

BIRD SURVEY - FIELDHOUSE AND TOWNFOOT.

REPORT FOR NOVEMBER 2013 TO JULY 2014.

This report covers the fourth complete year of the survey.

At this point I feel that it worthwhile briefly repeating the Aims and Methodology of the survey.

Aims of the survey.

This survey is aimed at assessing the effects on the wild bird population of gamekeeping where there is the provision of food and shelter and considerable control of predators 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 season.

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

Spring came early in 2014. It was noticeable that Grey Partridges were mainly all paired in mid January and many other species had a very early start to their breeding season. The continued good weather will hopefully have resulted in a prolonged and successful nesting period, which should help to counteract the poor seasons of the last few years.

There have been few notable sightings during the year, but one interesting record was of a pair of Merlins at Townfoot on the 17th. Jan. 2014.

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. National figures can be misleading when used as a direct comparison with any one local area and this must be taken into account when reviewing the results.

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,

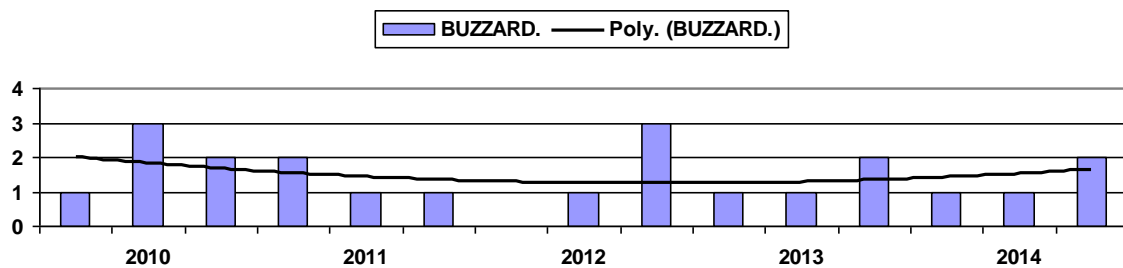
Red. For those at greatest risk.

BTO. National figures give:- (A) an average % rise or fall over the period 1995 – 2012

(B) an estimated % rise or fall over the period 2012 – 2013

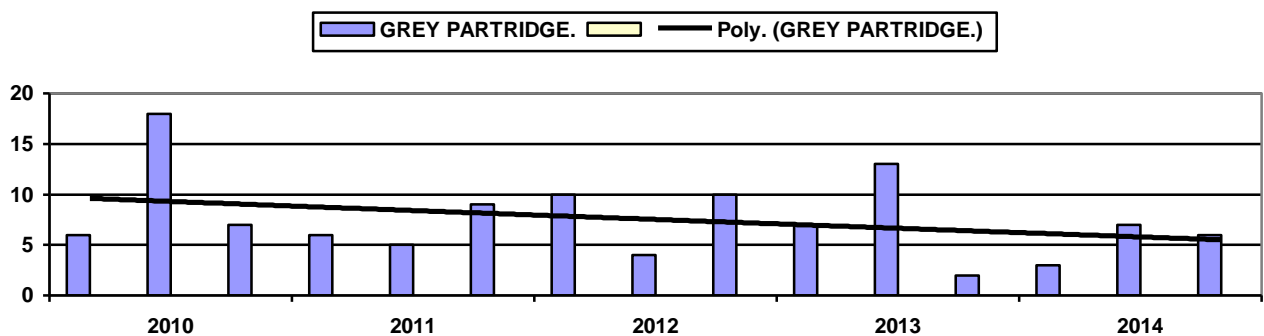
These figures and colour classification are given with the graph of each of the target species.

The recently published “Bird Atlas” from BTO has also been used as a reference.



