

BIRD SURVEY - FIELDHOUSE AND TOWNFOOT.

REPORT FOR NOVEMBER 2017 TO OCT. 2018.

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

The report covers the ninth 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 Townfoot 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 and are most likely to be affected. 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 has 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. This comparison between the two farms will probably change with the alterations in cropping policy which are now being introduced by the Estate after taking over the management of Fieldhouse from the previous tenant.

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,

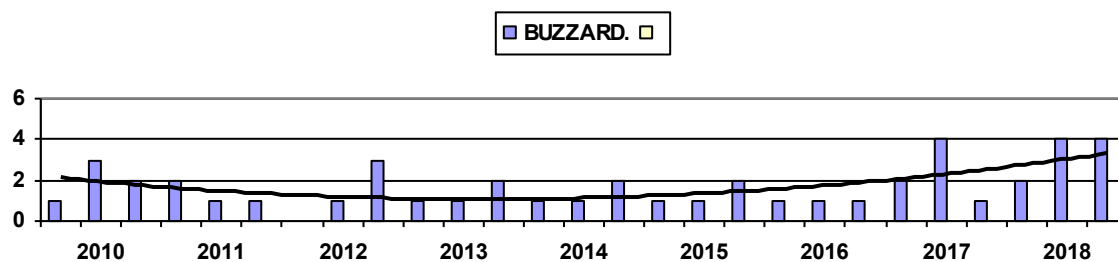
Red. For those at greatest risk.

BTO. National figures give:- **(A)** an average % rise or fall over the period 1995 – 2016

(B) an estimated % rise or fall over the period 2016 – 2017

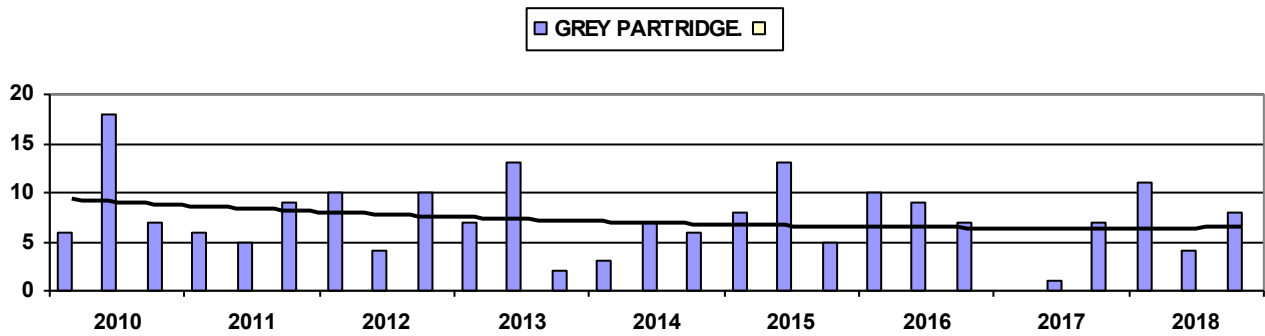
These figures, which are the most up to date available, and colour classification are given with the graph of each of the target species.

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 have become several years out of date and are therefore now of decreasing value.



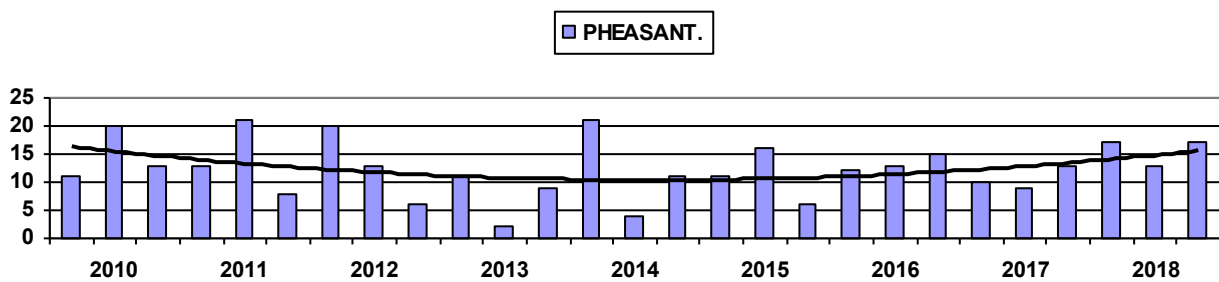
The eastward spread of buzzards now appears to be complete and the population is considered to be stable. This does not seem to be the position here where counts now appear to be rising. This may be a result of successful breeding in this area.

Black listed. (A) +93% (B) +6%



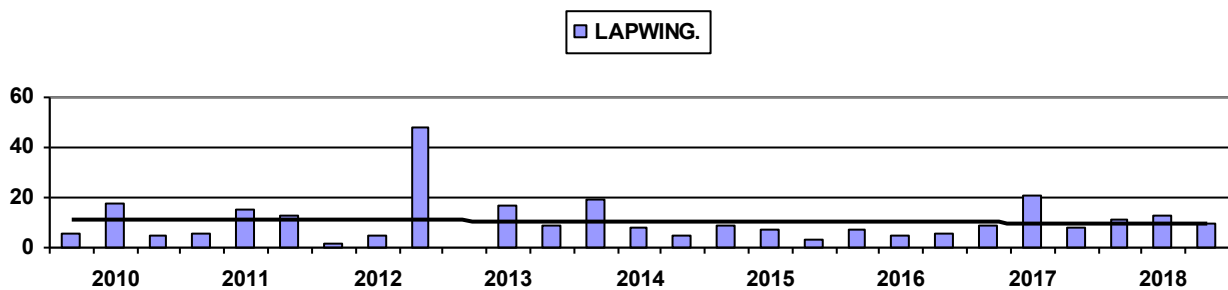
Nationally there has been a huge decline in Partridge numbers over the last forty years. In the survey area this trend has been reversed and after a year of low records in 2017 we are back to better than average numbers.

