

RATCHEUGH WILD BIRD SURVEY.

REPORT FOR YEAR 19.

NOV. 2017 – NOV. 2018.

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 arable land which is also in an Agricultural Environmental scheme. Ratcheugh and Snableazes farms are part of an attempt to encourage the Grey Partridge population to a point where some sustainable shooting can be carried out. These farms are where this scheme started and have now become the centre from which it is hoped that birds will spread to the surrounding area. A considerable number of farms are now involved.

Methodology.

In order to make comparative counts as accurate as possible, recording is carried out by walking the same route at each visit. Six visits are made each year. In the winter period these are three 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 by 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 those populations, eg. Sparrowhawks and Buzzards.

General Observations.

Nineteen years of this survey have now been completed and it is inevitable that some changes have been made to the area under survey. It is recognized that the population of some species can vary dramatically from year to year for many reasons. This is an attempt to record any population trends over a number of years. Northumberland Estates entered the Farm Stewardship scheme in 2003 when measures were introduced to aid wildlife conservation, including the establishment of field margins and changes to hedgerow management etc. In 2004 more intensive gamekeeping was commenced to further encourage the Grey Partridge population. Predators are now actively controlled and extra feed and shelter provided.

These changes have given the survey an opportunity to compare wild bird populations before and after the management changes of 2003/4.

No surveys were carried out during the breeding period of 2001 due to Foot and Mouth restriction

Achieving the Aims.

The aims of the survey will only be achieved if a comparison can be made between the results of this survey and average populations nationally and in similar areas in the north east. 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 must be the comparison of counts during the breeding period.

Graphs.

Graphs can easily mislead. Six visits per year produce only a small amount of data on which to base a survey, taking into account all the vagaries of weather and other variables which can affect counts

Target species graphs for the breeding periods to 2017.

No counts were carried out during the breeding season of 2001 due to Foot and Mouth restrictions, which tends to give a depressing effect in the early years of the survey.

All British species are classified into three groups which are indicated with the details of each species as follows. **Black** listed, for those which are not endangered.

Amber listed, for those were there is some concern.

Red listed for those which are at greatest risk.

The UK National average changes in population are shown as – (latest update – 2017)

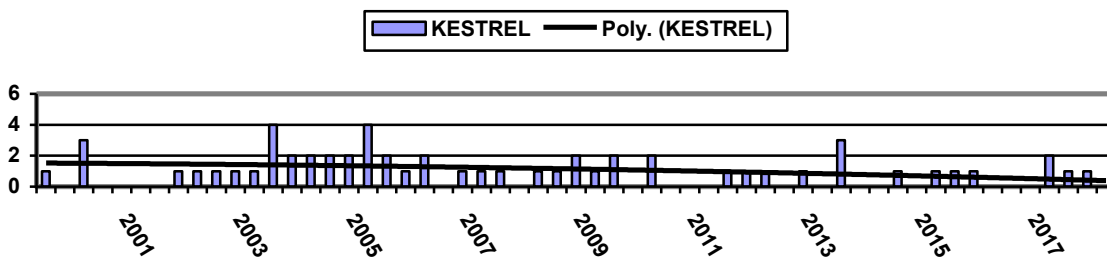
A (The percentage change between 1995 – 2016)

B (The estimated percentage change between 2016 – 2017)

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, although providing much useful information, bird atlases are updated only every ten years and the population of many species can change in the short term.

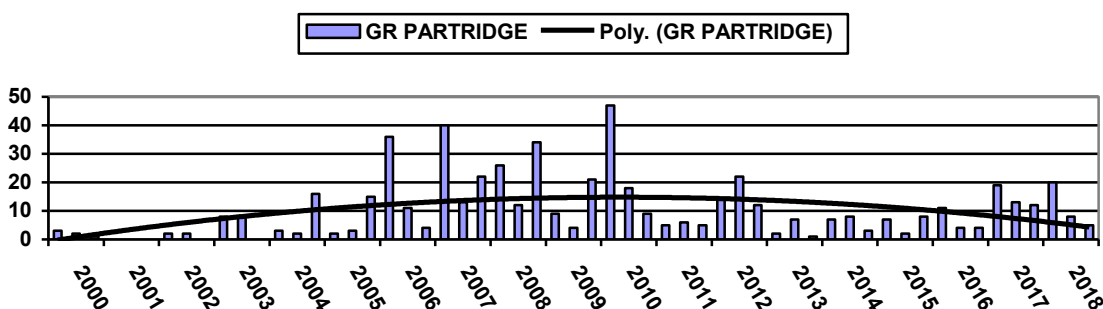
The Buzzard graph follows the (NBA) trends very closely during the period that numbers have increased dramatically with movement from the west. Counts now seem to have fallen slightly in the north east, possibly to the optimum number of breeding territories in Northumberland. (NBA)

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



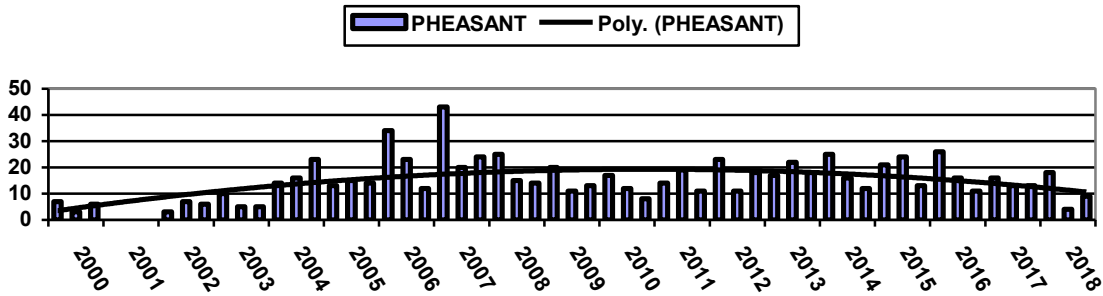
The small number of Kestrels recorded in the survey area shows little change. National figures indicate an increase during the last two years which would seem to agree with the increase reported by (NBA) in the North East but not followed in our counts. Intensive agriculture and the widespread use of rodenticides are mainly held responsible for the long time gradual decline in Kestrels, in wooded areas the increase in Goshawks is blamed in part for their decline.

Amber listed (A) -35% (B) +27%



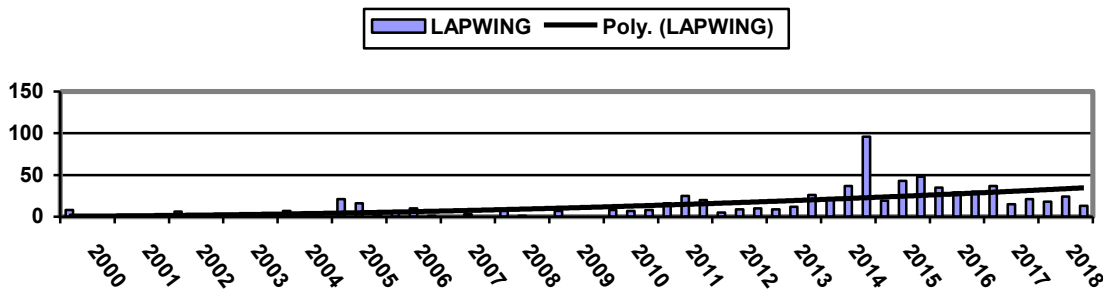
Counts of Grey Partridge in 2018 have been higher than in the previous few years. The breeding season was good, even though the weather was very hot and dry. Most of the visits to Ratcheugh had been made before any estimate of young birds could be accurately made. Higher counts in the North East coastal area, reported by NBA, can be attributed to the results of this scheme. Ratcheugh and Snableazes farms are now seen as being the centre of the Grey Partridge scheme. encouraging stock from here to populate the surrounding area. (See the winter counts for more accurate numbers.)

