BIRD SURVEY - FIELDHOUSE AND TOWNFOOT.

REPORT FOR NOVEMBER 2015 TO OCT. 2016.

This report covers the seventh 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.

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 more 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 information is now available and it is hoped that the conclusions now 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 a survey, taking into account all the vagaries of weather and the many other changing conditions which can affect counts.

Breeding period graphs of Target Species.

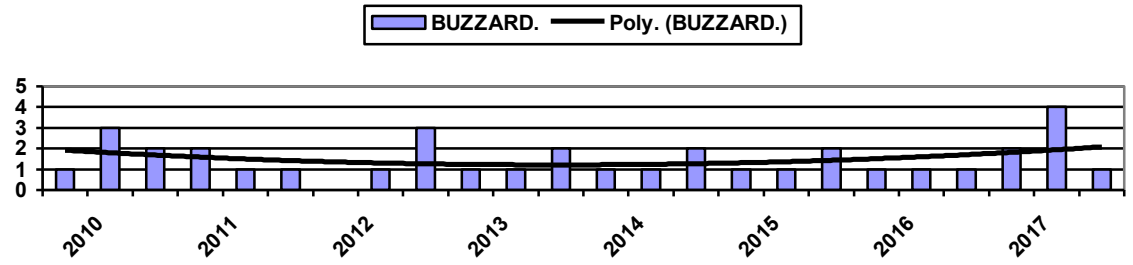
The counts of the target species from both farms are totalled and graphs produced from these results. To achieve the aims of the survey we are attempting to make a comparison between our figures and national averages produced by BTO. from the annual results of their Breeding Bird Survey.

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 – 2013
(B) an estimated % rise or fall over the period 2013 – 2014

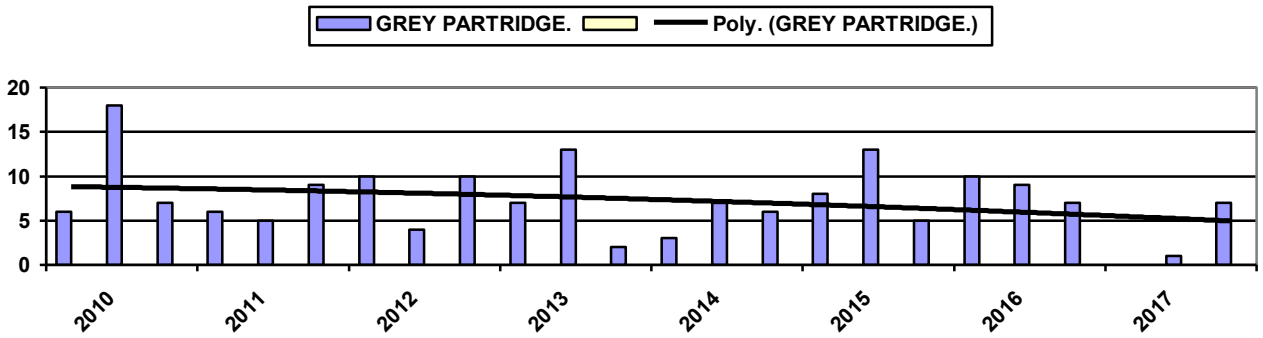
These figures, which are the most up to date available, and colour classification are given with the graph of each of the target species.

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)**



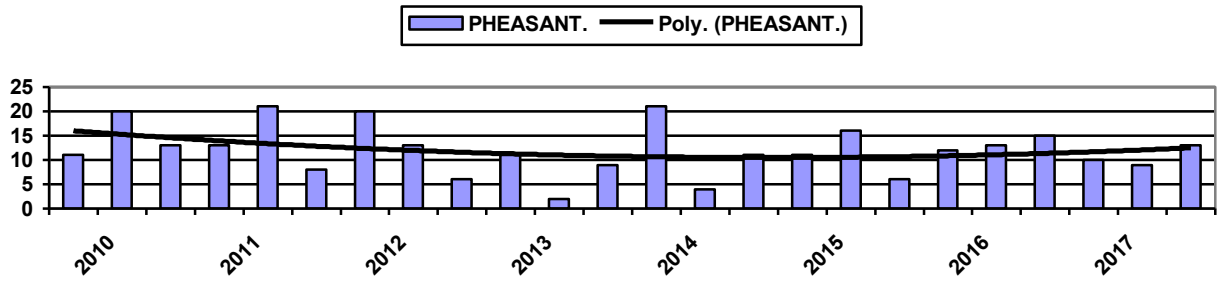
The eastward spread of buzzards now appears to be complete and the population is considered to be stable. This does seem to be the position here where counts now appear to be very constant.

Black listed. (A) +75% (B) +3%



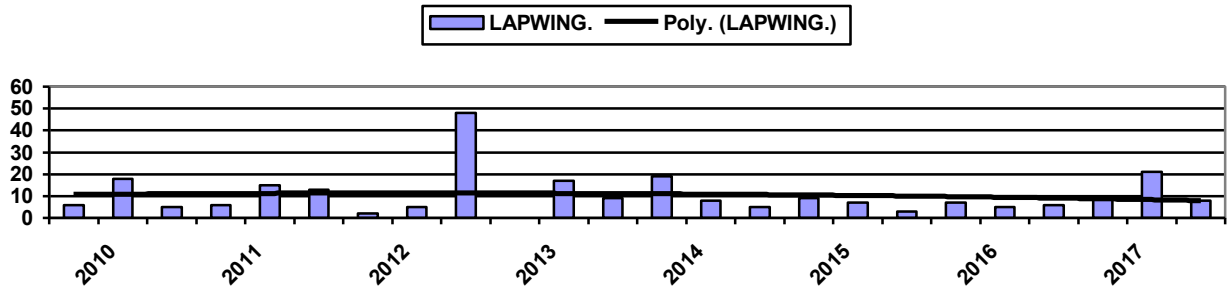
Nationally there has been a huge decline in Partridge numbers over the last forty years. In the survey areas this trend has been reversed but numbers have been affected by poor weather, especially during the breeding periods of 2014 – 15. Although breeding was delayed in 2016 results would seem to be better.