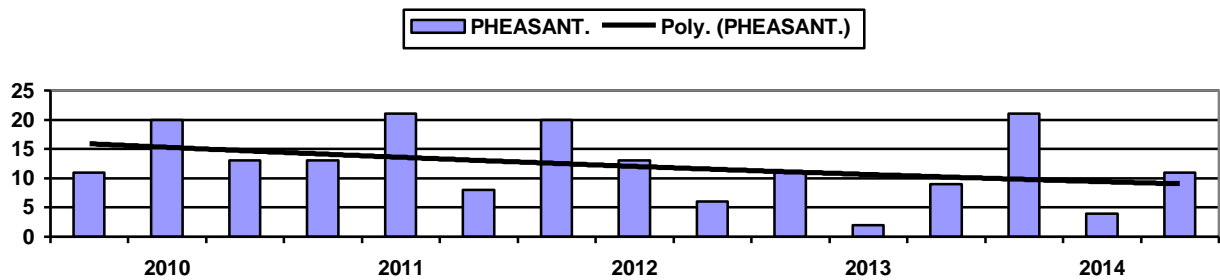
The eastward spread of buzzards now appears to be complete and the population is considered to be stable. This does seem to be the position in our area.

Black listed. (A) +79% (B) -12%



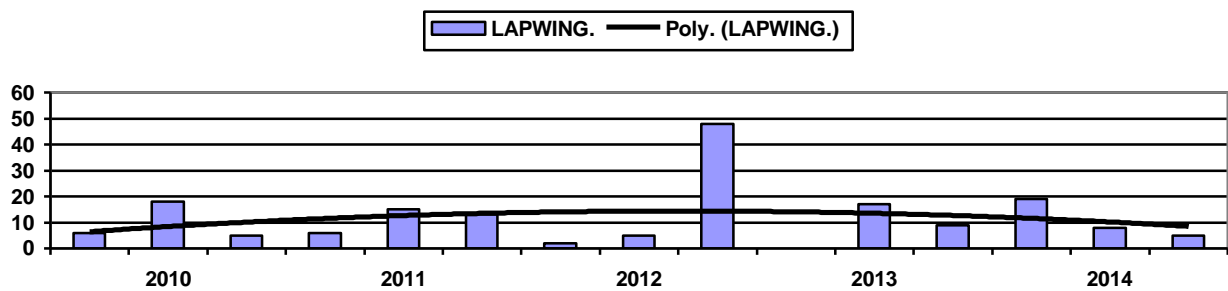
Nationally there has been a huge decline in Partridge numbers over the last forty years. In these survey areas this trend has been reversed but numbers here have been affected by poor weather over the last few years. It would seem that there are now signs of a recovery.

Red listed. (A) -56% (B) -31%



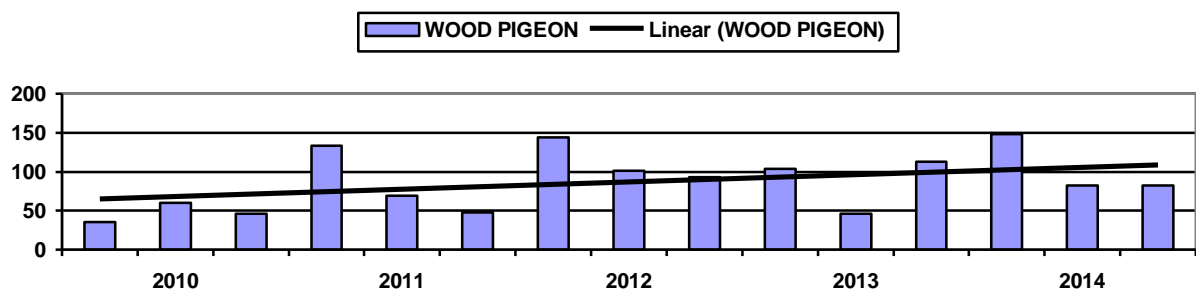
Nationally the number of Pheasants has risen with the release of large numbers of birds for shooting. In the survey area no hand reared birds have been released in recent years but numbers continue to be maintained by “wild birds” and migrants from surrounding shoots.

