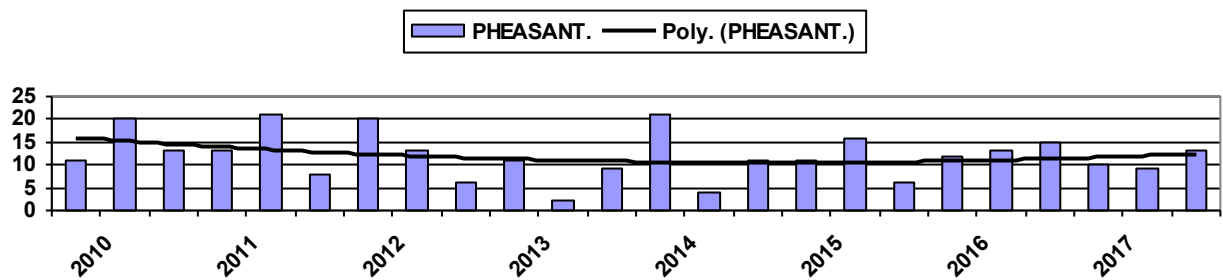
The eastward spread of buzzards now appears to be complete and the population is considered to be stable. This does seem to be the position here where counts now appear to be very constant, except for the one higher count which is probably by chance.

Black listed. (A) +182% (B) +14%



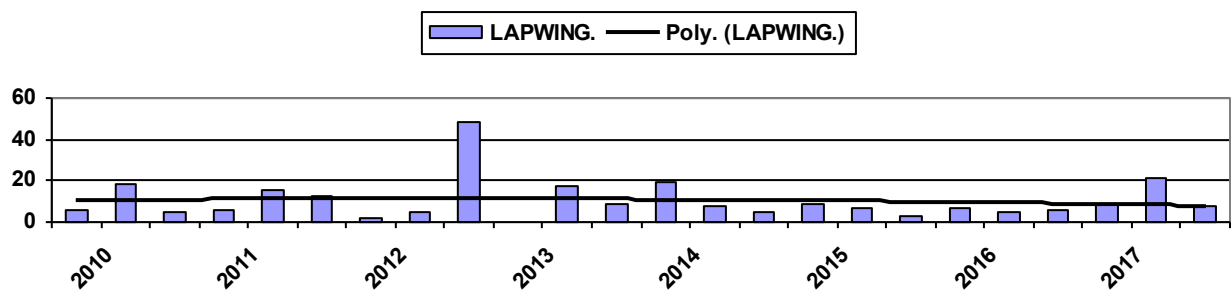
Nationally there has been a huge decline in Partridge numbers over the last forty years. In the survey area this trend has been reversed but numbers have again declined severely this year. which seems to be in complete contrast to the Ratcheugh survey results where they were satisfactory.

Red listed (A) -55% (B) +24%



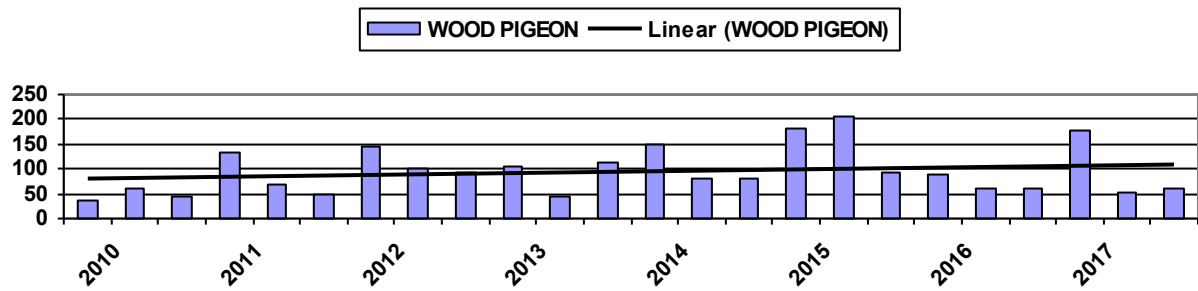
Nationally the number of Pheasants has risen with the release of large numbers of birds for shooting. In the survey area no hand reared birds have been released in recent years but numbers continue to be maintained by “wild birds” and immigrants from surrounding shoots, despite the fact that some shooting takes place in the survey area.

Black listed. (A) +31% (B) +3%



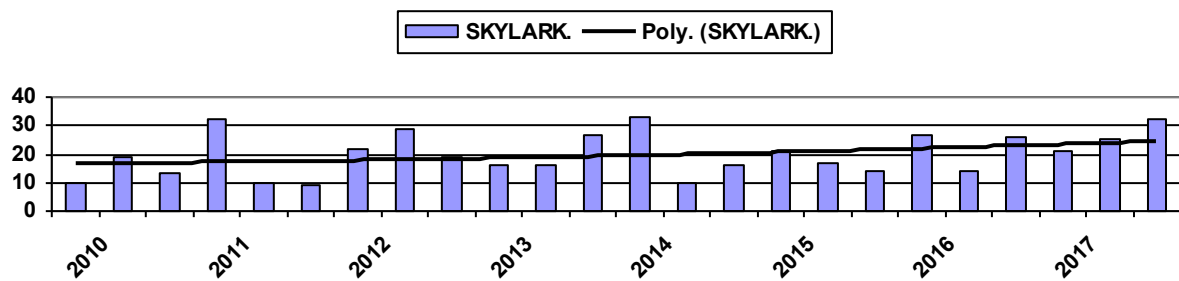
Lapwing have varied in numbers here in the last two years, probably because the rotation of crops provides a variable area of suitable breeding ground, especially at Fieldhouse.