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



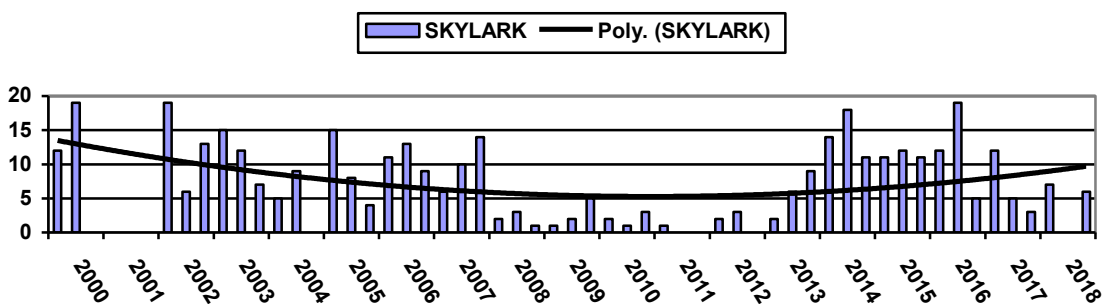
Little change from previous years. Although there are no releases of hand reared Pheasants at Ratcheugh, numbers have again been maintained, despite some shooting. Counts can be very misleading due to massive releases of hand reared Pheasants for shooting in the surrounding area.

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



Changes in the annual rotation of crops in 2017 and 2018 have resulted in smaller areas of stubble on the survey route and a reduced number of Lapwing recorded. The numbers are still very strong in comparison to other arable farms in the area.

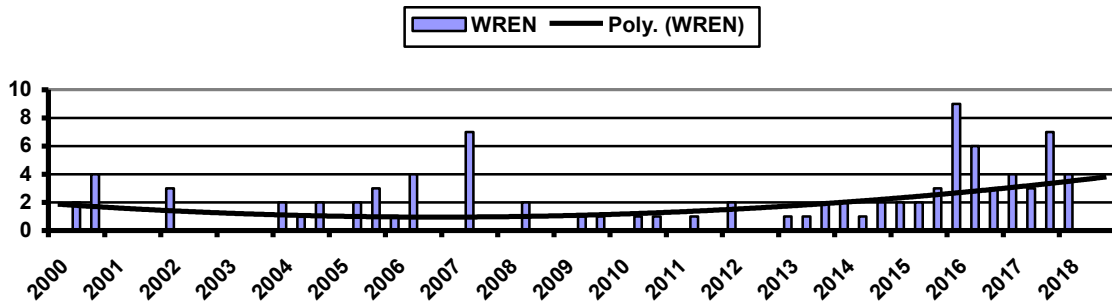
Red listed. (A) -45% (B) +7%



As for Lapwing, changes in the rotation have reduced the area of suitable breeding ground for Skylarks and numbers have been reduced but remain higher than in other arable farms in this area. (BA) shows that most Skylark losses have occurred in Ireland. (NBA) shows more gains on the

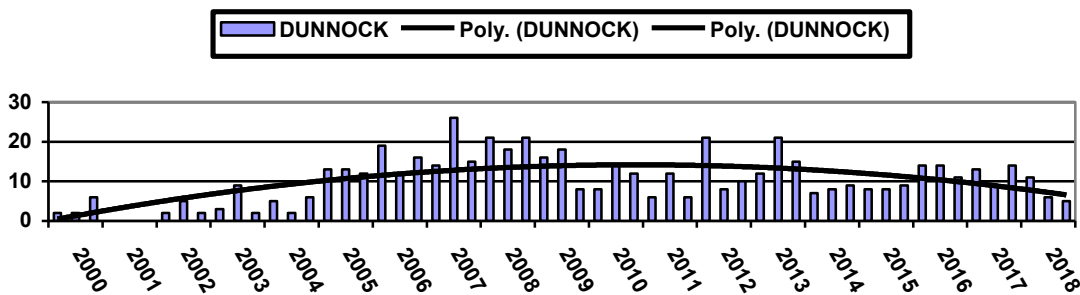
Northumbrian coast than losses. The period 2008 to 2012 can be explained by the fact that cropping was almost entirely winter sown, leaving little suitable nesting area for Skylarks.

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



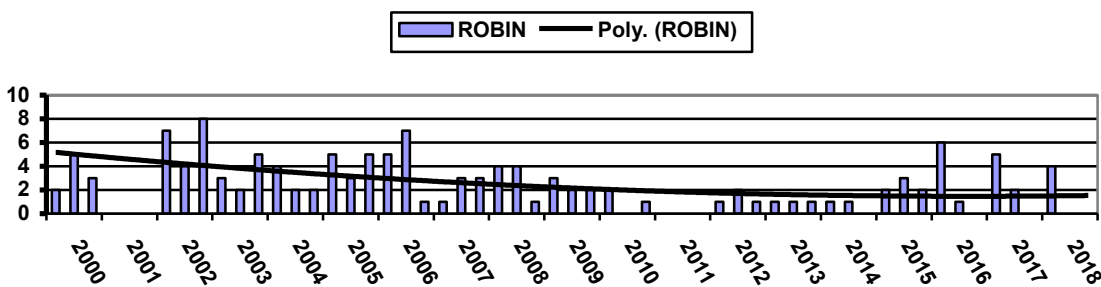
Wren numbers have slowly risen to their highest average in 2016/17 but a cold spell with some snow cover for about a week was enough to bring numbers down in the spring of 2018. The later part of the breeding season seems to have been good for them and perhaps Wren numbers will bounce back quite quickly this year. Numbers can fluctuate so quickly that the Atlases do not keep pace with the changes.

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



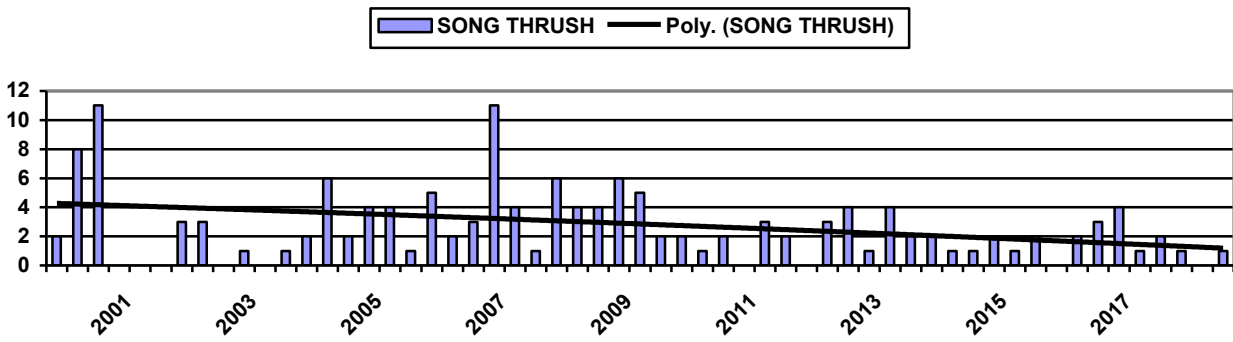
The increase in population nationally is due to the spread of this species into new areas in the west. (BA) Population numbers here tend to have levelled off or increased slightly. (NBA), a trend which does not show itself in our results, with a slight fall in 2018.