Black listed. (A) +32% (B) +2%



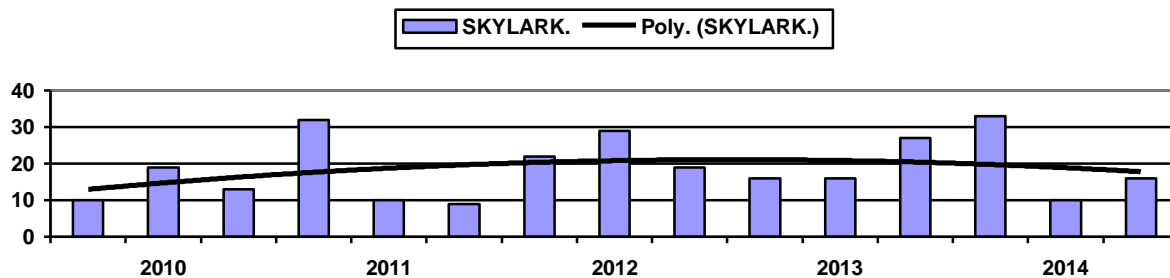
National figures indicate a steady decline in numbers mostly in lowland and arable areas. Results here show that Lapwing are managing to maintain their numbers in the limited area of ground which is suitable for nesting.

Red listed. (A) -42% (B) +6%



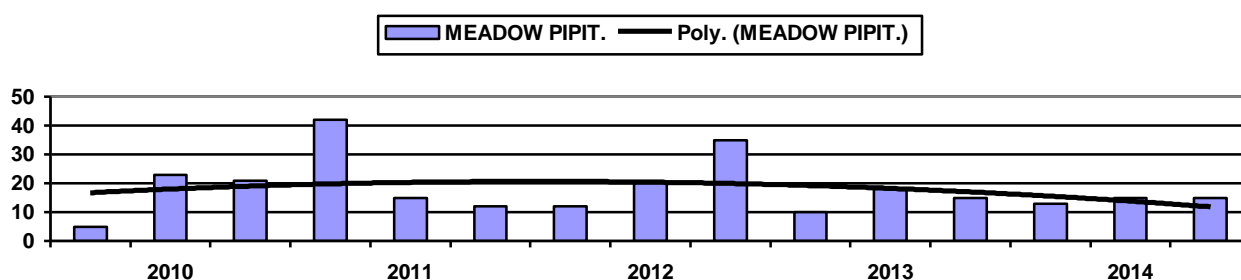
The trend shows a small increase in numbers, probably due to the availability of food which is attracting both breeding birds and non breeding juveniles. High numbers of Woodpigeons can become a nuisance to the farms.

Black listed. (A) +42% (B) -3%



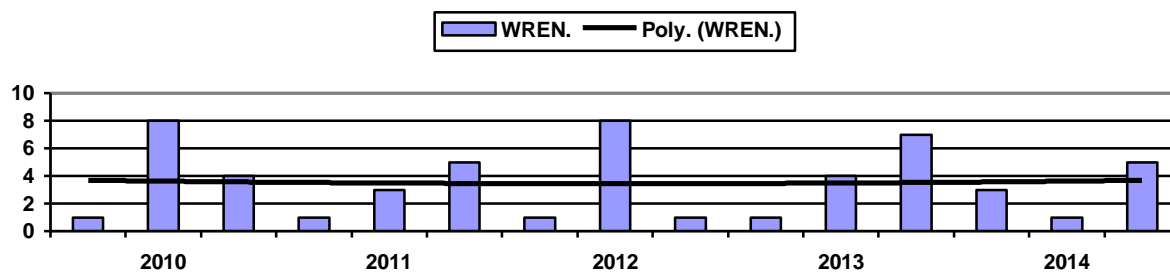
National figures show a continual drop in Skylark numbers over a long period, particularly in arable areas. Counts here and particularly on the more open parts of Fieldhouse farm show that numbers are being maintained well.

Red listed. (A) -24% (B) -13%



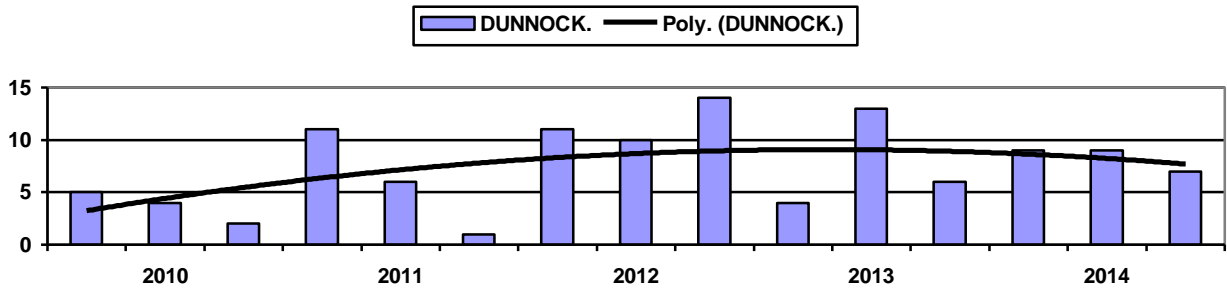
Meadow Pipits require similar conditions to Skylarks in their breeding habitat and are also reducing in numbers, mainly in arable areas. On the more suitable parts of Fieldhouse they are managing to retain reasonable numbers, against the national trend.