Red listed. (A) -26% (B) +2%



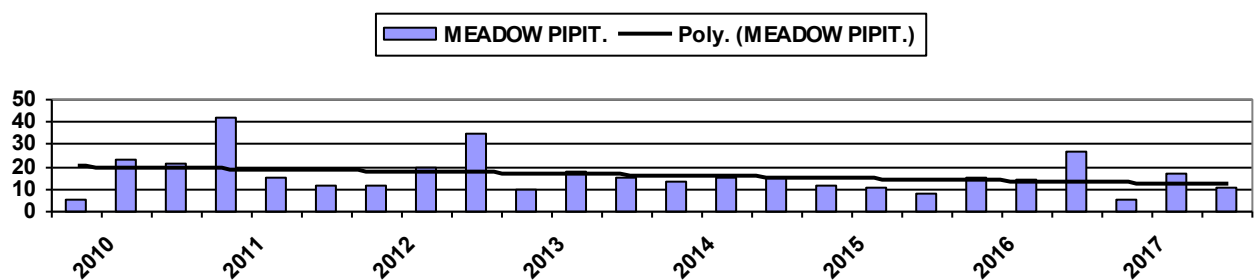
High numbers of Woodpigeons can be damaging to some agricultural crops and cause considerable losses, particularly to oil seed rape in the winter and cereal crops as they ripen towards harvest time. A surprisingly small number were recorded on average in the last two years.

Black listed. (A) +30% (B) +8%



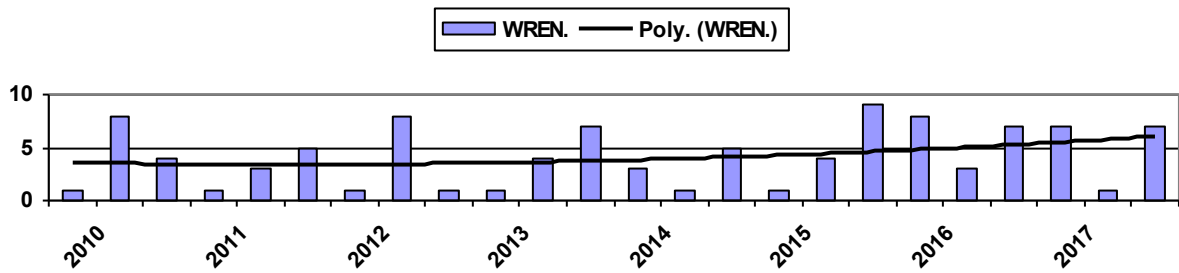
National figures show a continual drop in Skylark numbers over a long period, particularly in arable areas. Counts here and particularly on the more open parts of Fieldhouse farm show that numbers are increasing.

Red listed. (A) -23% (B) -6%



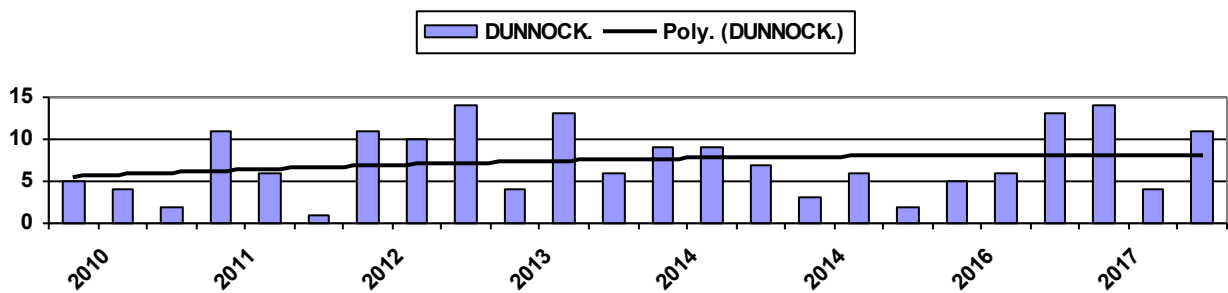
Meadow Pipits require similar conditions to Skylarks in their breeding habitat but are more suited to permanent grassland or hill pasture than in an arable situation. They continue to maintain their numbers in this survey area.

Amber listed. (A) -19% (B) -7%



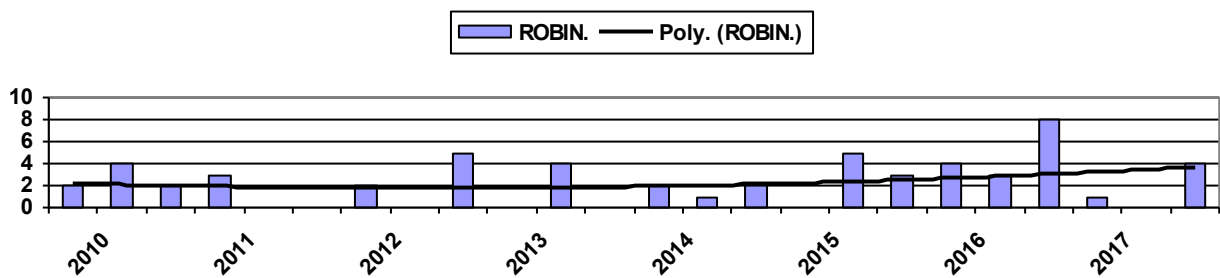
This chart continues to illustrate how numbers of Wrens vary throughout the year, with the higher numbers at the end of the breeding period which are normally reduced during the winter by the colder weather and shortage of insect food. National estimates claim a 50% loss of Wrens in an average winter. Results in 2015 continue this trend. (See winter graph) In 2016 and 2017 higher numbers have been recorded in spring, possibly due to the milder winters experienced then.