Red listed. (A) -59% (B) -9%



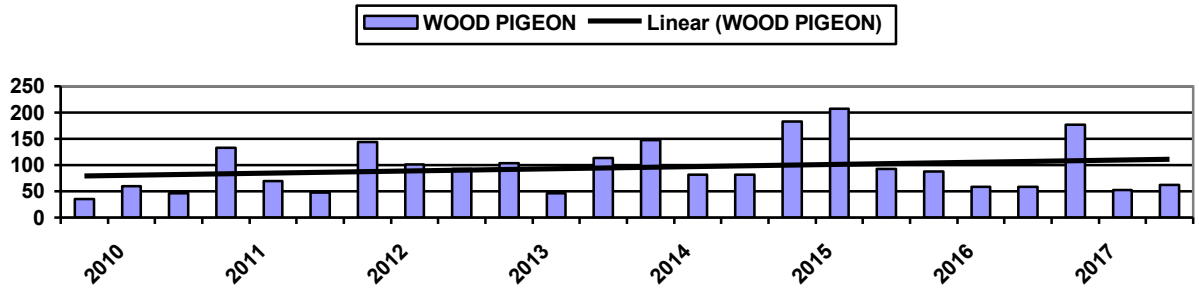
Nationally the number of Pheasants has risen with the release of large numbers of birds for shooting. In the survey area no hand reared birds have been released in recent years but numbers continue to be maintained by "wild birds" and immigrants from surrounding shoots, despite the fact that some shooting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

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



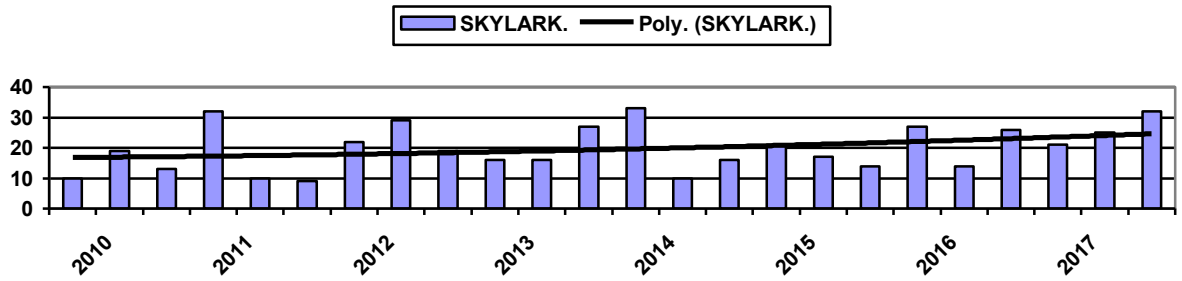
Lapwing have reduced in numbers here in the last two years, probably because the rotation of crops has reduced the area of suitable breeding ground, especially at Fieldhouse.

Red listed. (A) -45% (B) +2%



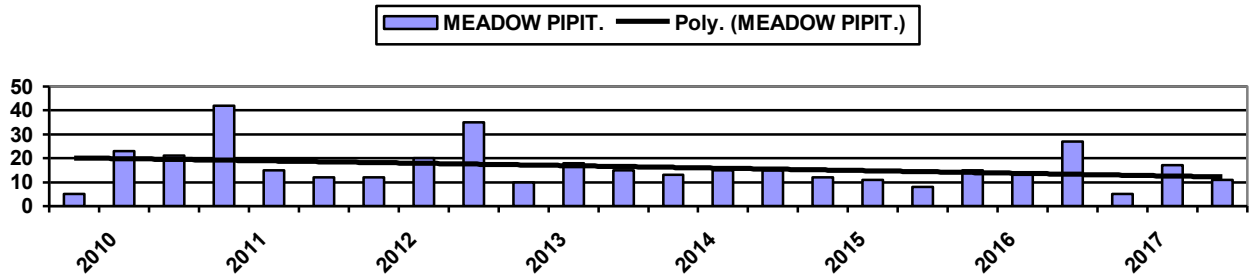
High numbers of Woodpigeons are an increasing nuisance to agriculture, although reduced numbers were recorded in 2016.

Black listed. (A) +37% (B) -10%



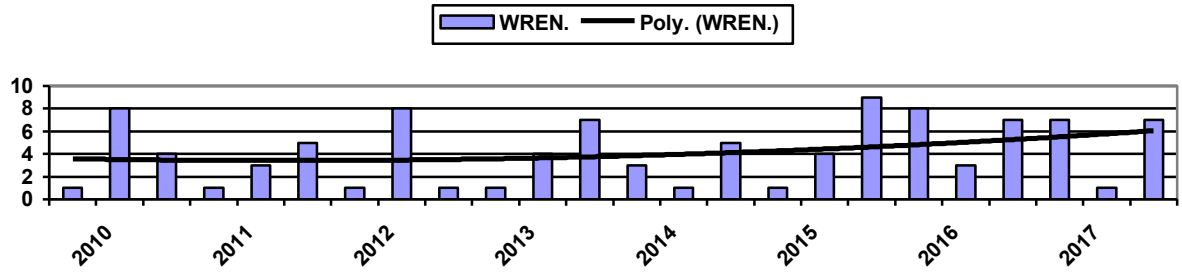
National figures show a continual drop in Skylark numbers over a long period, particularly in arable areas. Counts here and particularly on the more open parts of Fieldhouse farm show that numbers are being maintained.

Red listed. (A) -24% (B) +15%



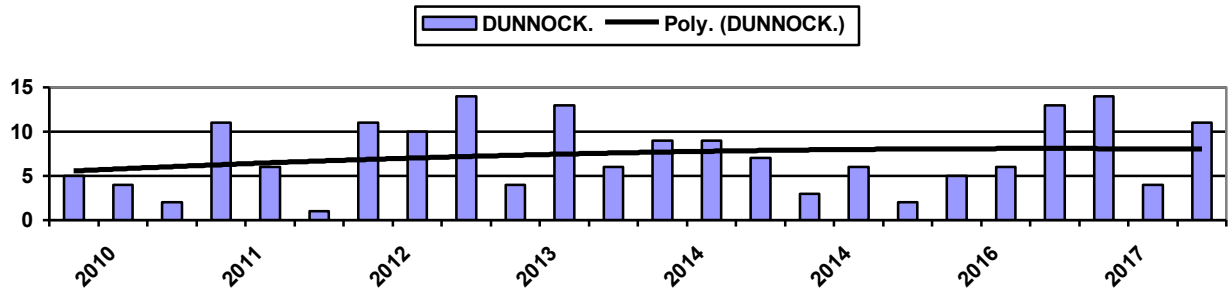
Meadow Pipits require similar conditions to Skylarks in their breeding habitat and are also reducing in numbers, mainly in arable areas. Crop rotation, with increased areas of stubble, have provided more suitable breeding conditions in 2016