Amber listed. (A) -17% (B) -13%



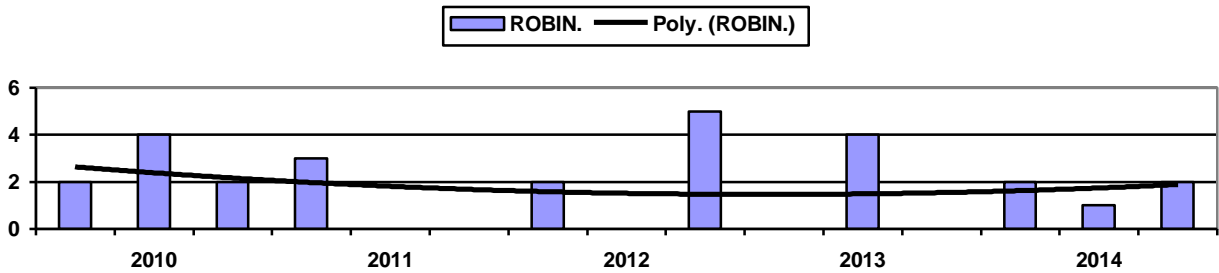
This chart continues to illustrate how numbers of Wrens vary throughout the year, with the higher numbers at the end of the breeding period being reduced during the winter to a much lower level at the start of the following breeding period. National estimates claim a 50% loss of Wrens in an average winter.

Black listed. (A) -3% (B) -4%



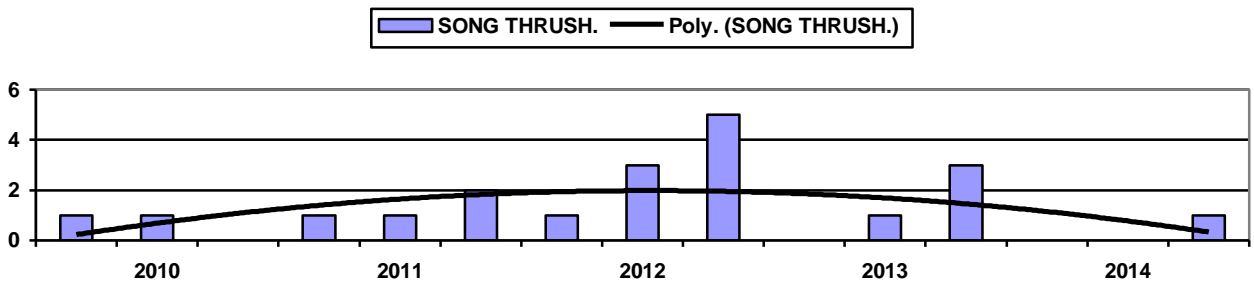
There has been a small increase over the survey period. Nationally there has been no change in the population.

Amber listed. (A) +21% (B) -4%



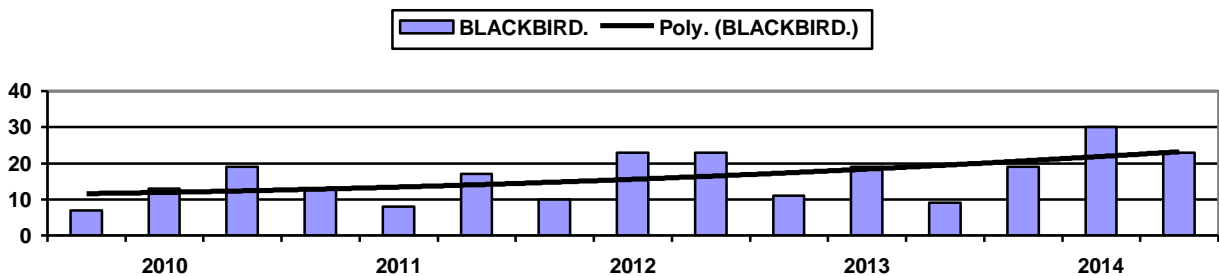
There have been very irregular counts of Robins which can be a very secretive birds during the breeding season. There is therefore likely to be a higher population than has been recorded.