Amber listed. (A) +23% (B) -4%



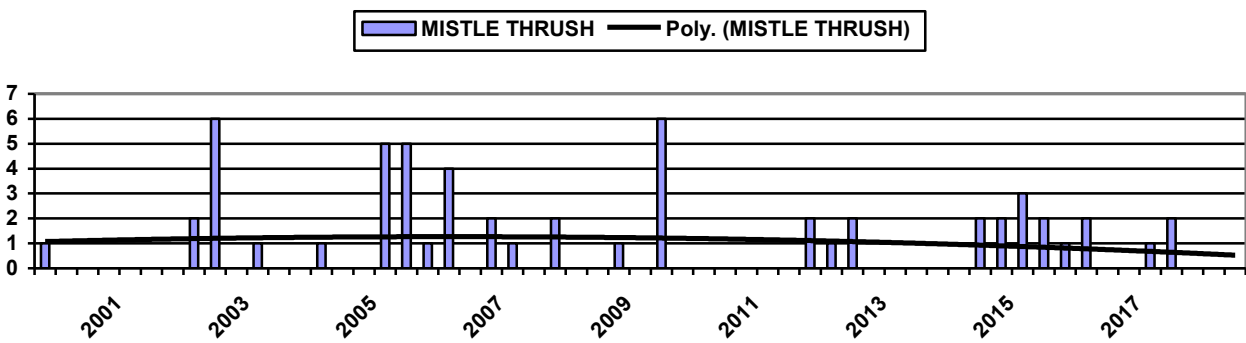
Average numbers are higher than recorded in the years following the severe 2010/11 winters when Robins suffered more severely than was recognized. The highest numbers recorded in the last eight years was in 2016/17 but this increase has not been continued into 2018.

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



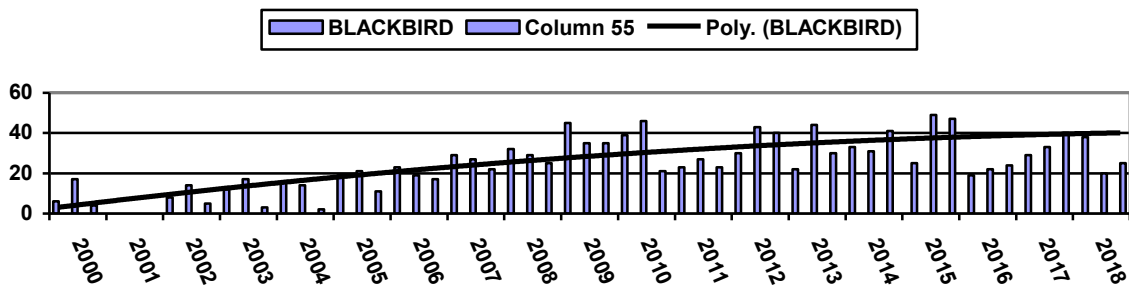
Following the national decline in population counts numbers now appear to be stabilizing or even on the increase,(BA). Numbers of Song Thrushes in arable areas has always been lower than in urban of more wooded areas,(NBA). In the survey area the decline would appear to be continuing.

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



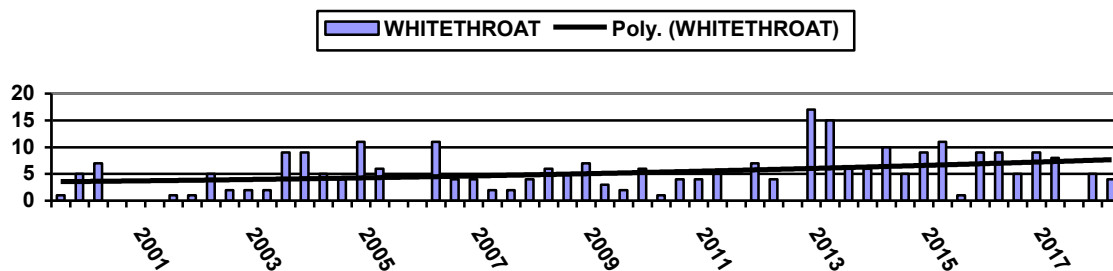
Little change. Only one pair of Mistle Thrushes have been recorded here with occasional family groups and could easily be over looked on some visits. Again, small numbers can result in misleading graphs. Nationally there has been a gradual decline in numbers over a period of years but the last two years have shown signs of a recovery,(BA). Like the Song Thrush, arable areas of the county have a lower population of Mistle Thrush. (NBA). Non were recorded in 2018.

Amber listed. (A) -24% (B) -5%



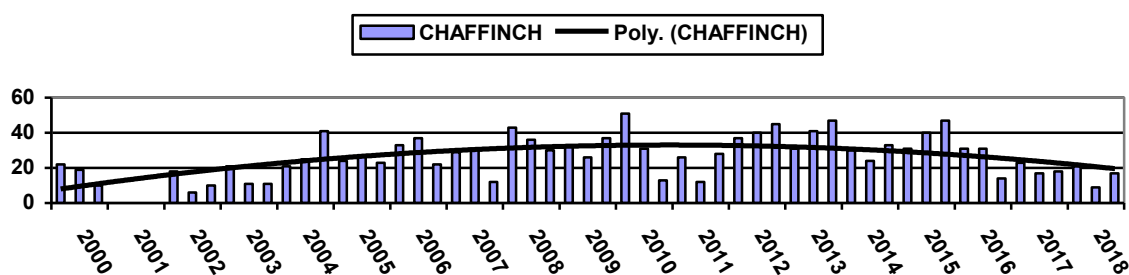
National figures show that there has been a steadily growing population for a number of years. (BA & NBA) In the survey area there has been an increase of much larger proportions during the last seventeen years. They have probably benefited from the provision of food and predator control provided by the Estate and are well adapted to withstand poor weather conditions.

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



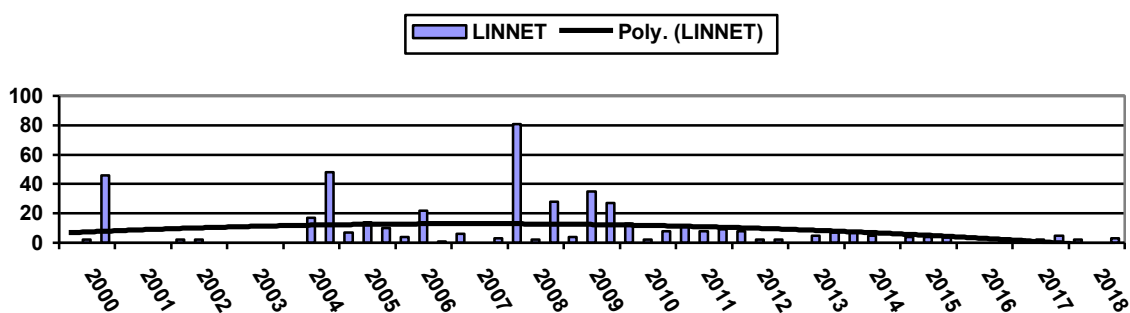
Whitethroats have again arrived in good numbers, continuing a revival. Our counts continue to follow the national trend. Being migrants, they are subject to other extremes of weather or food shortage when in their African winter sites south of the Sahara, which can result in dramatic reductions in numbers returning to breed.