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



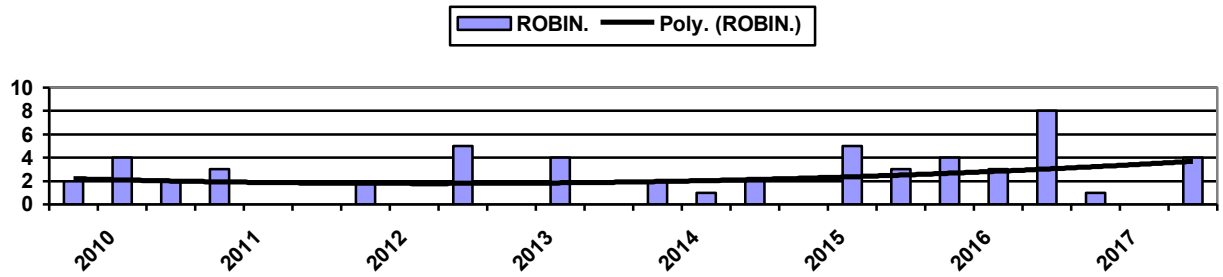
This chart continues to illustrate how numbers of Wrens vary throughout the year, with the higher numbers at the end of the breeding period which are normally reduced during the winter by the colder weather and shortage of insect food. National estimates claim a 50% loss of Wrens in an average winter.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

Black listed. (A) +34% (B) +8%



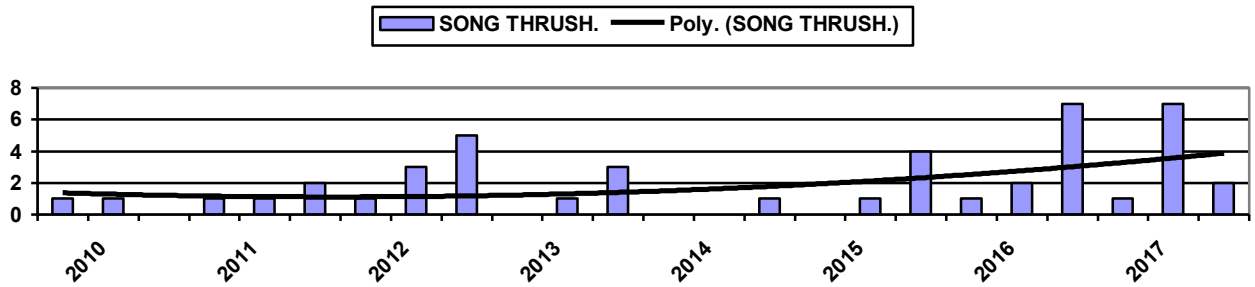
The national increase in previous years is due to their spread into areas in the west. (BA) Dunnocks have been recorded in much healthier numbers in the survey area in 2016.

Amber listed. (A) +21% (B) +2%



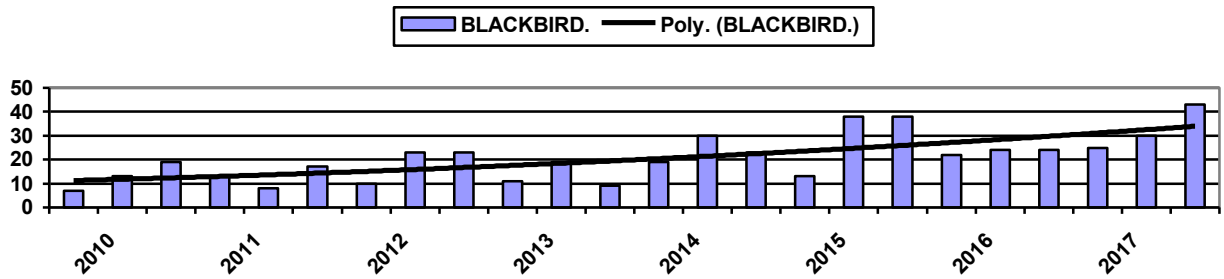
Robin population has increased again this year after the low counts of the previous years.

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

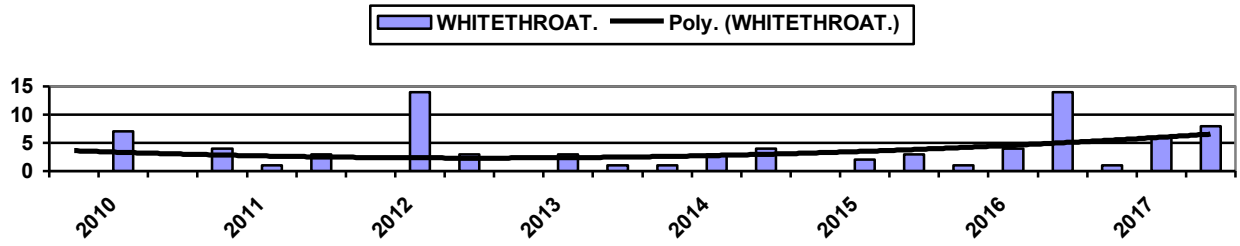


A better count of Song Thrushes in 2016. National figures have shown a constant fall over many years but an increase more recently,