Black listed. (A) +15% (B) +5%



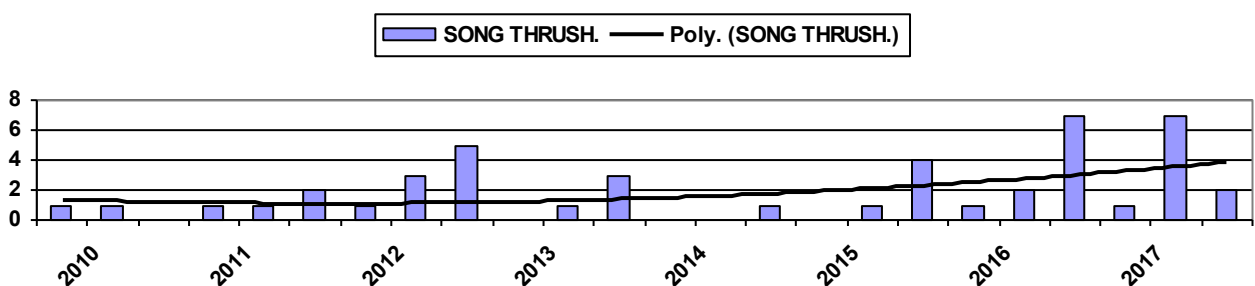
The national increase in previous years is due to their spread into areas in the west. (BA) Dunnocks have been recorded in much healthier numbers in the survey area in 2016 and 2017.

Amber listed. (A) +15% (B) +4%



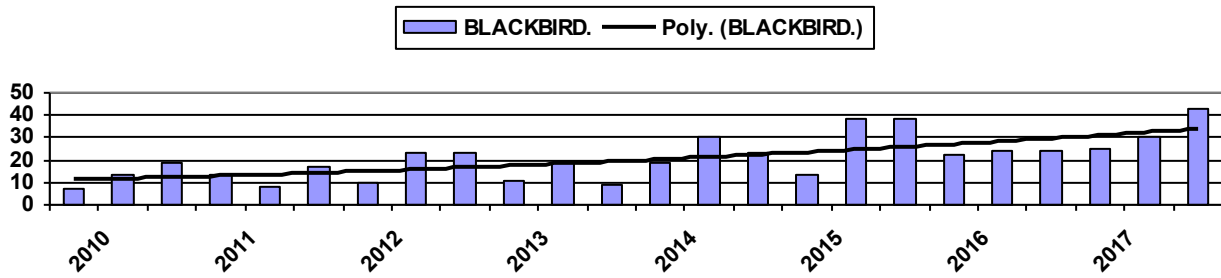
Counts of the Robin population are very variable and do not show any real increase.

Black listed. (A) +21% (B) +9%

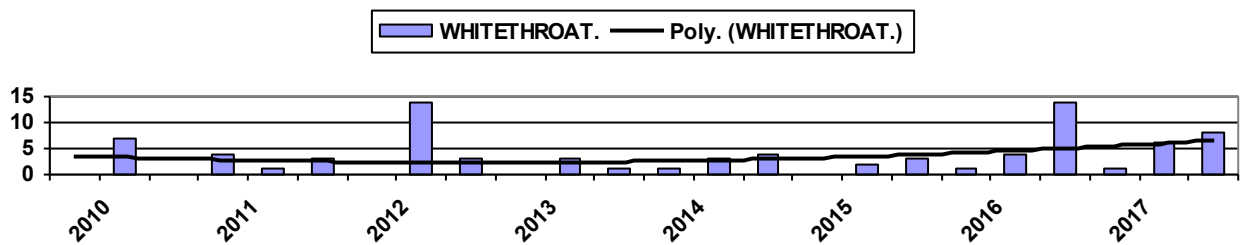


A better count of Song Thrushes in 2016 and 2017 National figures have shown a constant fall

In the long term but a small increase more recently,
 Red listed. (A)+13% (B) + 6%

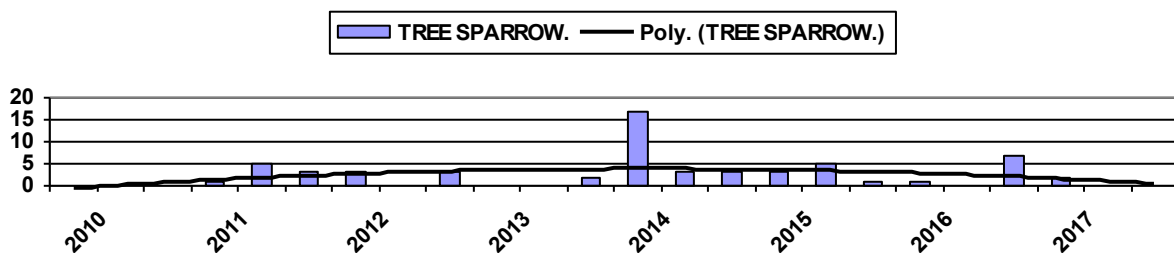


The increasing Blackbird numbers in the survey area continues at a much higher rate than the national average. It would seem that they have benefited from the control of predators and improvements to hedges for breeding. Black listed. (A) +18% (B) -1%



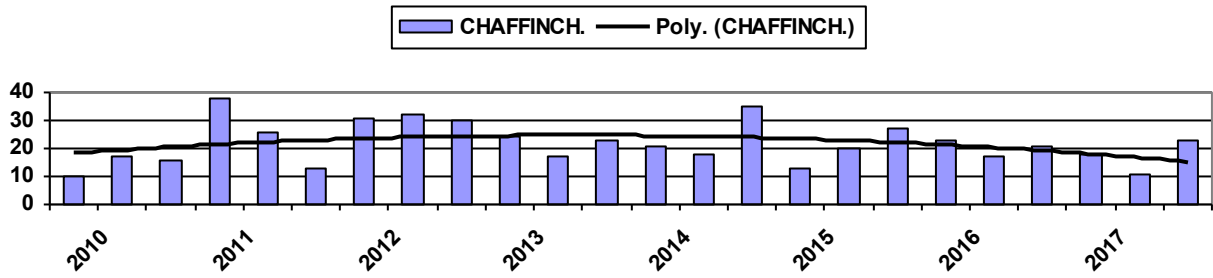
Whitethroats are the only summer visitor included in the target list. The population in our survey area depends, not only on the conditions here but also on those in their wintering habitats in Africa, and during movements to and fro. Whitethroats are therefore not a good indicator of the effects of any management in this country alone. The denser hedges of Townfoot are proving to be more attractive to Whitethroats than the more open areas of Fieldhouse. There is a small but regular count, which has been above average in 2016 and 2017.