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



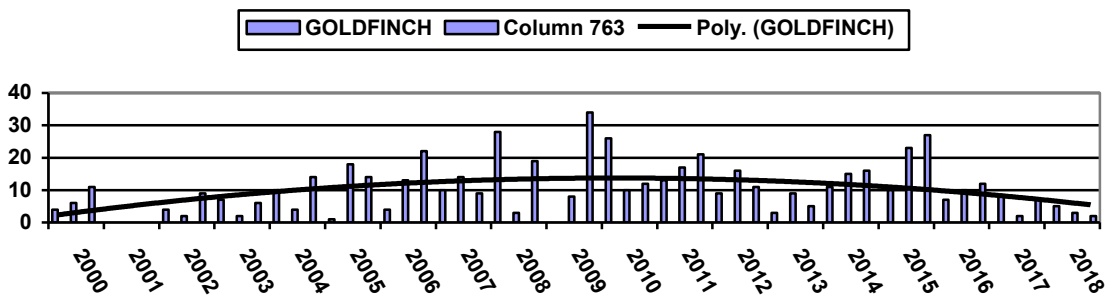
Chaffinches are another of the commonest species in the survey area and like Blackbirds they seem to have benefited from the estate gamekeeping with large increases in population until the last three years when numbers have been reducing. This would follow the national trend

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



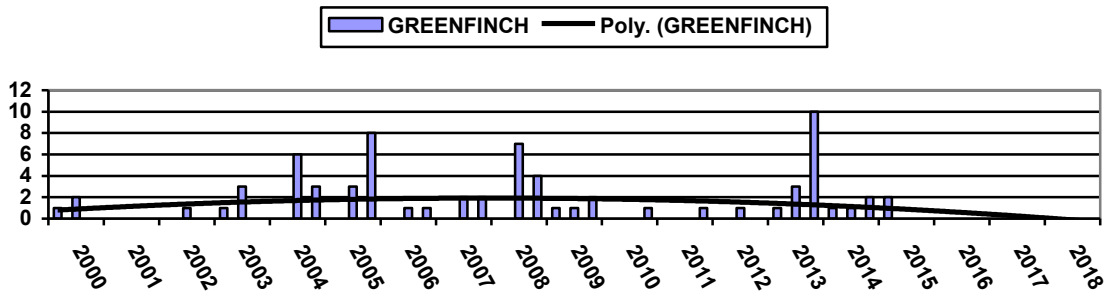
There are very few suitable breeding sites for Linnets in this survey area, since they prefer areas of more dense bush, the most popular being Gorse thickets. Nationally they are in decline which would agree with survey figures.

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



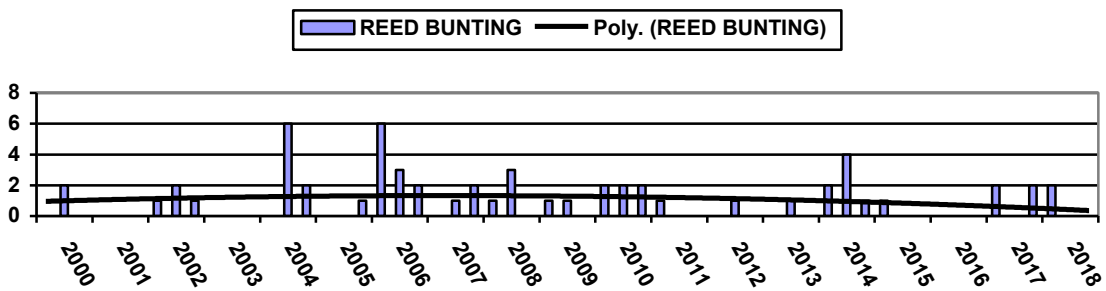
Smaller counts in 2018. As for Linnets, nesting sites are limited. In the NBA area there has been a higher increase in numbers than in most other parts of the country, a result which is not mirrored in these survey counts. They continue to extend their breeding range to the north of Scotland.(BA)

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



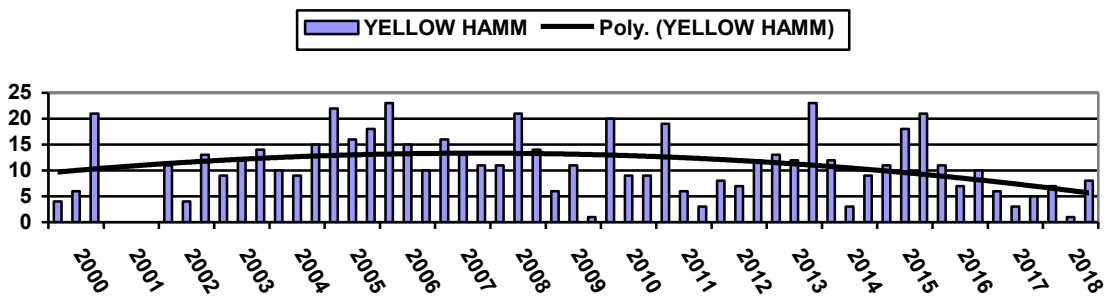
No records of Greenfinch have been made in most of 2015 to 2018, which follows the national trend. Losses of birds are partly due to the disease trichomonosis. This is another species which is increasing in urban gardens. (NBA). National figures show a continued fall,(BA).

Black listed. (A) -54% (B) -27%



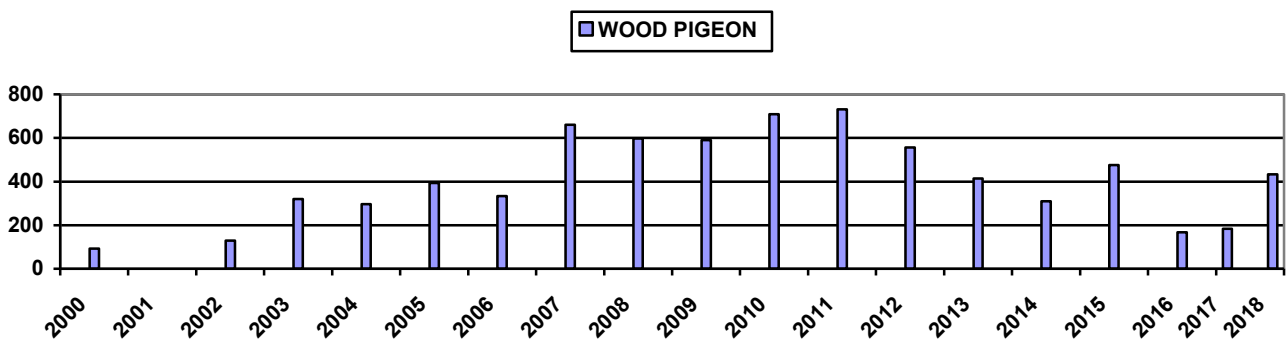
There is very limited scope for Reed Buntings to breed here with practically no suitable habitat for them, although more Reed Buntings are recorded adopting oil seed rape crops as an alternate breeding site. (NBA) a move which has been reported from this survey area. There is normally only one pair of regular breeders in the area.

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



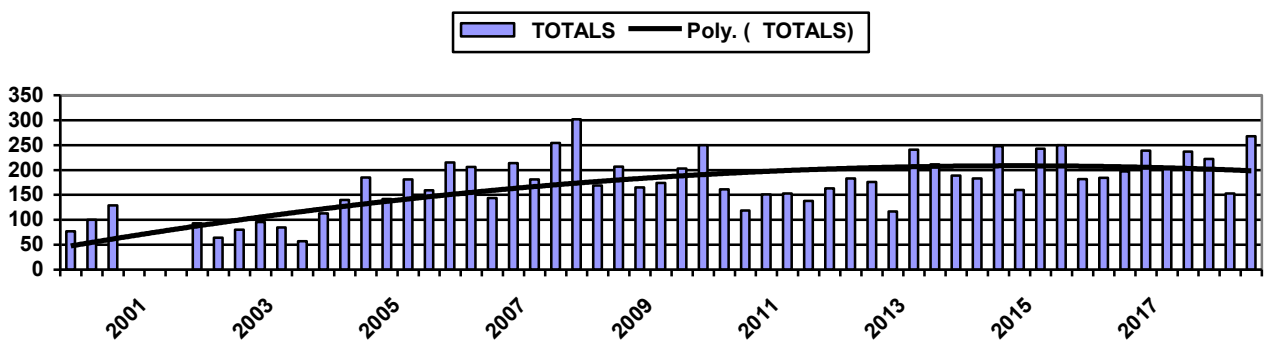
Yellowhammers seem to be holding their own on the east coast with most losses occurring on the west of the country.(BA) Despite the drop in 2017/18 survey counts their numbers are higher than the average for the North East.