Red listed. (A) +8% (B) +14%

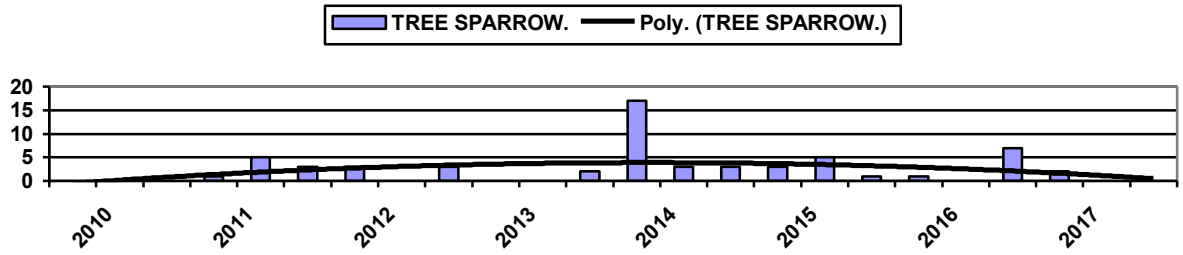


The increase in Blackbird numbers continues at a much higher rate than the national average. It would seem that they have benefited from the control of predators and improvements to hedges for breeding, and have withstood the severe winter periods in 2010 – 11 well. Black listed. (A) +21% (B) +5%



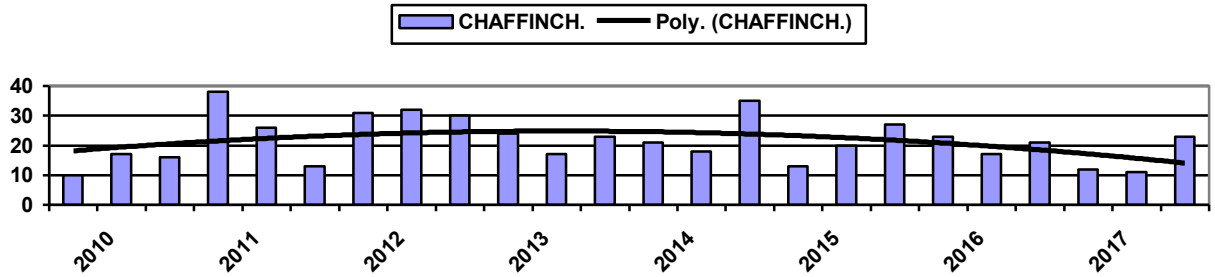
Whitethroats are the only summer visitor included in the target list. The population in our survey area depends, not only on the conditions here but also on those in their wintering habitats in Africa, and during movements to and fro. Whitethroats are therefore not a good indicator of the effects of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

Amber listed. (A) +32% (B) +18%



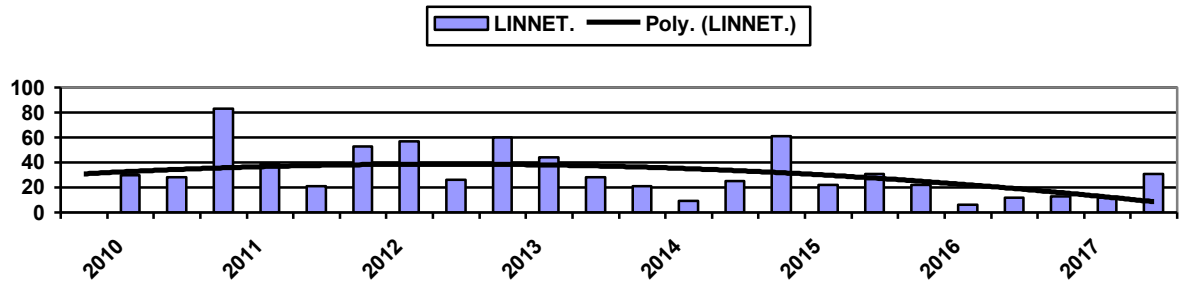
Tree Sparrows were reduced to a very small breeding population in Northumberland but in recent years have been on the increase. This increase would seem to have followed a big rise in the number of wintering birds mainly on the east coast (BA)with some remaining to breed here. Like other members of the Finch family they are attracted to game plots and are much more able to withstand adverse winter conditions than many other species. They are more often seen in company with other finches.

Red listed. (A) +122% (B) +1%



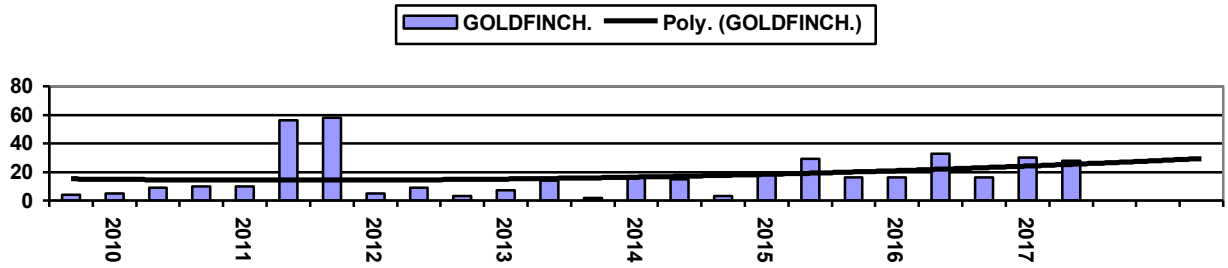
The Chaffinch is, like the Blackbird, one of the commonest species in the survey area and is therefore important in monitoring of the effects of the Estate management. So far the counts show a good population with very little change. This is in line with national averages.

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



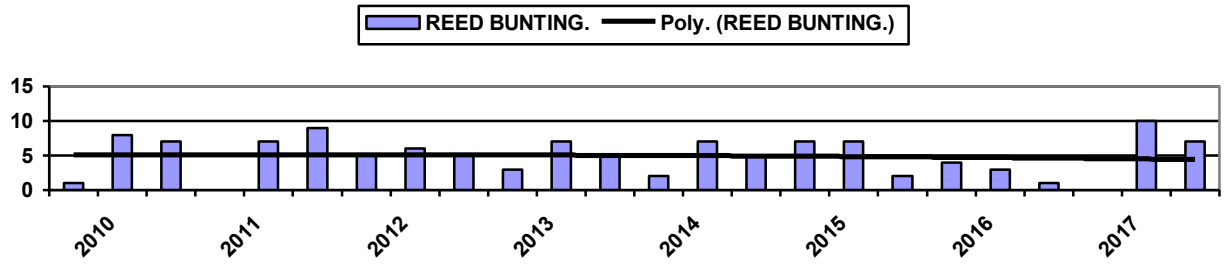
This survey has a higher population of Linnets than most other arable farms in this area. The national trend is still going down and 2016 would seem to be following the national trend.