Amber listed. (A) +32% (B) -13%



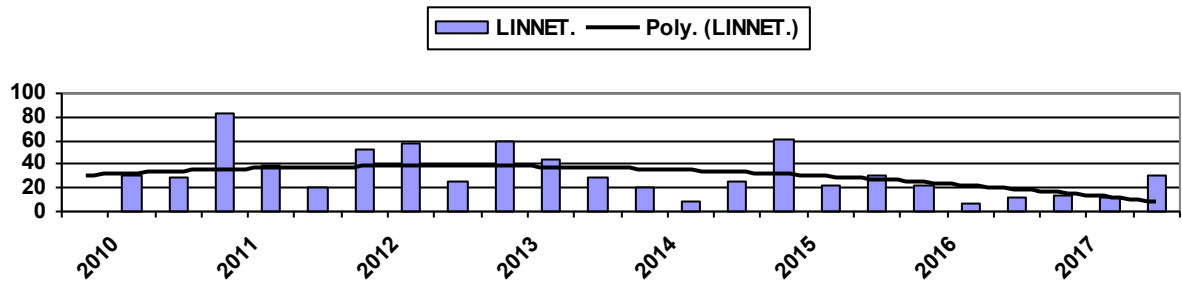
In the years leading up to 2000 breeding Tree Sparrows were scarce. Increasing numbers wintering on the East coast in subsequent years appeared to give a boost to the numbers breeding in the area. This number would now seem to be in decline, as are the numbers being recorded in the winter periods.

Red listed. (A) +72% (B) -8%



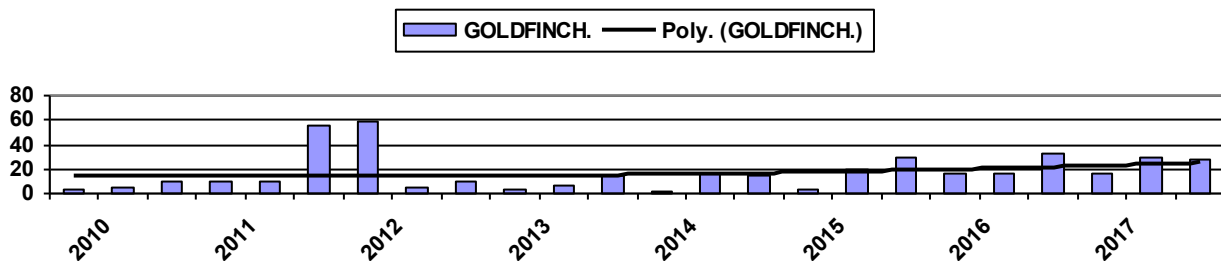
The Chaffinch is, like the Blackbird, one of the commonest species in the survey area and is therefore important in monitoring of the effects of the Estate management. So far the counts show a good population with very little change. This is in line with national averages.

Black listed. (A) +1% (B) 0%



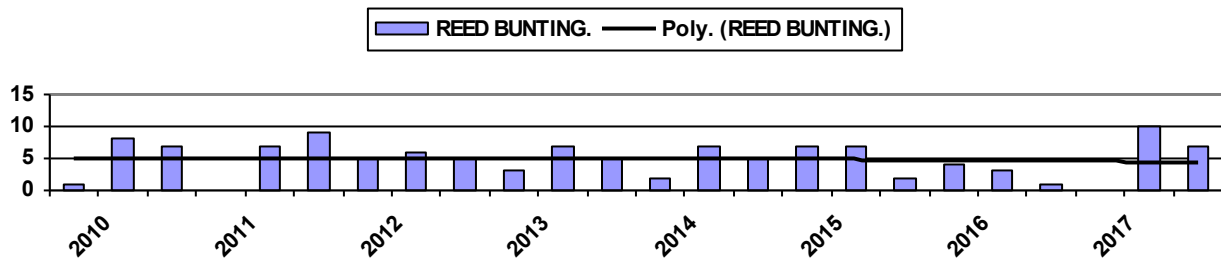
This survey has a higher population of Linnets than most other arable farms in this area. The National average shows an increase in the last two years, which is not being followed here. There are only small areas of suitable habitat for breeding in the survey area.

Red listed. (A) -24% (B) +31%



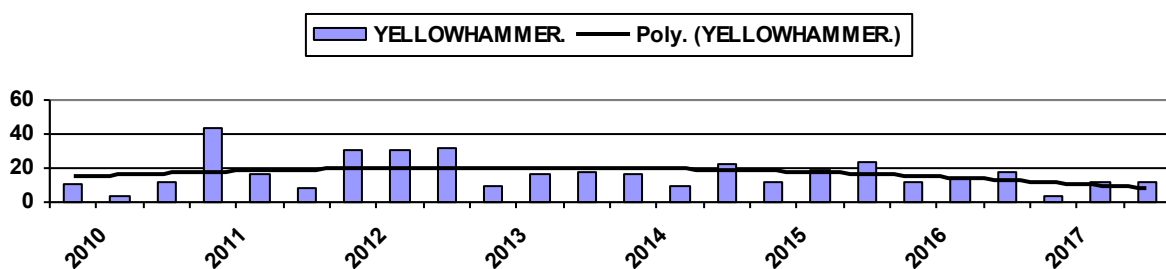
The high numbers of Goldfinches in late 2011 will probably be birds flocking together after breeding and probably mainly juveniles. In early 2012 the higher count will be of a similar group prior to dispersing to their breeding territories. These two high counts distort the true trend which shows a small increase over the last two or three years and would be following the national figures.