Red listed (A) -60% (B) +2%



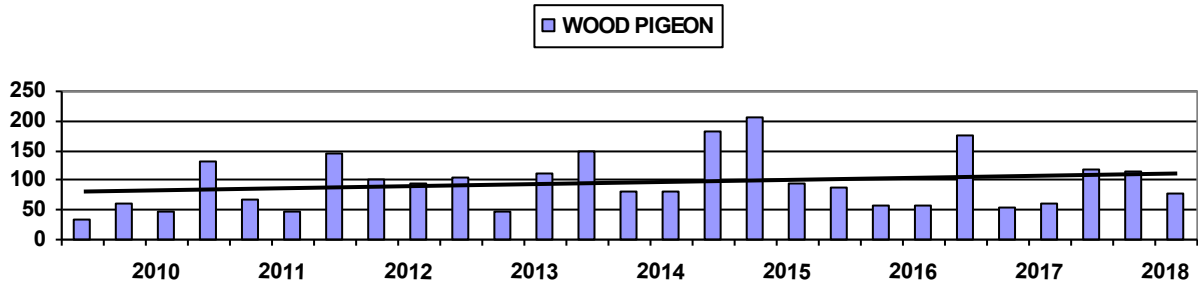
Nationally the number of Pheasants has risen with the release of large numbers of birds for shooting. In the survey area no hand reared birds have been released in recent years but numbers continue to be maintained and are even increasing by “wild birds” and immigrants from surrounding shoots, despite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

Black listed. (A) +32% (B) +14%



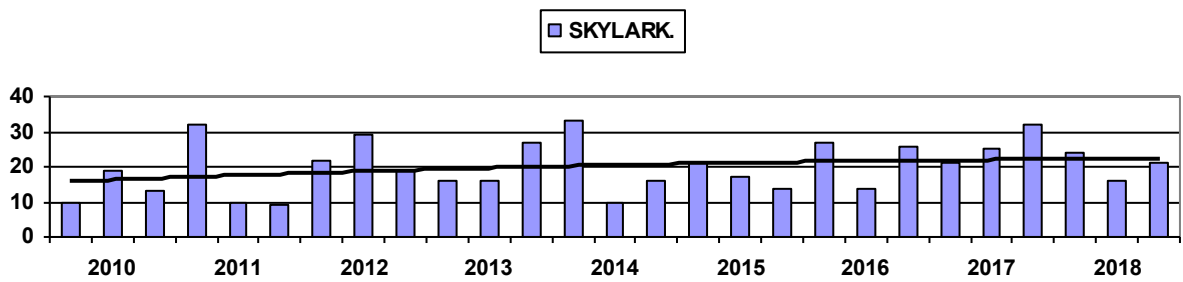
Lapwing numbers seem to have become more stable over the last three years. The crop rotation has been providing a regular source of suitable breeding areas. The change in management may not always follow the same pattern. Here they are performing better than the national average.

Red listed. (A) -42% (B) +7%



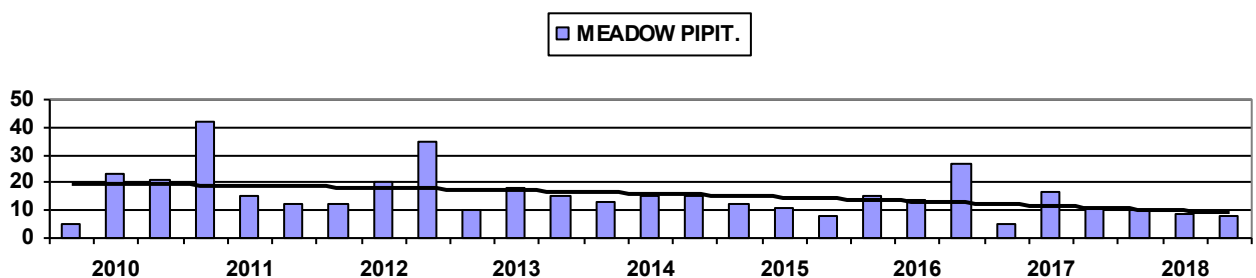
High numbers of Woodpigeons can be damaging to some agricultural crops and cause considerable losses, particularly to oil seed rape in the winter and cereal crops as they ripen towards harvest time. The numbers recorded here are being effectively controlled by bangers.

Black listed. (A) +33% (B) 0%



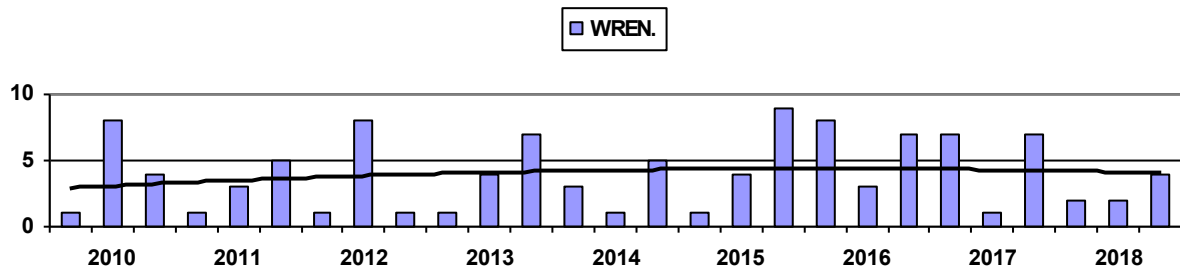
National figures show a continual drop in Skylark numbers over a long period, particularly in arable areas. Counts, particularly on the more open parts of Fieldhouse farm, show that numbers have not fallen here but changes in cropping may well influence numbers in the future with grassland being replaced by arable crops.

