Ratcheugh and Snableases Wild Bird Survey.

Report for the Winter Period of 2019/2020.

This survey is carried out by members of the Alnwick Wildlife Group and is the 2ist. Annual report.

Target species graphs for the winter periods 2019/20 report.

Due to Coronavirus restrictions no surveys have been carried out during the breeding period of 2020 but records for the winter period were completed before regulations came into force.

No figures are available from National sources to use as a comparison with the winter counts but there is always something of interest in the results that we have. Please note that, when looking at the graphs, that 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.

The aims and methodology of this survey remain the same as detailed in previous reports.

Graphs can easily mislead. Six visits per year produce only a small amount of data on which to base this survey. The vagaries of weather and the many other changing conditions can affect counts.

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 where there is some concern.Red listed, for those which are at greatest risk.

<u>Buzzard</u>



Although there were smaller numbers of Buzzards breeding in the area before this survey began these records illustrate how the population increased. Average numbers of Buzzards have declined from the peak years of 2006 to 2012 to a more sustainable level. There are two pairs which are regular breeders at Ratcheugh farm and on the Crag. Buzzards are a sedentary species with very little movement during the winter months.

Black listed.

Kestrel.



The graph, although based on small numbers does illustrate a gradual fall in the Kestrel population. No longer our commonest bird of prey. It is interesting to see that the years when numbers were highest was in the period when Buzzards were also recorded at their highest counts. See the summer graph (2019 report) for more details.

Amber listed

Grey Partridge



Grey Partridge counts in 2019/20 have been disappointing, since there has been little or no shooting in recent seasons in the survey area. Ratcheugh and Snableazes are now thought of as the centre from which Grey Partridge would possibly populate surrounding farms in the scheme.

Red listed

Pheasant



With little shooting Pheasants have built up a regular population without the addition of any released birds.

Lapwing



In winter Lapwings flock together and spend most of their time feeding at the coast or at inland water ways. In severe weather they will move to more sheltered areas away from the coast, as is illustrated by the occasional large groups at Ratcheugh.

Red listed.

<u>Wren</u>



The graph for the Wren population clearly shows how even relatively short periods of either cold or dry conditions, when there are few insects available to them, survival is questionable. It has been shown that about 50% of Wrens die during a normal winter. Fortunately they are capable of bouncing back by producing two or even three large broods of young when conditions are good. The graph tells the story of a strong population in the 2003 to 2007 which was reduced to a handful, followed by several years when there were severe conditions with long periods of complete snow cover (2010 and 2011) late springs or very dry breeding seasons. It was not until 2015 that numbers where again rebuilt. Spring of 2020 gives the impression that Wren numbers have again returned to a high point, but unfortunately no survey counts have been possible.

<u>Dunnock</u>



The winter graph for Dunnocks would appear to be maintaining a constant population during the last few years. Both the breeding period and winter graphs show the effect of severe winter conditions in 2010/11 on this species and that they are able to rebuild numbers given better conditions in following years.

Amber listed.

<u>Robin</u>



In common with most of our overwintering passerines the severe weather in 2010 and 2011 took a heavy toll, reducing numbers drastically. It is not easy to get a true count of Robins, very easy when in song but otherwise difficult when they are hiding in dense vegetation. The graph shows that they have not managed to make up numbers since 2010/11. This seems to be in common with many other species.

Song Thrush



Winter numbers may have been increased by an influx of migrants from northern Europe, but counts have been very erratic during the winter period. It does appear that there has been an increase in numbers recorded recently.

Red listed.

Mistle Thrush



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 of one family group.

Blackbird



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 in November, before they become more widely scattered throughout the rest of the country. If the one very high count in 2012 was removed from the graph it would give a more clearly defined picture of the situation. Discounting the early influx of birds in early winter, there has still been a steady increase in Blackbird numbers overwintering at Ratcheugh which is possibly influenced by the gamekeeping.

Black listed.