Black listed. (A) +111% (B) +13%



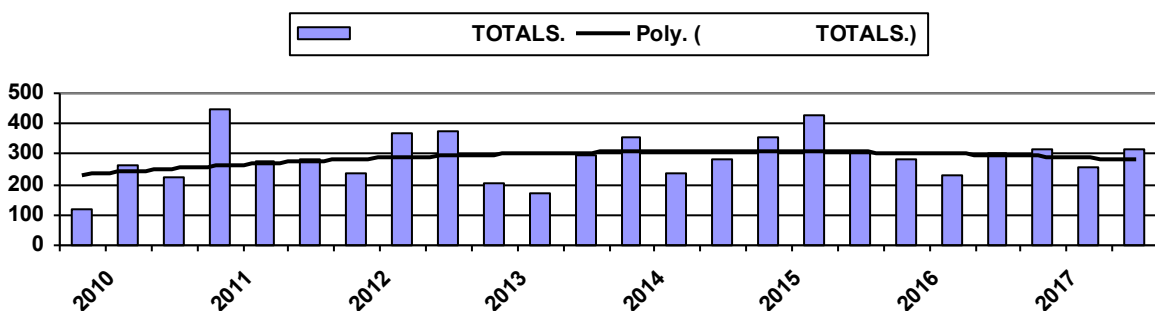
A regular small population of Reed Bunting, mainly along the river Aln at Townfoot. In the North East there has been a small increase during the last twenty years. (NBA) Improved counts were made at the later visits in 2017

Amber listed. (A) +34% (B) +9%



There have been irregular counts of Yellowhammers but on average the population is higher here than on many arable farms. They are closely associated with cereal growing areas and the highest populations are on the east of the country. (BA) Improved hedges are providing better nesting habitats.

Red listed. (A) -25% (B) +3%



The average of total counts are maintaining a good level.

Conclusions.

The results of this survey compared with national averages indicate that six of the target species are performing very satisfactorily, they are:- Grey Partridge. (Red listed)
 Skylark, (Red listed)
 Blackbird
 Wren.
 Whitethroat.
 Lapwing. (Red listed)

Eleven species maintain similar results to national averages:-

- Buzzard.
- Robin.
- Chaffinch.
- Goldfinch.
- Yellowhammer (Red listed)
- Pheasant.
- Meadow Pipit.
- Song Thrush. (Red listed)
- Dunnock.
- Tree Sparrow. (Red listed)
- Reed Bunting.

Two species have not followed the same trends as the national records would suggest:-

- Woodpigeon.
- Linnet. (Red listed)

Winter period Records.

Most winter records are more irregular than those of the breeding period, being determined by weather, food availability and shelter, etc. Graphs have been produced for those of the target species which are winter residents and may have some bearing on the results of the survey.

Winter migrants often add to or replace the local breeding species, which move further south in winter. No graphs have been prepared for the following species as insufficient data is available.

Sparrowhawk. Few sightings.

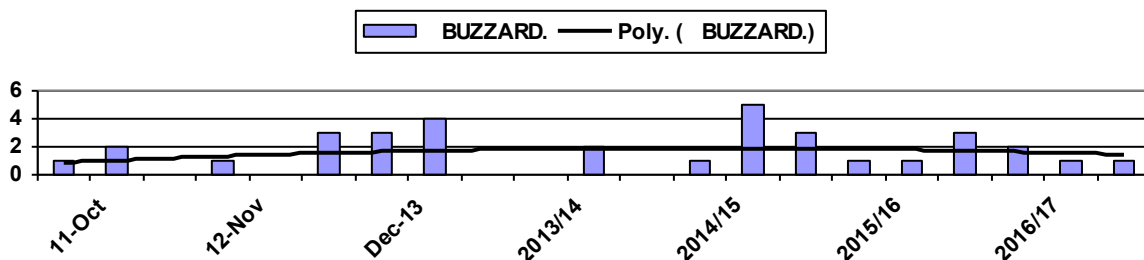
Kestrel. Few sightings.

Lapwing Only three records of groups, usually when there is more severe weather affecting their wintering areas nearer the coast.

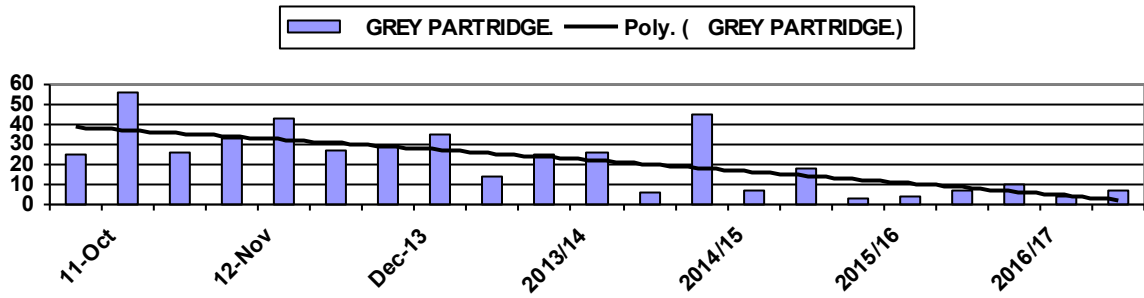
Skylark, Mainly move away from the area in winter.

Meadow Pipit. As the Skylark.

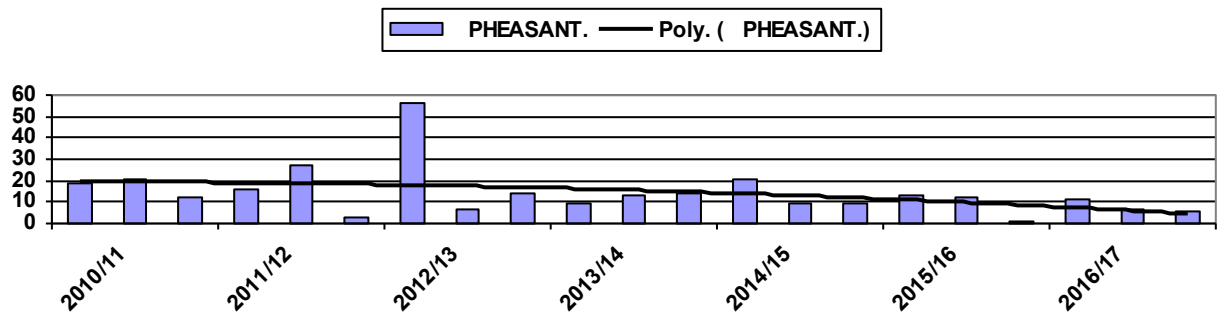
Mistle Thrush. Small numbers.