Red listed. (A) -29% (B) +7%



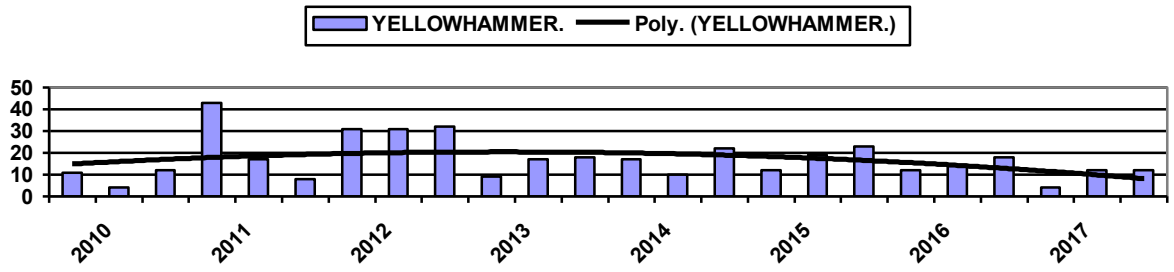
The high numbers of Goldfinches in late 2011 will be birds flocking together after breeding and probably mainly juveniles. In early 2012 the higher count will be of a similar group prior to dispersing to their breeding territories. These two high counts distort the true trend which shows a small increase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

Black listed. (A) +111% (B) +4%



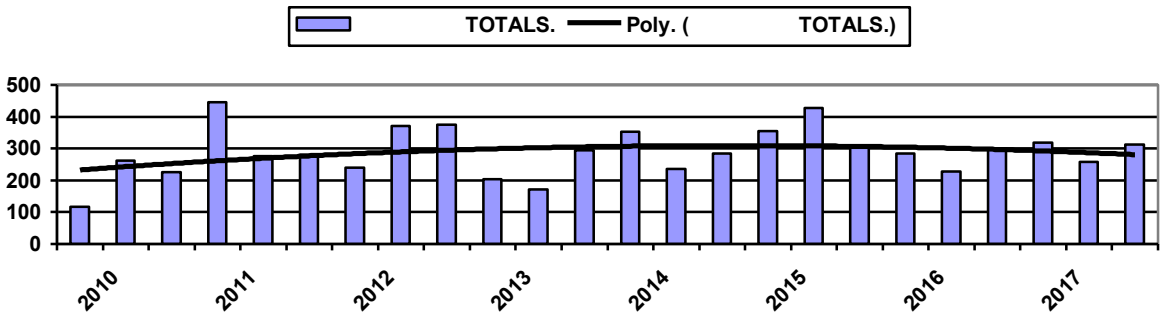
A regular small population of Reed Bunting, mainly along the river Aln at Townfoot. In the North East there has been a small increase during the last twenty years. (NBA) Very low counts where recorded in 2016

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



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) -15% (B) +6%



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)
Woodpigeon.
Skylark, (Red listed)
Blackbird.
Yellowhammer. (Red listed)
Wren.

Thirteen species maintain similar results to national averages:-
Buzzard.
Robin.
Whitethroat.
Tree Sparrow. (Red listed)
Chaffinch.
Linnet. (Red listed)
Goldfinch.
Reed Bunting.
Pheasant.
Meadow pipit.
Lapwing. (Red listed)
Song Thrush. (Red listed)
Dunnock.

No species has under performed by comparison to the national averages.

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.

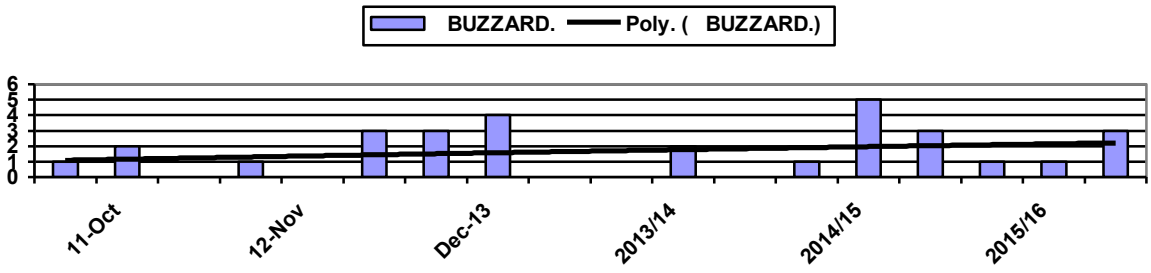
Kestrel. Few sightings.

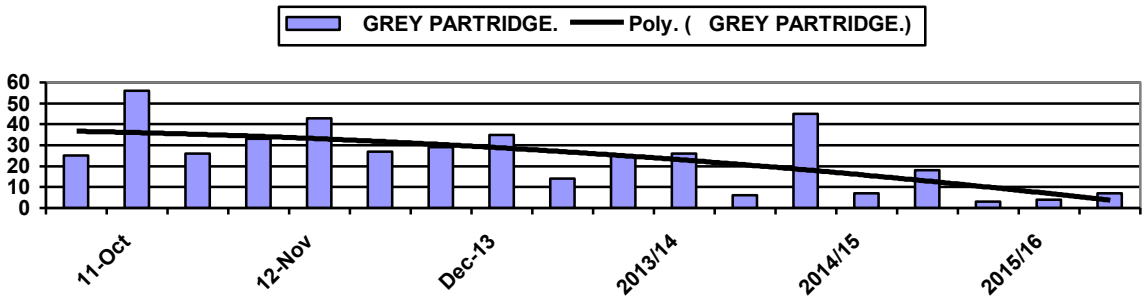
Lapwing Only three records of groups, usually when there is more severe weather affecting their wintering areas nearer the coast.

Skylark, Mainly move away from the area in winter.