Red listed. (A) -20% (B) +1%



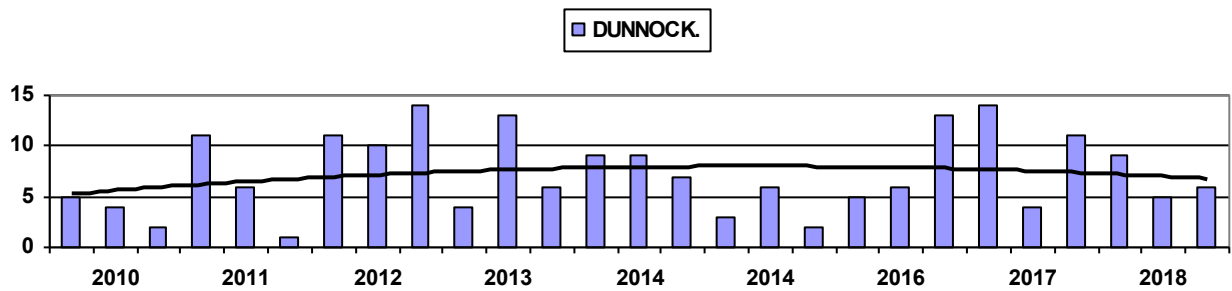
Meadow Pipits require similar conditions to Skylarks in their breeding habitat but are more suited to permanent grassland or hill pasture than in an arable situation. The graph shows a gradual fall in numbers but they may be affected by the changes in cropping, similar to Skylarks.

Amber listed. (A) -7% (B) +5%



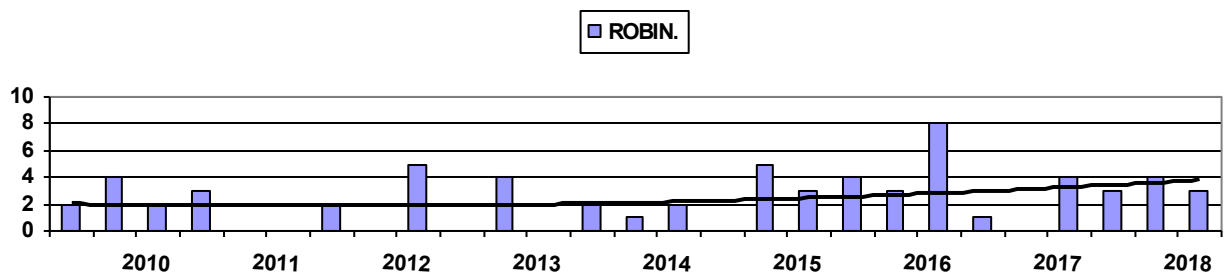
This chart continues to illustrate how numbers of Wrens vary throughout the years, with the higher numbers at the end of the breeding period which are normally reduced during the winter by the colder weather and shortage of insect food. National estimates claim a 50% loss of Wrens in an average winter. Results in 2017/18 winter continue this trend. (See winter graph) The long and wet winter reduced Wren numbers but show an increase again by the end of the breeding period of this year (2018)

Black listed. (A) +40% (B) +1%



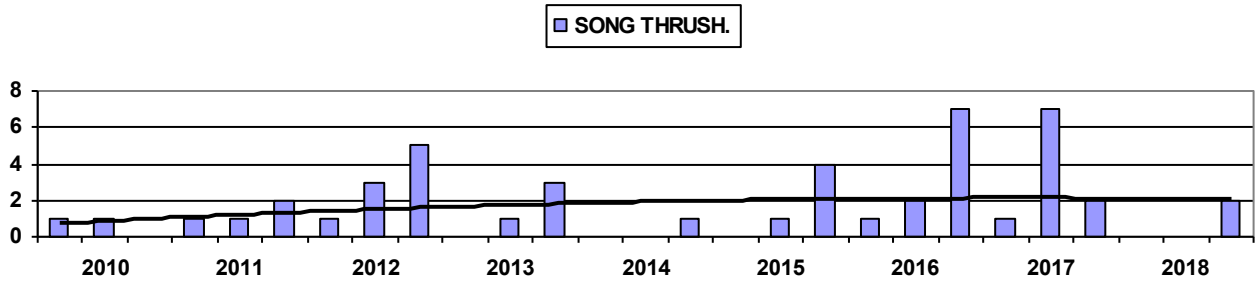
The national increase in previous years is due to their spread into areas in the west. (BA) Dunnocks have been recorded in much healthier numbers in the survey area in 2016 and 2017 but reduced again in 2018.