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



Comparatively small counts in 2016/17 are difficult to understand when the availability of food here is so high in both summer and winter but an increase again in 2018.

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



The graph of the total number of the target species counted during this breeding period gives a rather false idea of the true picture. There have been lower counts of many of the target species which has been balanced only by the increased Woodpigeon count. A disappointing result.

Conclusions from the breeding period counts.

After a period of cold weather with a short spell of snow cover, spring started wet with cold nights.

Generally, plant life was slow to start. The average time of the return of migrant birds was a little earlier than most years. From mid May it was dry and this continued until the beginning of August. Temperatures in June and July were extremely hot. A scarcity of insects in the main breeding period must have led to some poor results, but better conditions followed later in the season.

The results of this survey compared with national averages shows that eight species have performed well in the survey area.

performed very well:-
Grey Partridge. (Red listed)
Lapwing. (Red listed)
Whitethroat.(Amber listed)
Blackbird.
Chaffinch.
Yellowhammer. (Red listed)
Woodpigeon.
Buzzard.

The following have performed equally as well as the National averages:-
Skylark (Red listed)

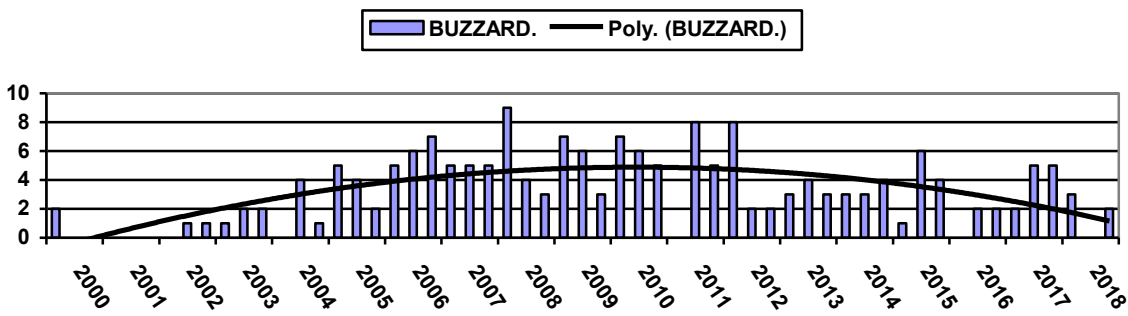
Pheasant.
Song Thrush.(Red listed)
Duncock (Amber listed)
Goldfinch.
Linnet. (Red listed)

The following have not performed as well as the National averages:-

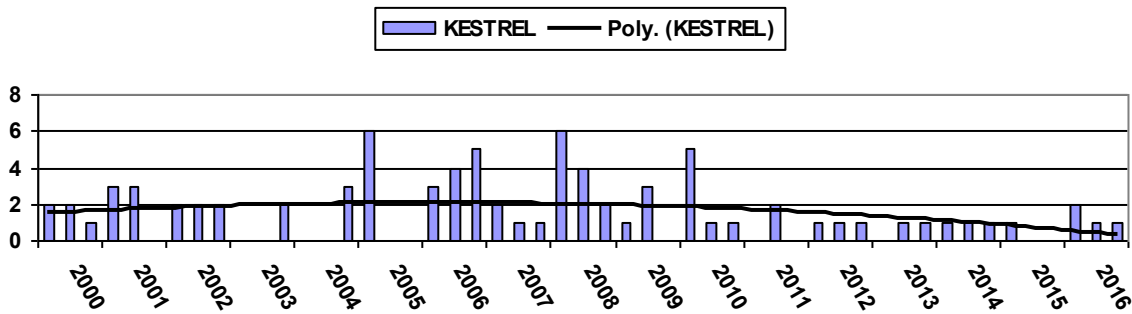
Robin.
Reed Bunting.
Mistle Thrush (Amber listed)
Greenfinch.
Kestrel. (Amber listed)

Target species graphs for the winter periods.

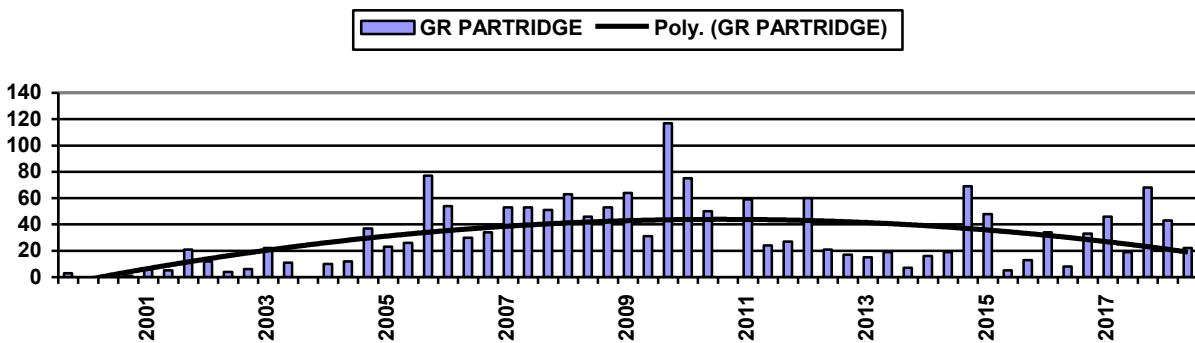
No figures are available from National sources to use as a comparison with the winter counts. It was not possible to make any counts in Jan. 2011 because of severe weather with a long period of complete snow cover, when disturbance to birds was considered to be detrimental.



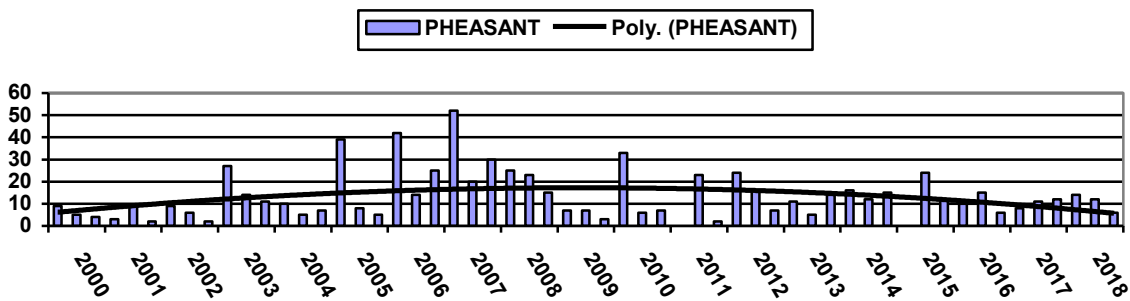
Average numbers for Buzzard remain fairly constant with a small reduction in numbers, supporting the reasoning that the population has now settled at a sustainable level, after the huge build up in numbers from the west. Buzzards are a sedentary species with very little movement during the winter months.