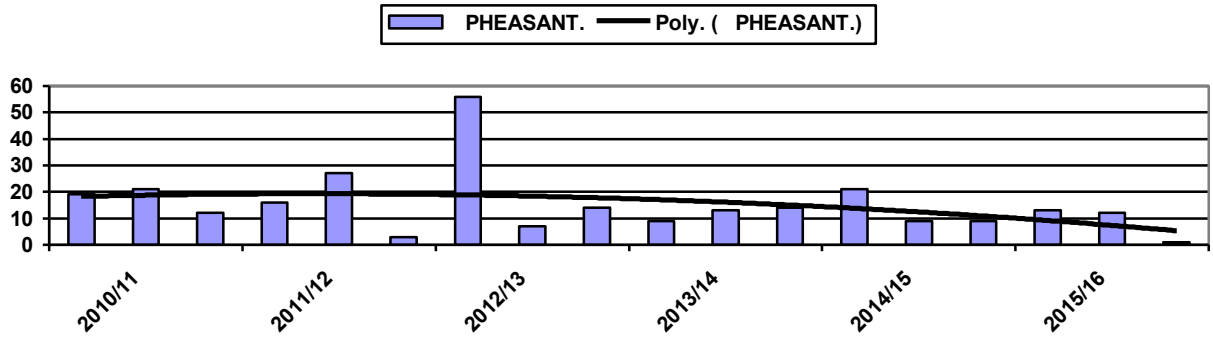
Meadow Pipit. As the Skylark.

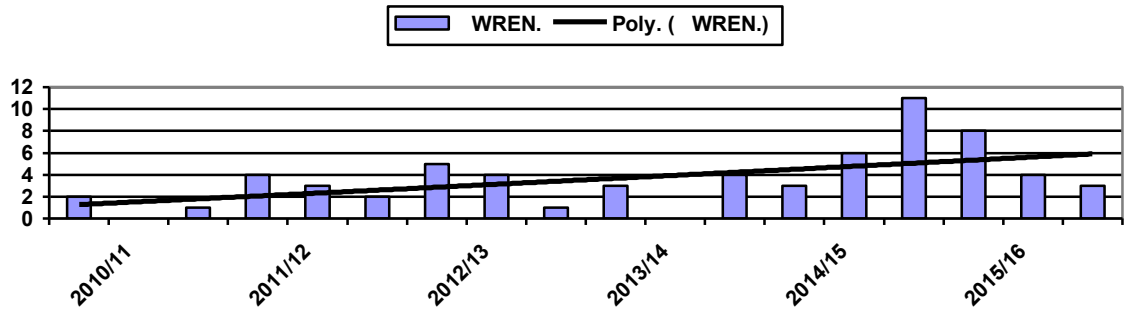
Mistle Thrush. Small numbers.

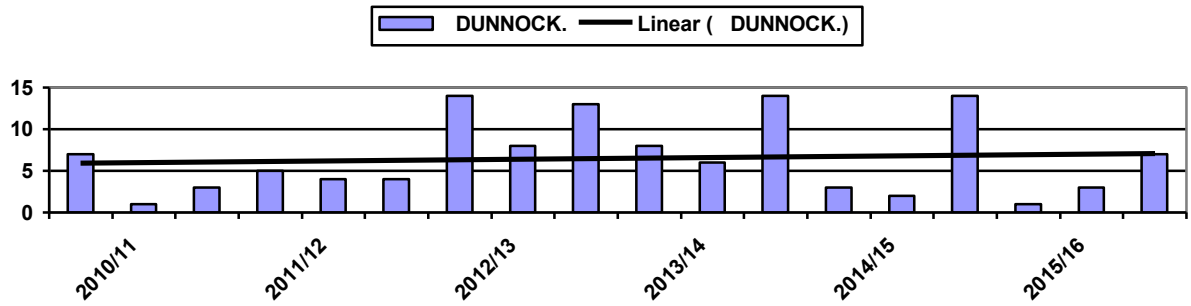


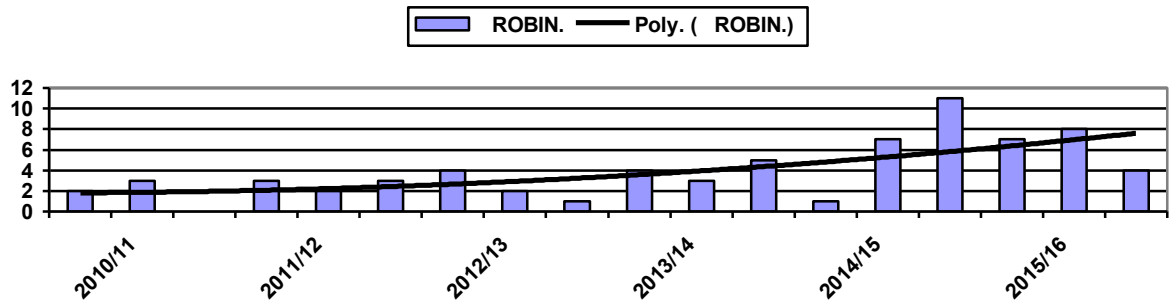


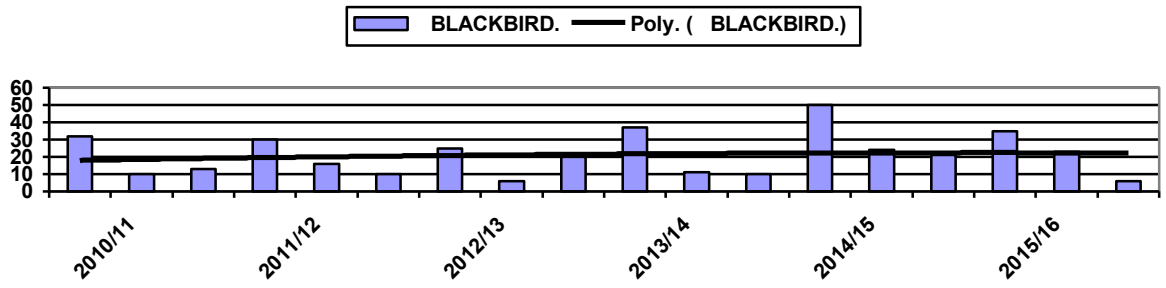
Gray Partridge numbers in winter appear to be declining. This may be due to the level of shooting which could be putting the breeding population at risk.