Amber listed. (A) +23% (B) +3%



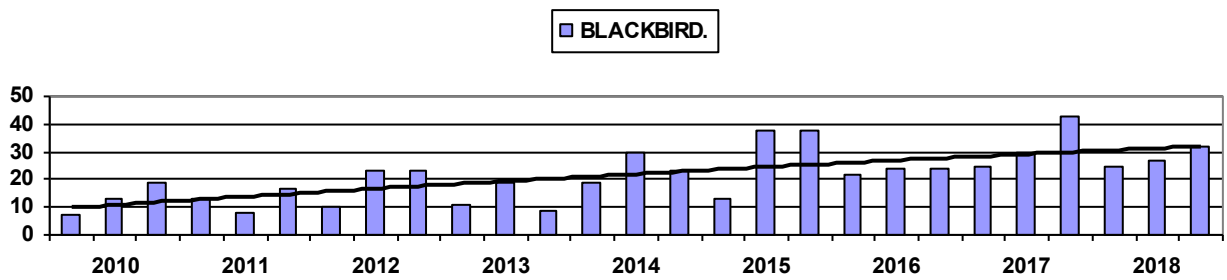
Counts of the Robin population are very variable but are showing a gradual increase in the survey area. This would appear to be in line with national trends.

Black listed. (A) +31% (B) -2%



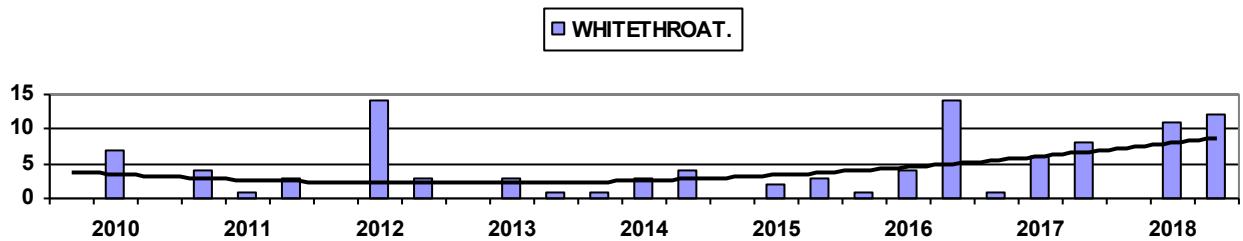
This graph is made with very small numbers having been recorded and is probably of little value. After a long period of gradually reducing numbers, nationally, there seems to be a good revival.

Red listed. (A)+32% (B) + 8%



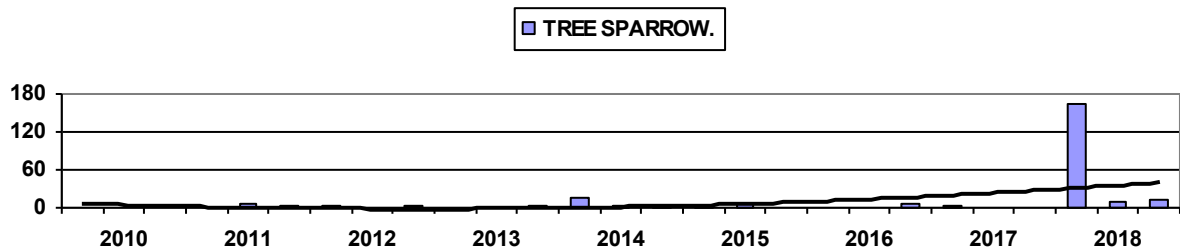
The increasing Blackbird numbers in the survey area continues at a much higher rate than the national average. It would seem that this is one species which has benefited from the control of predators and improvements to hedges for breeding.

Black listed. (A) +24% (B) +6%



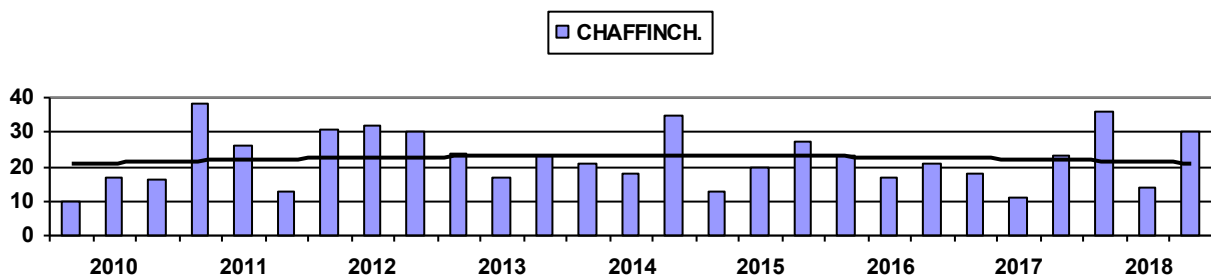
Whitethroats are the only true summer visitor included in the target list. The population in our survey area depends, not only on the conditions here but also on those in their wintering habitats in Africa, and during movements to and fro. Whitethroats are therefore not a good indicator of the effects 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 appears to have been increasing during the last three years.

Amber listed. (A) +27% (B) -3%



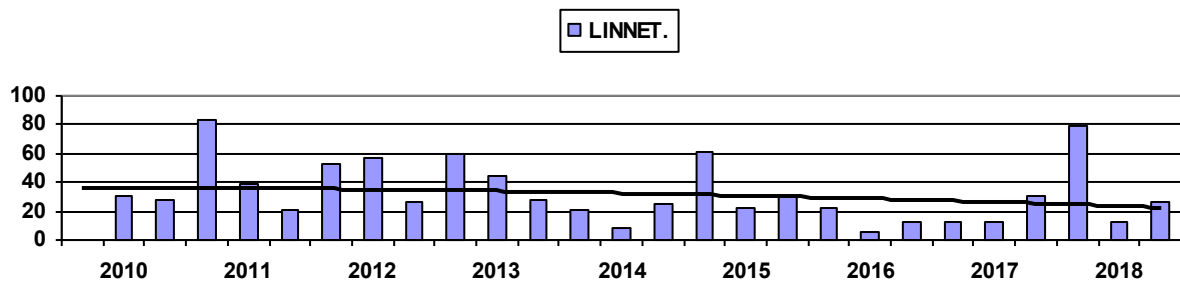
In the years leading up to 2000 breeding Tree Sparrows were scarce. Increasing numbers wintering on the East coast in subsequent years appeared to give a boost to the numbers breeding in the area. This graph shows a very small number breeding in the survey area. The high count in the first visit of 2018 are of flocking birds before their breeding season had started and distorts the graph.