Tree Sparrow



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. The number of Tree Sparrows wintering in this country may have declined in the last two years when weather conditions in most of Europe have been unusually mild and did not encourage birds to migrate. There were no records of Tree Sparrows in the winter of 2018/19 and only a very small number recorded in 2019/20.

Chaffinch



This graph suggests a fall in Chaffinch number. This may be explained by the provision of numerous new game plots in the area which are not on the survey route, resulting in a wider spread of wintering finches and the other seed eating passerines. A national fall in Chaffinch numbers has been recognised and efforts are being made by BTO to find the cause.

Black listed.

<u>Linnet</u>



In winter Linnets tend to move and feed in larger flocks and are therefore seen either in large numbers or often 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.

<u>Goldfinch</u>



The Goldfinch graph again follows the same trend as other finches in winter, giving a misleading picture of the true population.

Black listed.

Greenfinch



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.

Reed Bunting



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.

Amber listed.

Yellowhammer



One of our endangered species which has previously been recorded at Ratcheugh in healthy numbers, and sometimes in quite large flocks. Since 2014 winter counts have been much lower, following the trend of the other finches and National counts.

<u>Woodpigeon</u>



Woodpigeon compete with Game Birds for the feed which the Estate provides. It is therefore not surprising that numbers are high. They are also attracted by Oil Seed Rape crops during the winter, which are liable to suffer more severely as a result. We have seen an amazing increase from the first two years of the survey, which were prior to the introduction of oil seed rape. We can presume that winter numbers will include migrants from Northern Europe which may not be high in mild winters when food is still available for them in their breeding areas. More concentrated efforts are now being made to deter Wood Pigeons from winter crops and serve to move flocks from one farm to the neighbours.

Black listed.



Total of All Winter Counts (Target Species)

It is difficult to estimate the value of this graph. For instance, if it is correct that Wood Pigeons are being effectively removed from counts at Ratcheugh by approx. 200, that would reduce the overall average in the total winter counts by that amount.

Other sightings of Interest.

Golden Eagles in Northumberland.

The sighting of a Golden Eagle at Ratcheugh was an unexpected experience. Seen during a survey on 29th. November 2019, perched in a low tree in bright sunlight at a distance of about 200 yds. and later in flight for a brief time. In the bright light it appeared to be a warm brown, the upper and lower tail coverts were pure white. A well defined area of white on the upper wing coverts and a lesser area on the under wing coverts could be seen clearly in flight. This showed that it was probably, a first year juvenile bird. The head and nape were lighter coloured but not the golden of a mature adult.

This bird was seen later at Ratcheugh by the gamekeeper Nicki Smith and probably the same bird at Rothbury and in the Coquet valley, two days later.

There are occasional records of Golden Eagles in Northumberland, mainly in the north of the county, which is not a great distance from the area of southern Scotland where a few eagles breed. There have been reports of one in the College Valley earlier in 2019.

Enquiries to the West of Scotland Group, who are reintroducing birds to their area and tracking them, told me that it was not one of theirs. Similarly, with the Southern Group, who are tracking birds bred in their area, but thy did say that one of theirs had been tracked into Northumberland earlier in 2019, possibly the same that was seen in the College Valley.

Conclusions based on Winter Counts.

It is disappointing that there is a continuing reduction in the totals of wintering Passerines here but this is in line with the results of counts made in most other parts of the country and with the latest national averages. Various reasons for this are suggested.

- (1) Mild winters and sufficient food in continental countries tend to negate the necessity to emigrate. Is this a long term result of Global Warming?
- (2) Farming systems now rely more on winter sown crops, resulting in few over wintered stubbles.
- (3) Efficient harvesting machines, combined with the use of herbicides result in stubbles which are bare of seed feed for birds.
- (4) At Ratcheugh and Snableazes, the increase in the area of game plots means that the route taken by this survey covers only a small proportion.

At Ratcheugh and Snableazes the very considerable acreage sown annually to game plots should attract and satisfy the requirements of many species.

J.C.(21/5/2020)