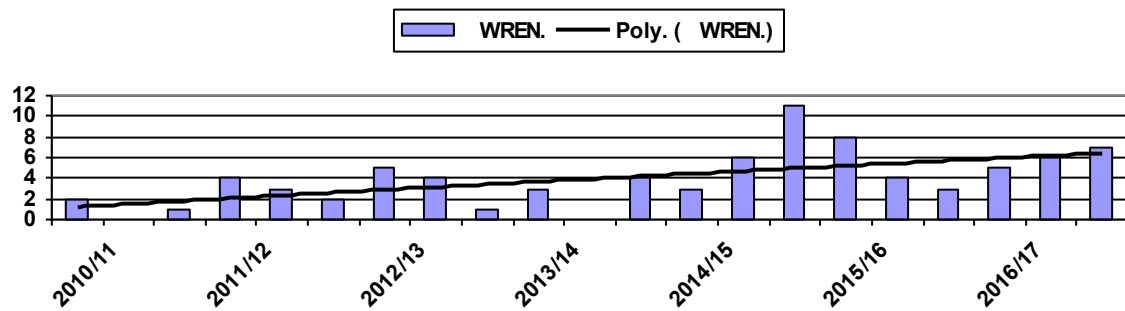
Similar to the breeding period, the Buzzard population appears to be very stable.



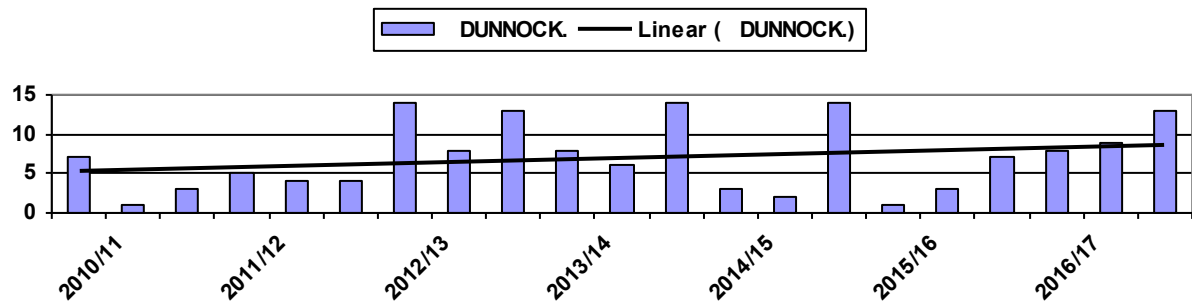
Gray Partridge numbers in winter continue to decline. This may be due to the level of shooting which could be putting the breeding population at risk.



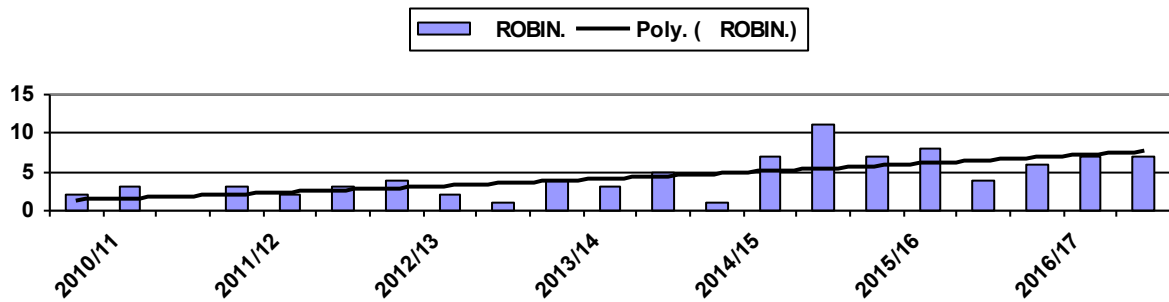
Pheasants will always be affected by the numbers shot during the season



More level average counts. Rising numbers through the winter suggest a high level of survival in the milder conditions which prevailed in the last three years.

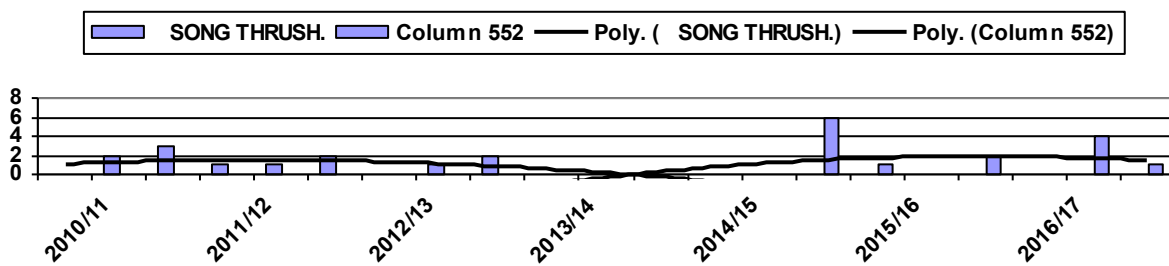


A better average number of birds recorded in the past winter.