Red listed. (A) +112% (B) -20%



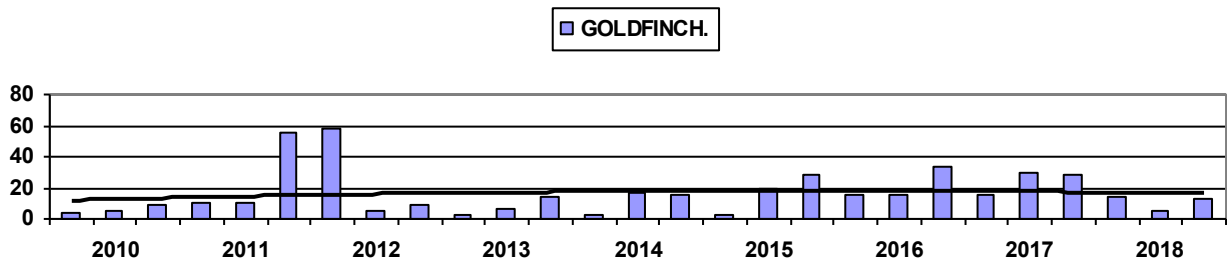
The Chaffinch is, like the Blackbird, one of the commonest species in the survey area and is therefore important in monitoring the effects of the Estate management. So far the counts show a good population with very little change. This is possibly slightly better than the national average

Black listed. (A) -8% (B) -12%



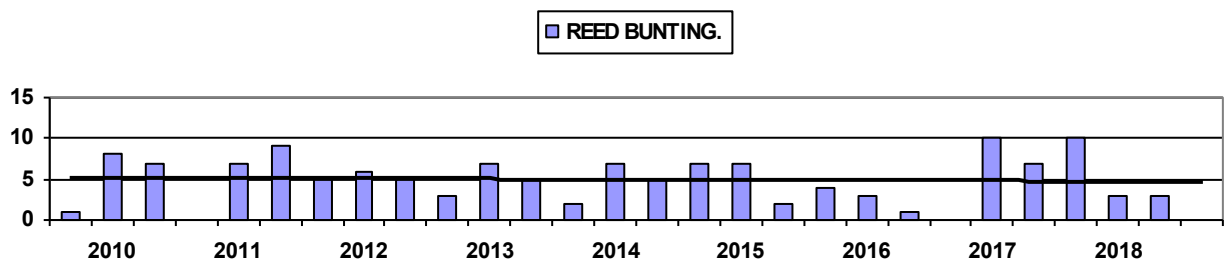
This survey has a higher population of Linnets than most other arable farms in this area. The national average shows a general loss in numbers, which is reflected in our counts. There are only small areas of suitable habitat for breeding in the survey area.

Red listed. (A) -18% (B) -6%



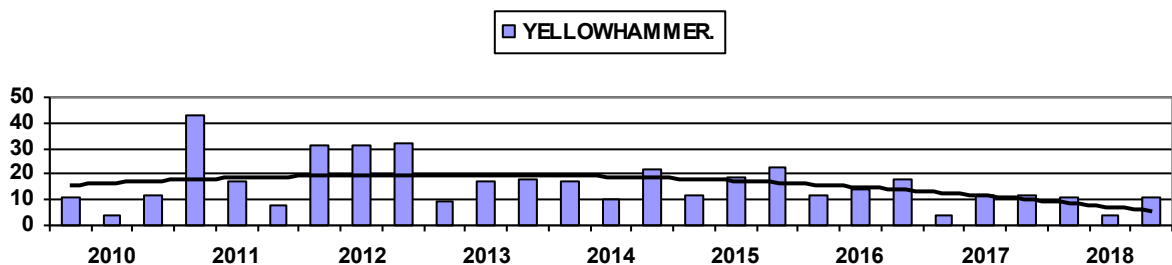
The high numbers of Goldfinches in late 2011 will probably be birds flocking together after breeding and be mainly juveniles. In early 2012 the higher count will be of a similar group prior to dispersing to their breeding territories. These two high counts distort the true trend which shows a small increase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

Black listed. (A) +136% (B) +7%



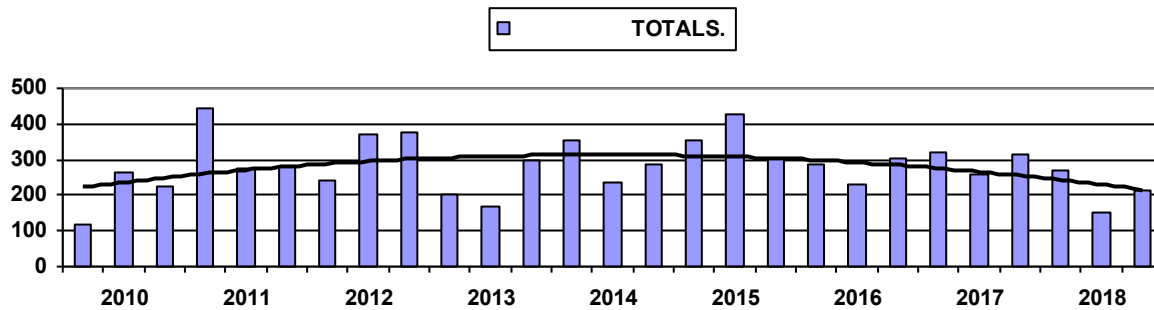
This shows a regular small population of Reed Bunting, mainly along the river Aln at Townfoot. In the North East there has been a small increase during the last twenty years. (NBA) Improved counts were made at the later visits in 2017 but much lower in 2018. Again the problem of creating graphs from small numbers of records.