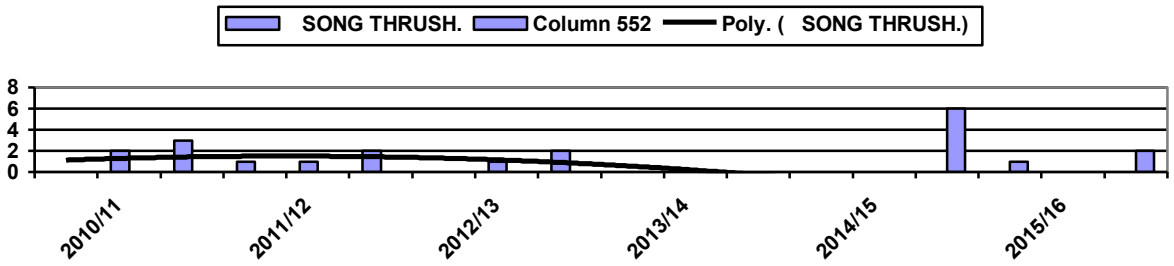


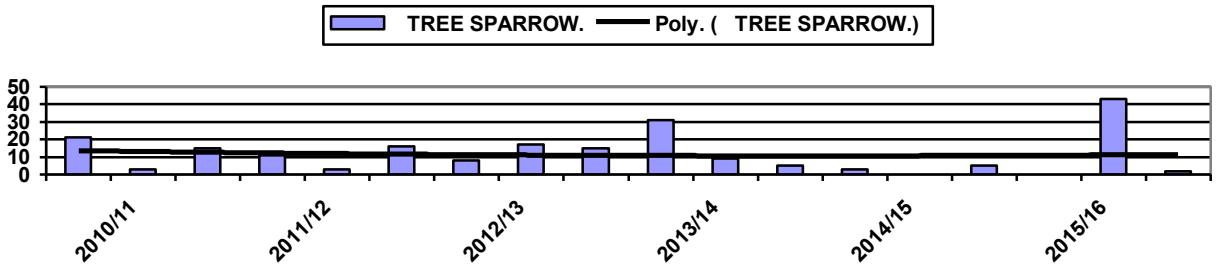


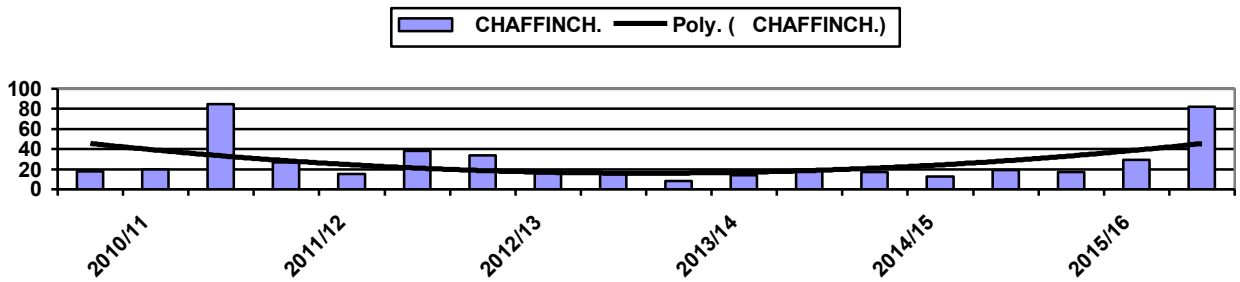


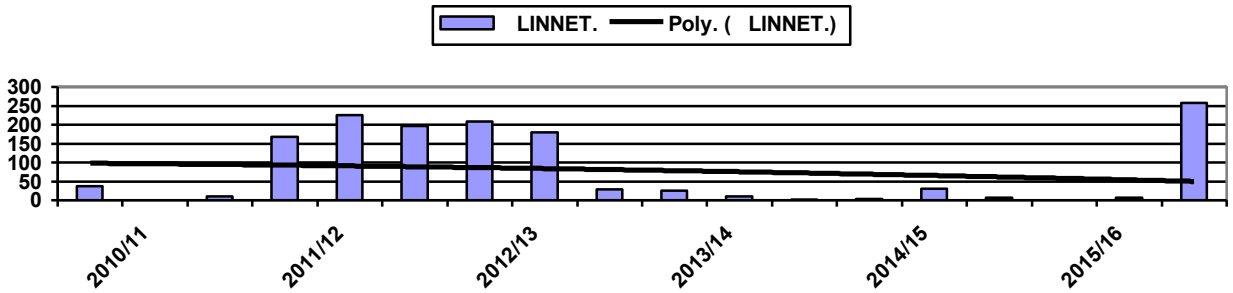


High counts of Blackbirds at the Nov. visits each year, coincide with the annual immigration from Northern Europe.