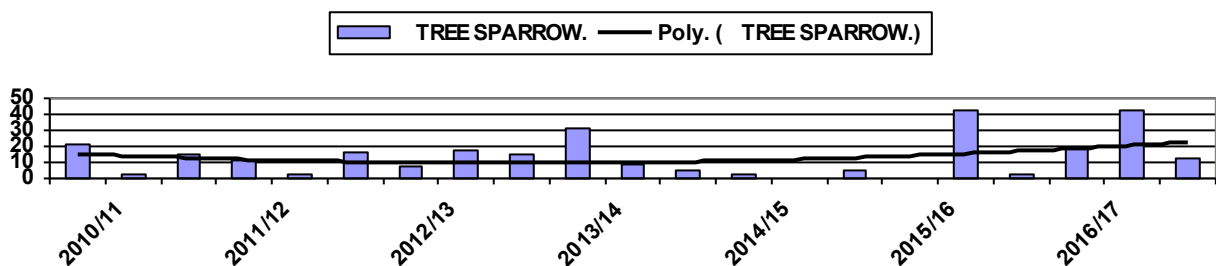


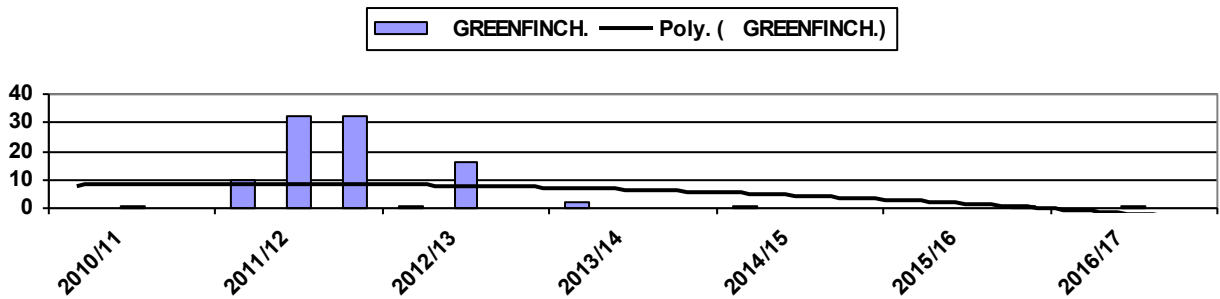
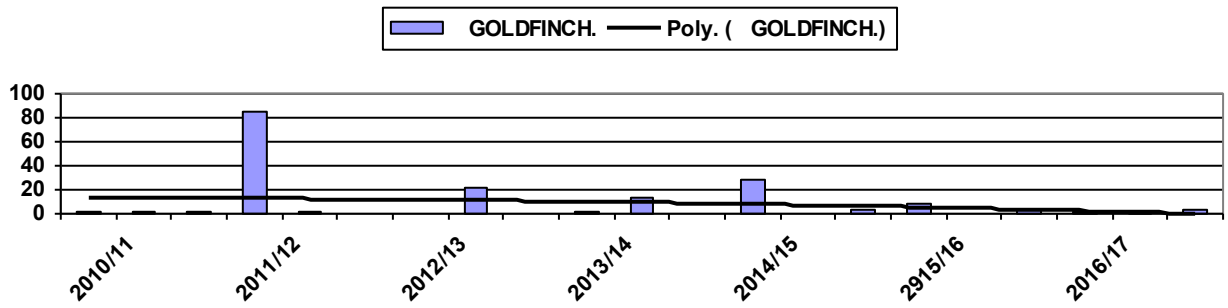
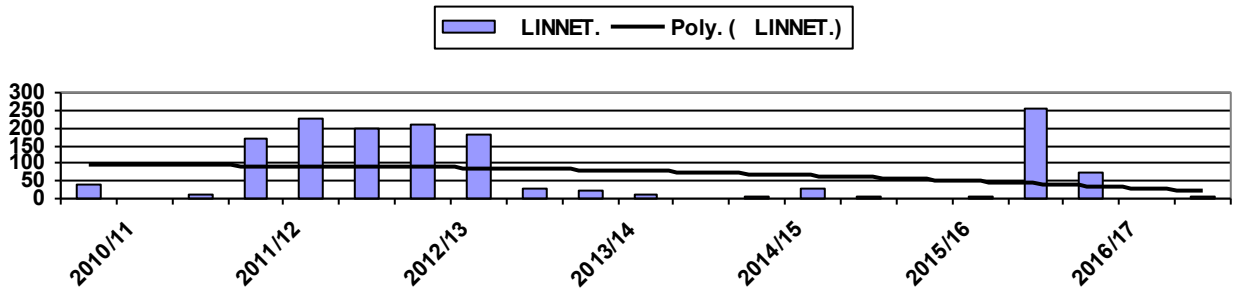
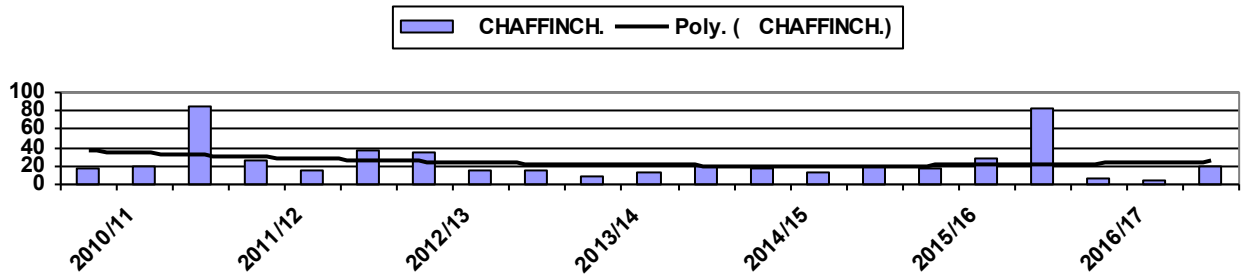
As above, Robins are being recorded in gradually increasing numbers. It would seem to have taken longer for them to increase their population than other species affected by the 2010/11 winter weather. Winter numbers will be affected by immigrants from the continent, in some years more than in others.