Amber listed. (A) +39% (B) +4%



There have been irregular counts of Yellowhammers but on average the population is slowly declining, this is in line with the national trend. They are closely associated with cereal growing areas and the highest populations are on the east of the country. (BA)

Red listed. (A) -18% (B) -9%



The average of total counts has fallen slightly.

Conclusions.

The results of this survey compared with national averages indicate that eight of the target species are performing more satisfactorily, they are:-

- Grey Partridge. (Red listed)
- Skylark, (Red listed)
- Blackbird
- Wren.
- Whitethroat.
- Lapwing. (Red listed)
- Buzzard.
- Pheasant.
- Chaffinch.

Eight species maintain similar results to national averages:-

- Robin.
- Linnet (Red listed)
- Goldfinch.
- Yellowhammer (Red listed)
- Woodpigeon
- Meadow Pipit.
- Song Thrush. (Red listed)
- Dunnock.

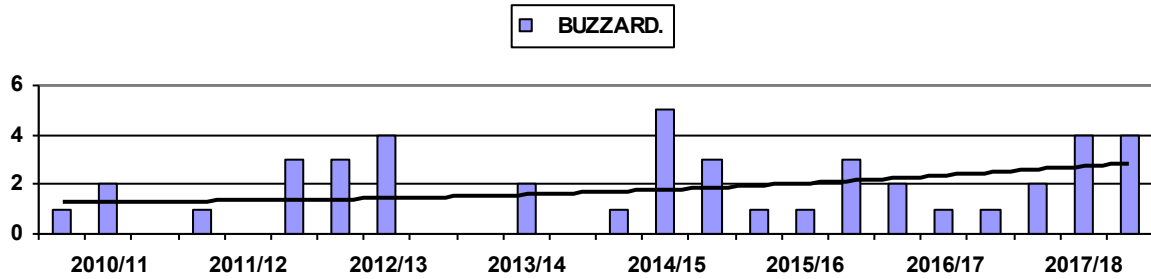
Two species have not followed the same trends as the national records would suggest;-

- Reed Bunting
- Tree Sparrow.(Red listed)

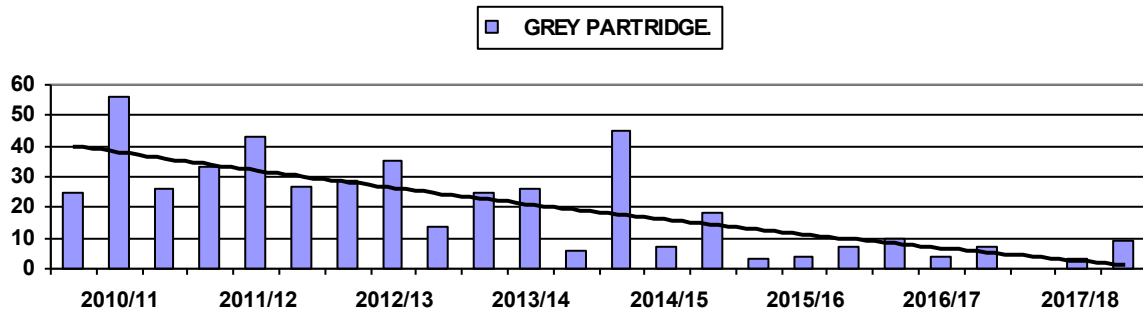
Winter period Records.

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.

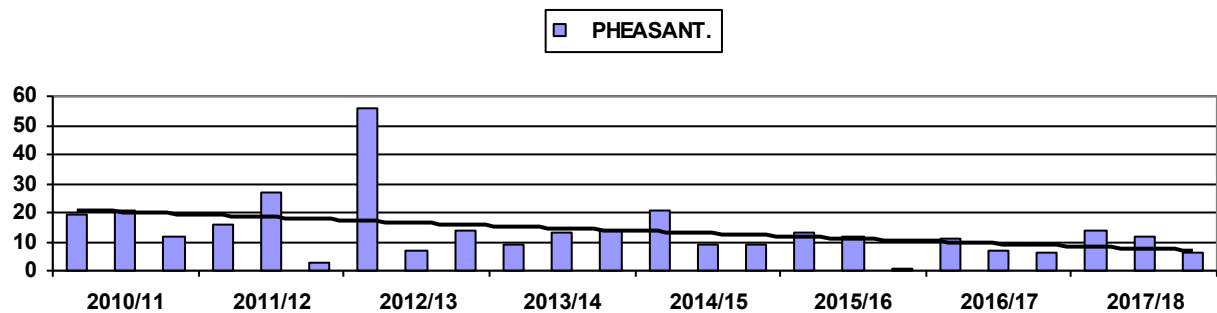
Kestrel. Few sightings.
 Sparrow Hawk. Few sightings.
 Lapwing Only three records of groups, usually when there is more severe weather affecting their wintering areas nearer the coast.
 Skylark, Mainly move away from the area in winter.
 Meadow Pipit. As the Skylark.
 Mistle Thrush. Small numbers.