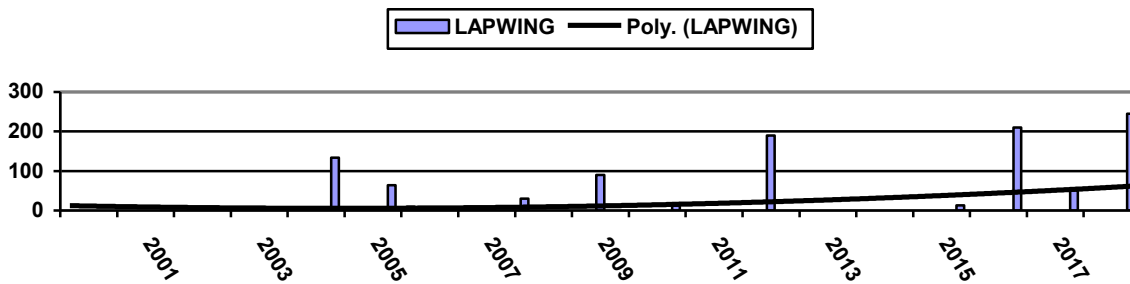
The graph illustrates the continued fall in Kestrel numbers, no longer our commonest bird of prey. See the summer graph for more details.



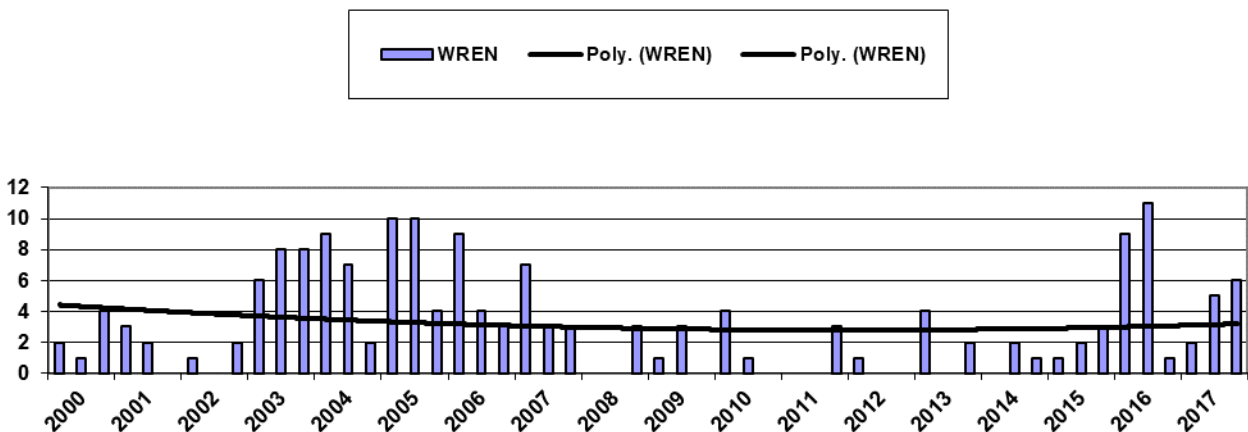
There has been a gradual reduction in counts of Grey Partridge since 2011. Severe winter weather in that year followed by a series of poor breeding seasons and some shooting appear to have reduced numbers. There has been little shooting since then and the population is still being maintained at a much higher level than the national average.



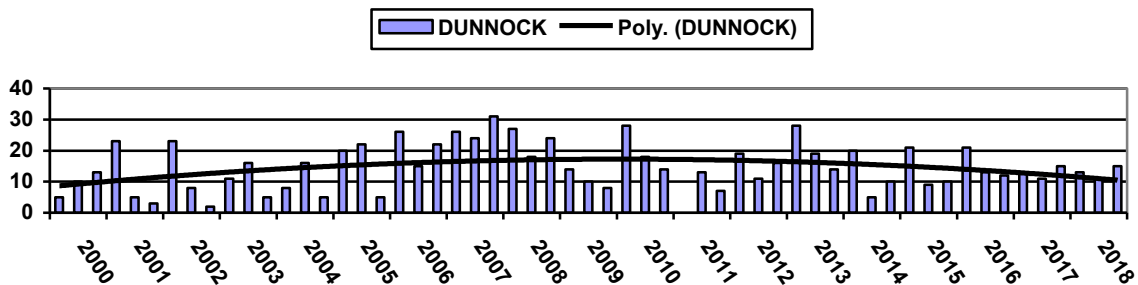
Pheasant records have followed the same pattern as Grey Partridge. No hand reared birds have been released here for a number of years but there are bound to be stray birds from neighbouring shoots which are now breeding at Ratcheugh. There has been some shooting.



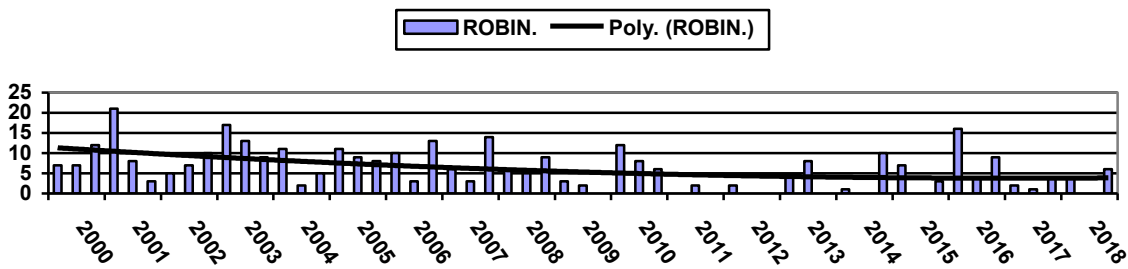
In winter Lapwings flock together and spend most of their time feeding at the coast or further south, to be replaced by migrants from further north. In severe weather they will move to more sheltered areas a little way from the coast, as is illustrated by the occasional large groups at Ratcheugh.



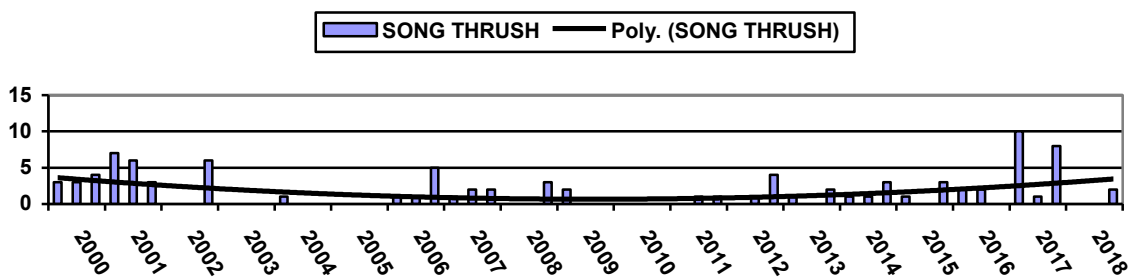
There has been an increase in Wren numbers this year. Although it is mainly a woodland species records from Ratcheugh in 2003/6 show that a higher population can be maintained here if conditions allow. A short cold spell with a ground covering of snow in late winter had an adverse effect on the Wren population, see the Summer graph.