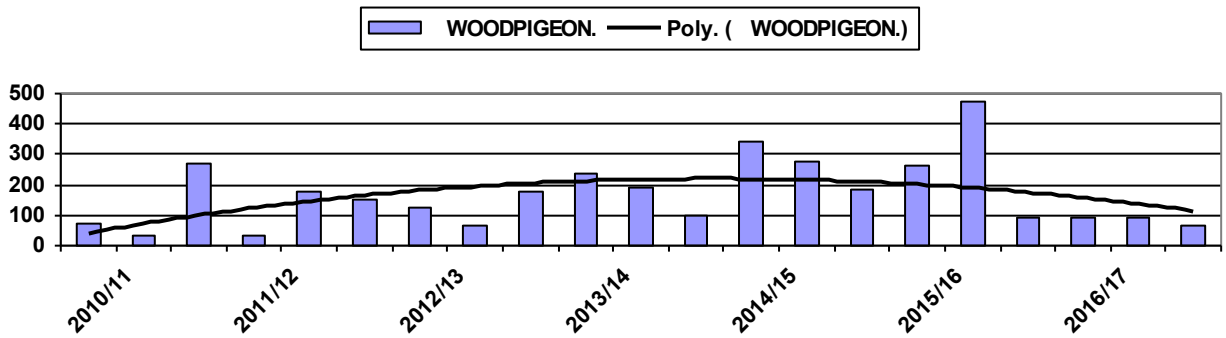
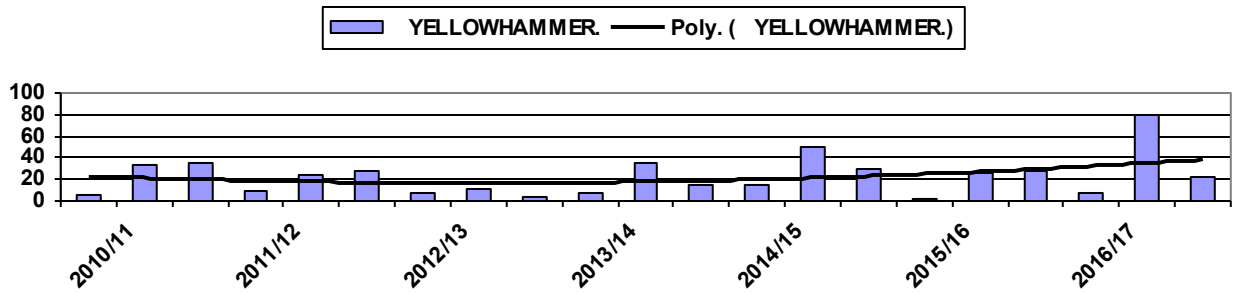
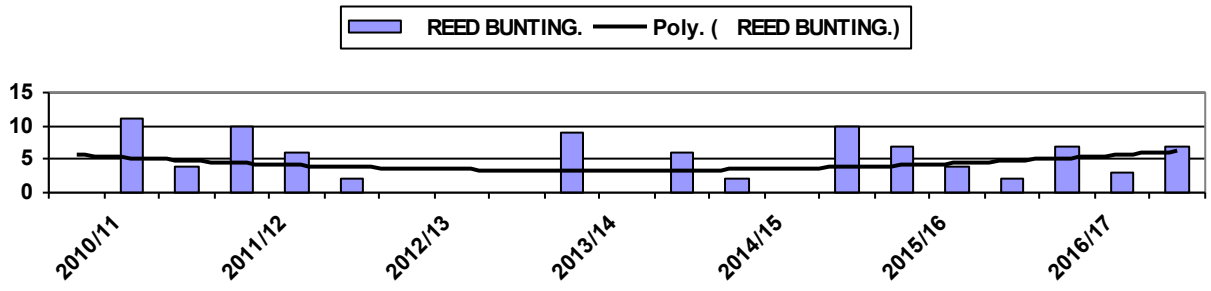
High counts of Blackbirds at the Nov. visits each year, coincide with the annual immigration from Northern Europe.



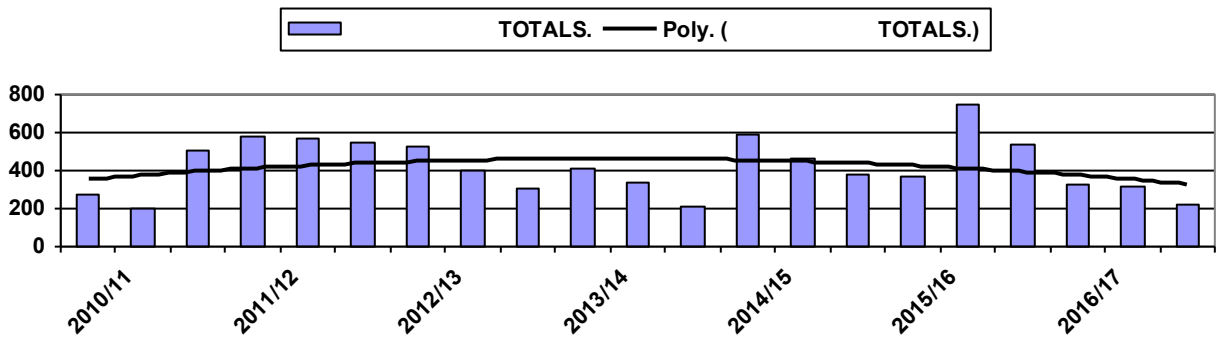
Very irregular counts during the winter period, they tend to be seen in more sheltered habitat such as game plots and woodland.







Smaller numbers of Woodpigeon in the winter follow the pattern of the records of the breeding period. It may be that in milder winters few continental birds arrive here since feed requirements are adequate in their own breeding areas.



All the finch species tend to flock together in winter to areas which provide food and shelter. The game plots on Fieldhouse and Townfoot provide good examples of this and at times high numbers of finches have been recorded here. It is often impossible to count the numbers of individual species and estimates have to be made.

Graphs produced using small amounts of data are of little value. Only when the survey has been running for some time will any obvious and more accurate trends be recognized.

J.C. (Sept. 2017)