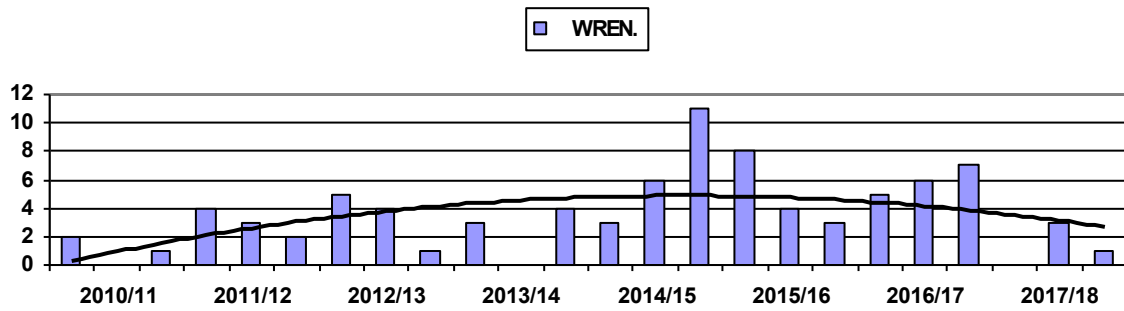
Similar to the breeding period, the Buzzard population appears to be stable or increasing slightly.



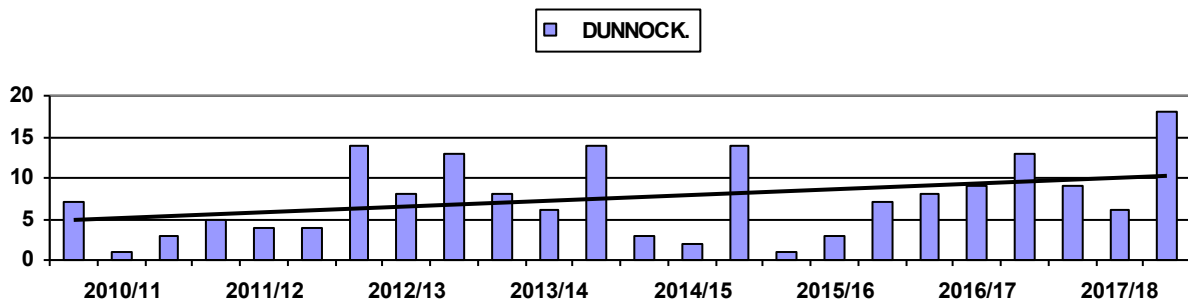
Grey Partridge numbers in winter continue to decline. This may be due to the level of shooting which could be putting the breeding population at risk.



Pheasants will always be affected by the numbers shot during the season but leaving sufficient numbers to form a breeding stock.

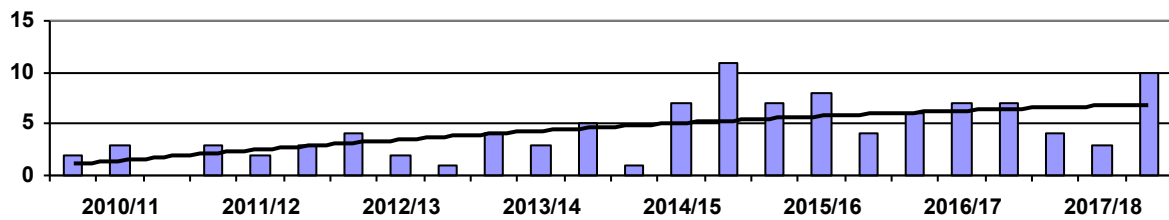


Low numbers in the third visit of each year follow the claim that Wren losses in an average winter are high. High survival rates in 2014/15 and 2016/17 are as a result of mild winters.



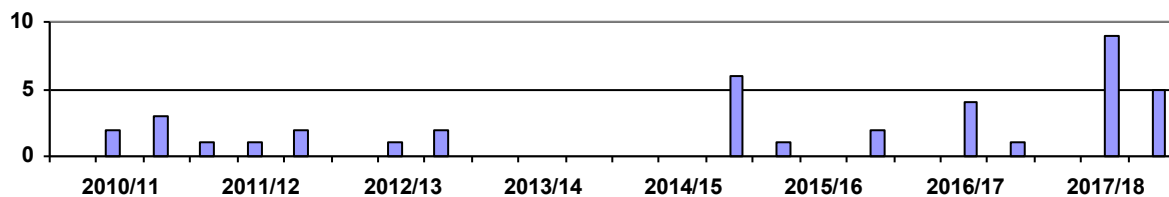
A better average number of birds recorded in the past two winters.

ROBIN

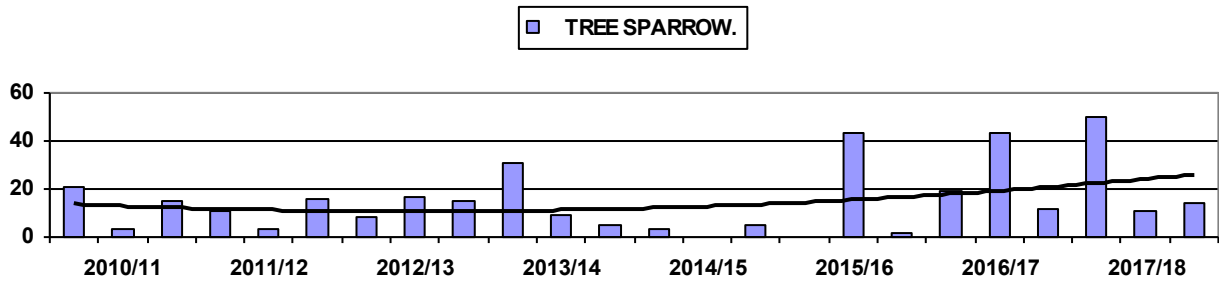


Robins are being recorded in gradually increasing numbers. Winter numbers will be affected by immigrants from the continent, in some years more than in others.