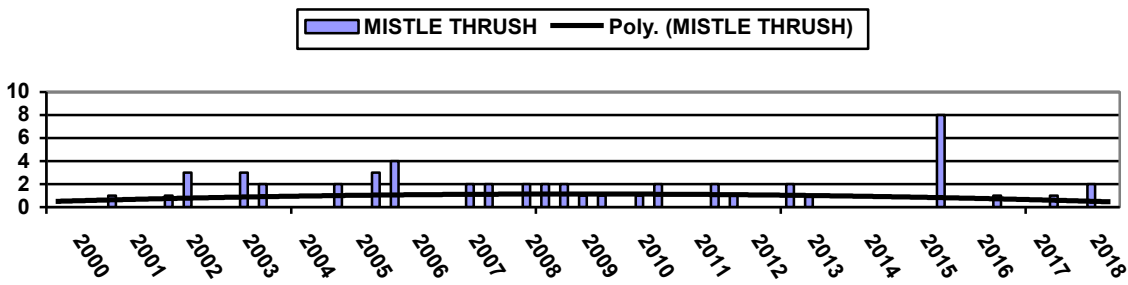
The graph shows a level population which has never returned to the pre 2010 numbers. National records show a fall in counts. Dunnock may becoming more of an urban garden bird.(BA) There is little movement of these in the winter months.



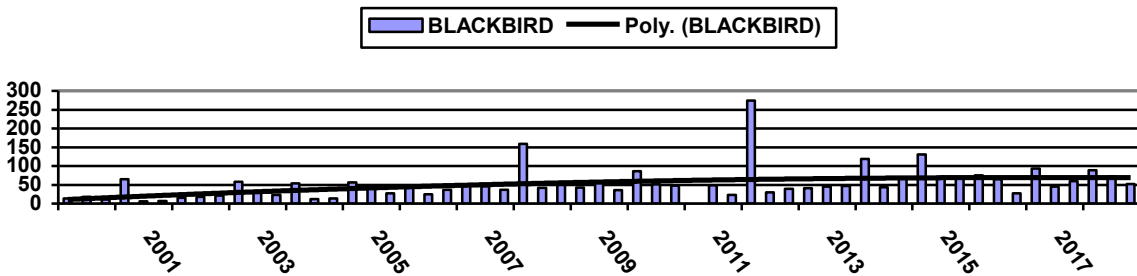
Counts of Robins tend to be very erratic. Apart from singing birds they can be difficult to spot skulking in hedgerows and are more often seen in woodland and urban gardens. Winter populations are bolstered by migrants from northern UK and Europe.(BA)



Winter numbers may have been increased by an influx of winter migrants from the northern Europe at times but this is not obvious every winter.

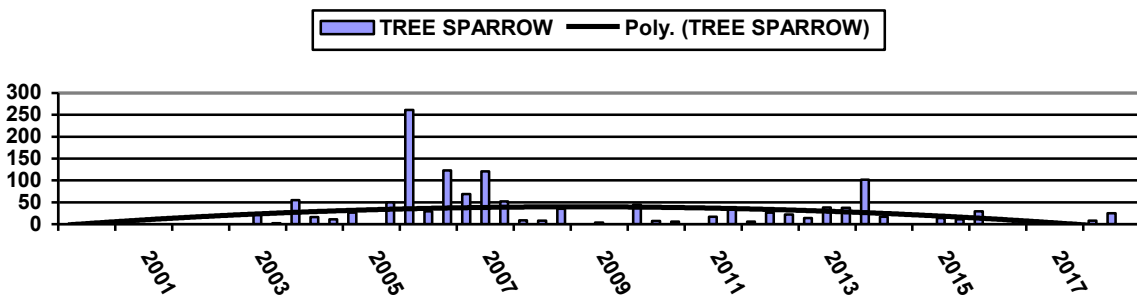


The one pair of Mistle Thrush recorded here is not enough to produce figures which could indicate any population trend. The record of eight birds in Feb. of 2015 was one family group.

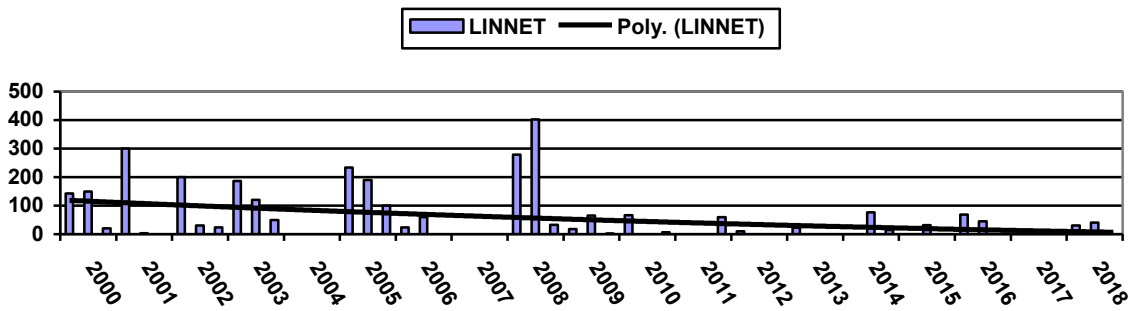


A continuing increase in blackbird numbers arriving here in the winter. The first count of most years clearly shows a much higher number of birds arriving from Europe and being recorded here, before they become more widely scattered throughout the rest of the UK.

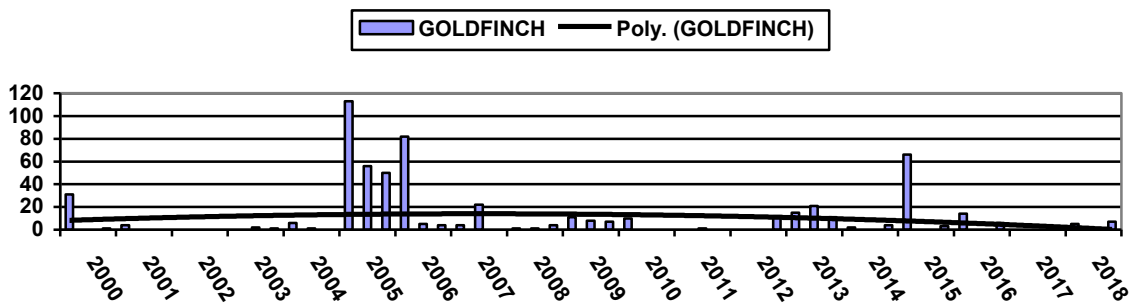
If the one very high count in 2012 was removed from the graph it would give a much better defined picture of the situation.



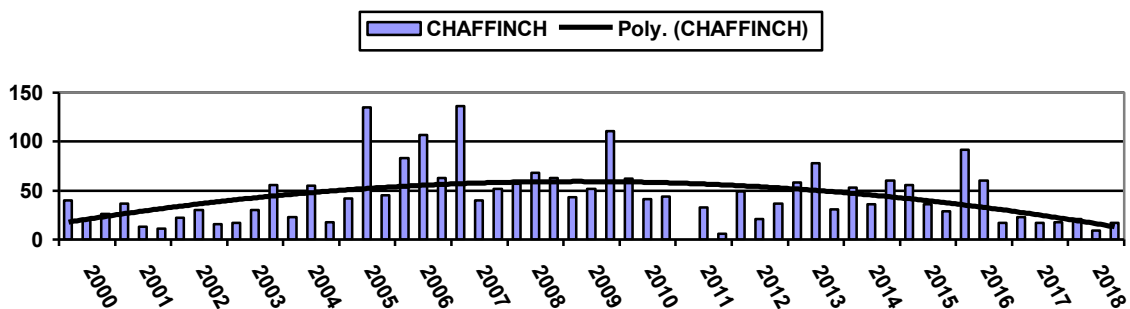
As for other finches in the winter the graph illustrates how they were more concentrated into the fewer areas of available feed in the 2005/7 period, after which more feed areas were provided and finch flocks became more fragmented and more widely spread. I do not believe that the overall number of Tree Sparrows has declined but milder conditions in their breeding areas may have reduced the need to migrate.