Black listed. (A) +7% (B) +1%



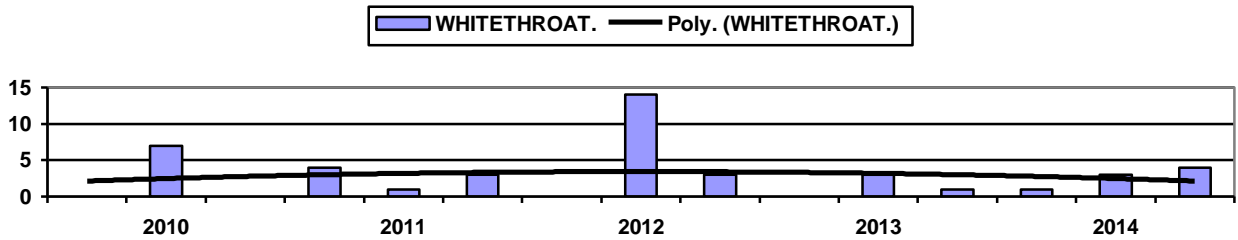
A disappointingly low count of Song Thrushes. National figures have shown a constant fall over many years but an increase more recently, which has not been recorded here.

Red listed. (A) +5% (B) -3%



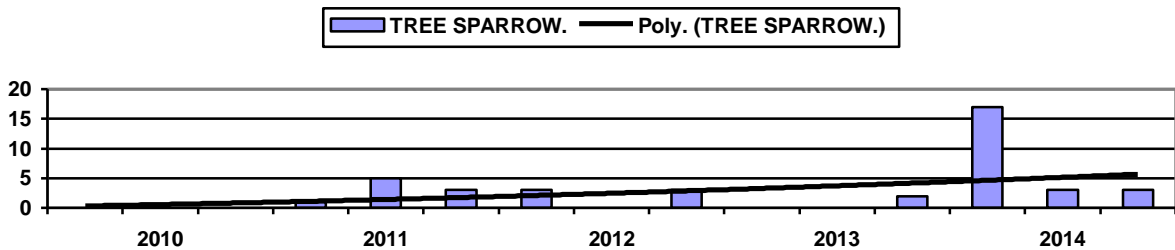
A steady increase in numbers, higher than the national trend.

Black listed. (A) +21% (B) -4%



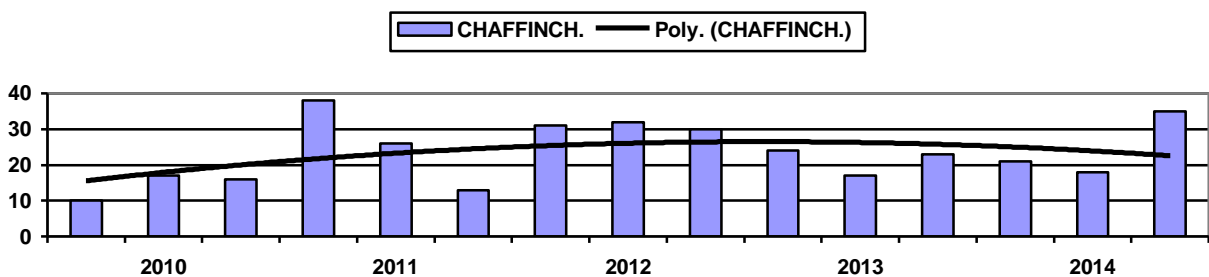
Whitethroats are the only summer visitor included in the target list. The population in our survey area depends, not only on the conditions here but also on those in their wintering habitats in Africa, and during movements to and fro. Whitethroats are therefore not a good indicator of the effects of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