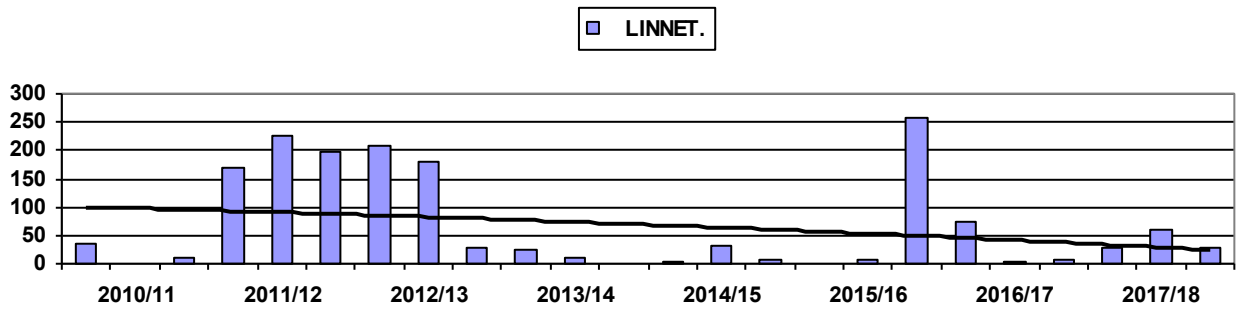
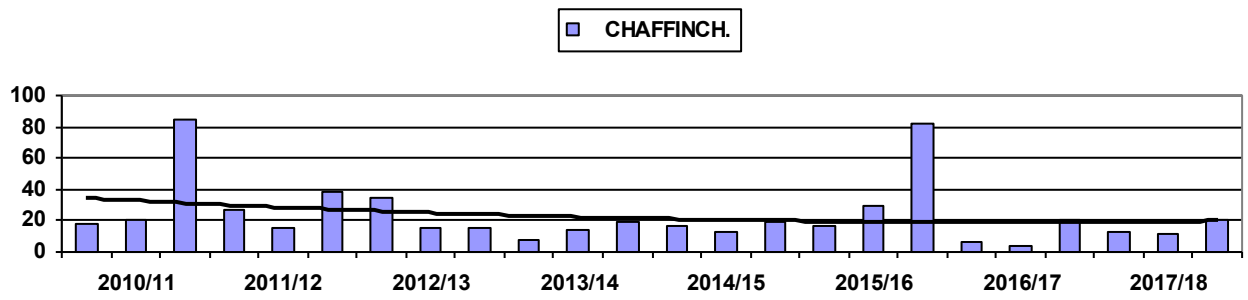
SONG THRUSH



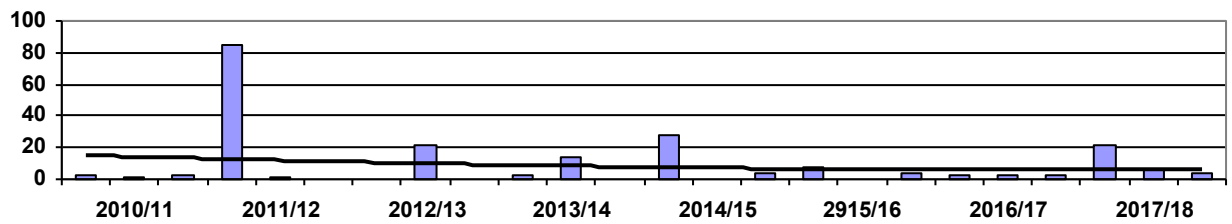
Very irregular counts during the winter period, they tend to be seen in more sheltered habitat such as game plots and woodland.

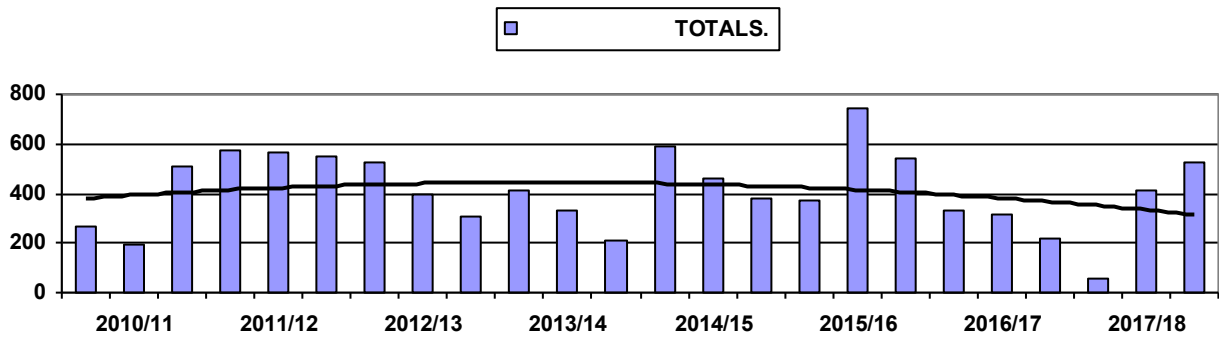


Winter counts are increased by immigrants from the Continent and Scandinavia.



GOLDFINCH





All the finch species above 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. Any graphs made for these species are of very little value.

J.C. (Aug. 2018)