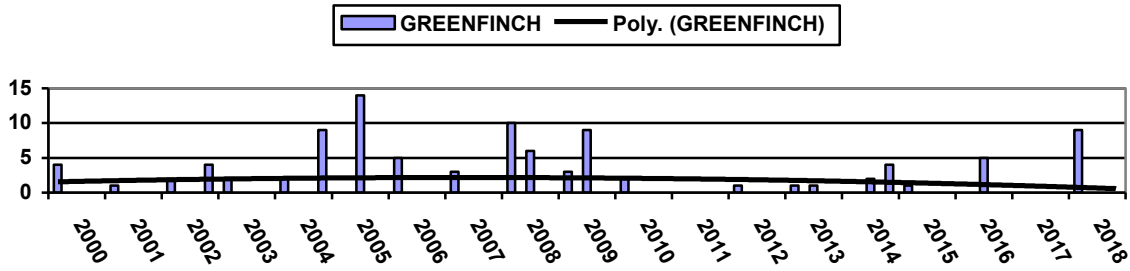
In winter Linnets tend to move and feed in larger flocks and are therefore seen either in large numbers or not at all. The Linnet graph follows the same pattern as other finches. Most Linnets wintering with us are from northern UK or Europe and numbers can vary from year to year with fluctuating conditions.(BA)



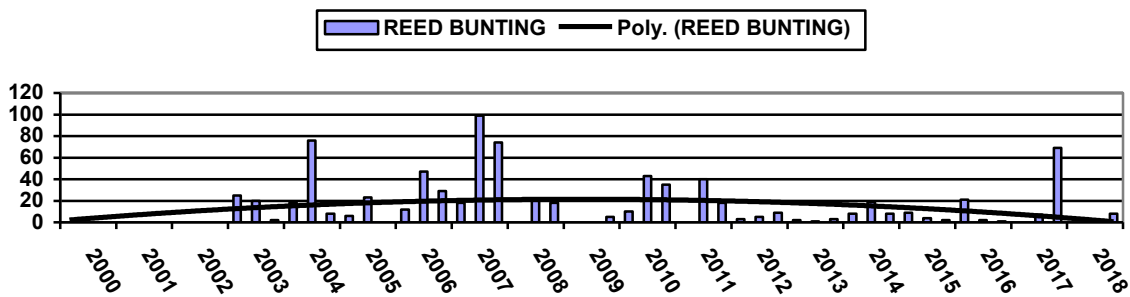
The Goldfinch graph again follows the same trend as other finches in winter.



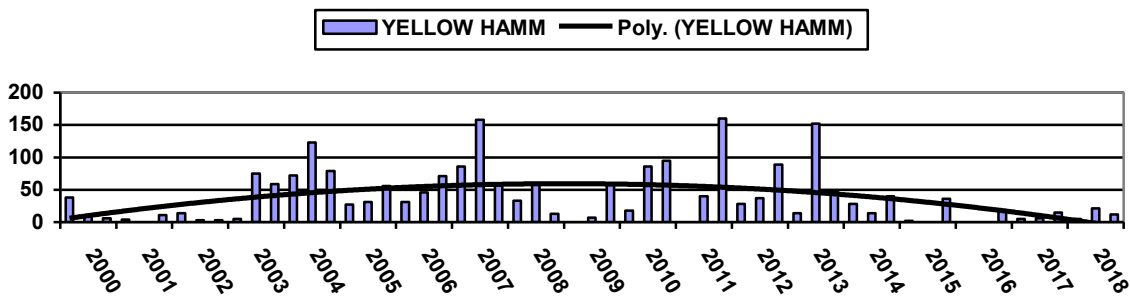
The graph shows a considerable reduction in Chaffinch numbers. As for the other finches in the survey area, they are affected by the spread of game plots over a wider area which are not covered in the survey route. Flocks have become smaller and spread over the much larger area than in the early years of the survey.



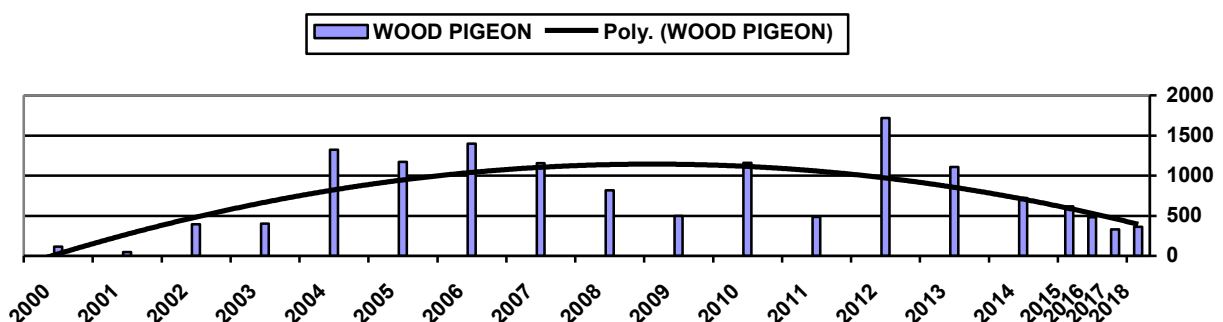
Greenfinches have not been recorded in large numbers. They tend to remain in families or in small groups during the winter. Despite the small numbers seen the trend line still follows the same pattern as other finches. Garden bird counts show good numbers of Greenfinches in more urban areas.(BA)



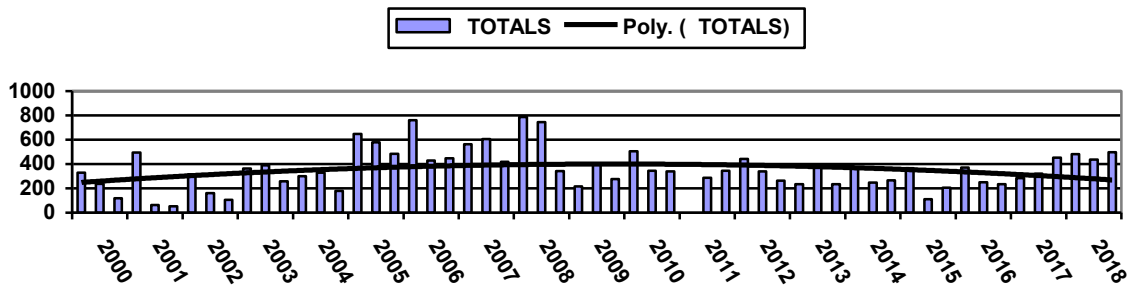
Occasionally seen in larger groups in winter but more often in smaller numbers mixed with flocks with other finches. Again showing a similar trend line to other finches in the survey area.



One of our endangered species which has been recorded at Ratcheugh in healthy numbers, occasionally in larger groups but very poor counts in 2015 -18.



Woodpigeon compete with Game Birds for the feed which the Estate provides, it is therefore not surprising that numbers are sometimes high. They are also attracted by Oil Seed Rape crops which are liable to suffer severely as a result. An amazing increase from the first few years of the survey. We can presume that winter numbers will include migrants from Northern Europe which may not be in high numbers in mild winters when food is still available for them in their breeding areas resulting in fewer birds migrating to this country.



Conclusions Based on Winter Counts.

The winter totals graph shows a reasonably steady count over the years but is affected by occasional larger groups, such as Lapwing and Woodpigeons. This tends to hide the poorer results of many of the other target species.

JC.(6/10/18)