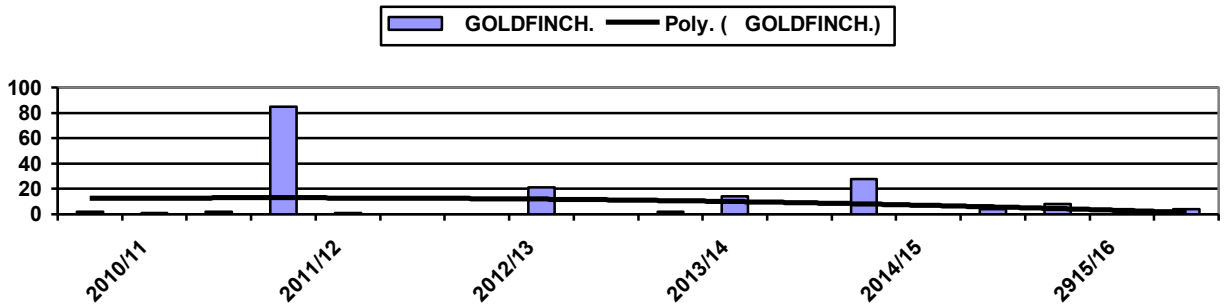








Linnet form large flocks in winter which may or may not be seen on the survey route.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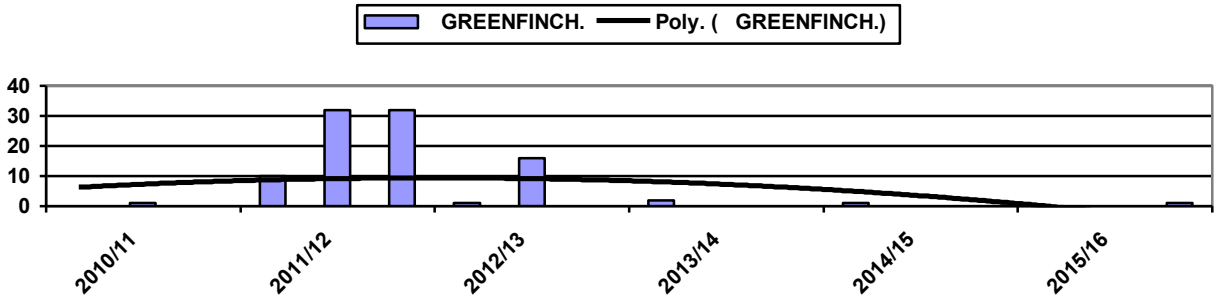
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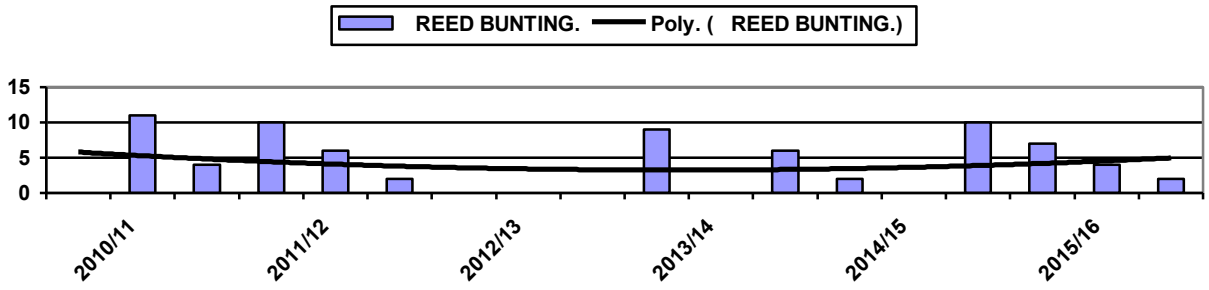
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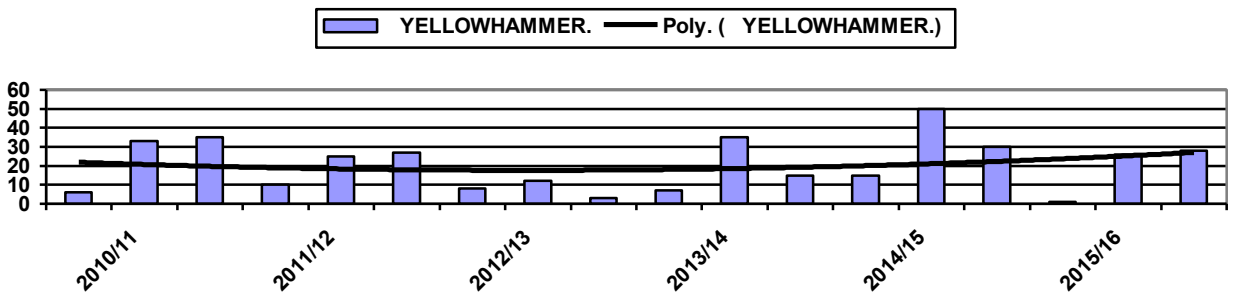
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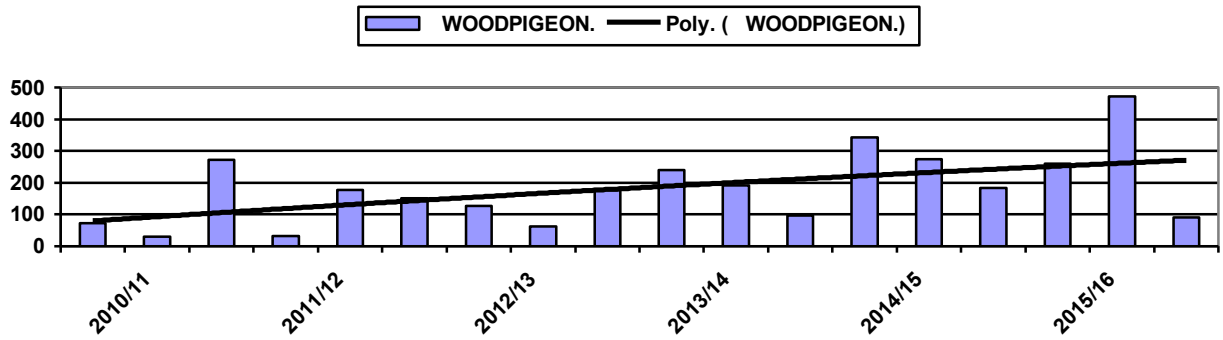

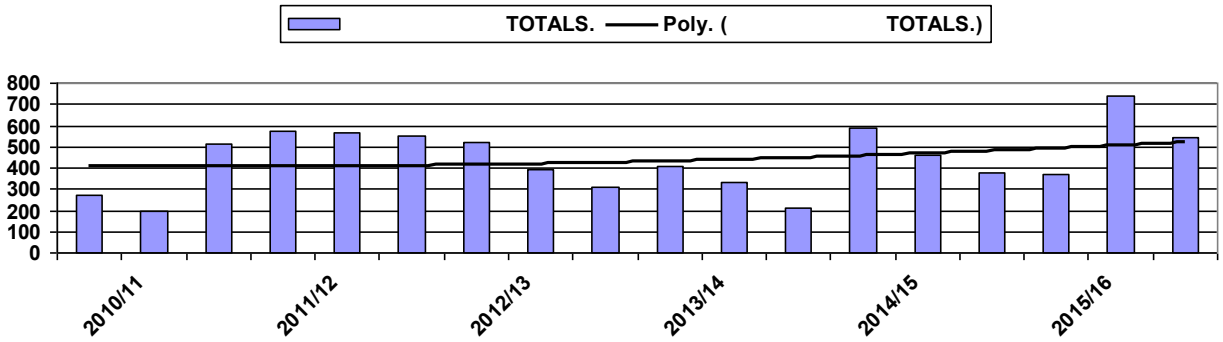

Graphs produced using small amounts of data are of little value. Only when the survey has been running for some time will any obvious and more accurate trends be recognized.
The Finches in winter usually flock together and move between the various game plots on the farms, which have been increased in number and are spread over a much wider area than is now covered by the survey route.

J.C. (Sept. 2016)