Amber listed. (A) +35% (B) +5%



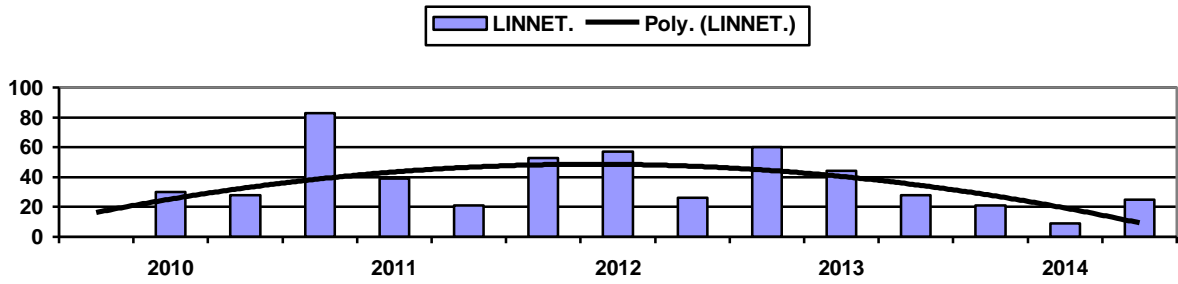
Tree Sparrows were reduced to a very small breeding population in Northumberland but in recent years have been on the increase. This increase would seem to have followed a big rise in the number of wintering birds mainly on the east coast with some remaining to breed here. Like other members of the Finch family they are attracted to game plots and are much more able to withstand adverse winter conditions than many other species. Counts in 2014 seem to have followed this pattern, following the national trend.

Red listed. (A) +128% (B) -8%



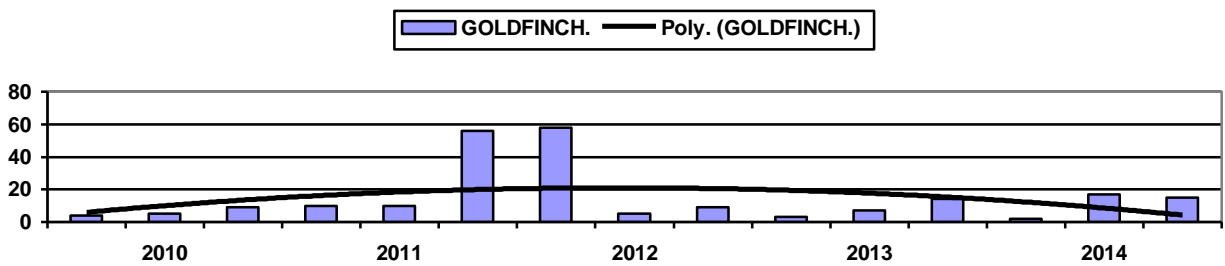
The Chaffinch is, like the Blackbird, one of the commonest species in the survey area and is important in the monitoring of the effects of the Estate management. So far the counts show a good population with very little change. This is in line with national averages.

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



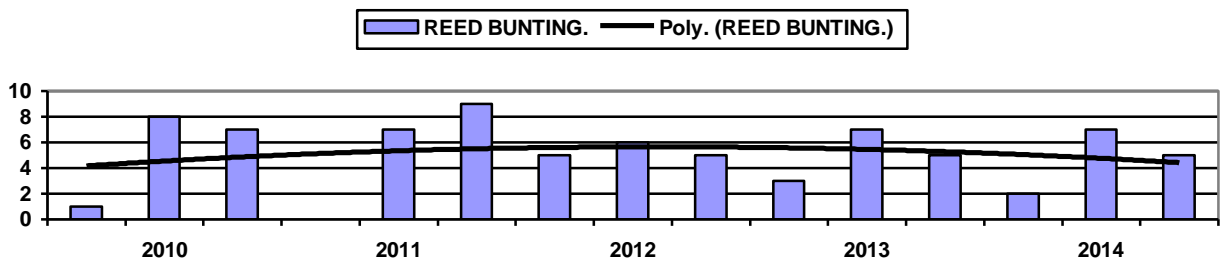
This survey has a higher population of Linnets than most other arable farms in this area but the trend here is still going down, which is in line with the national figures.

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



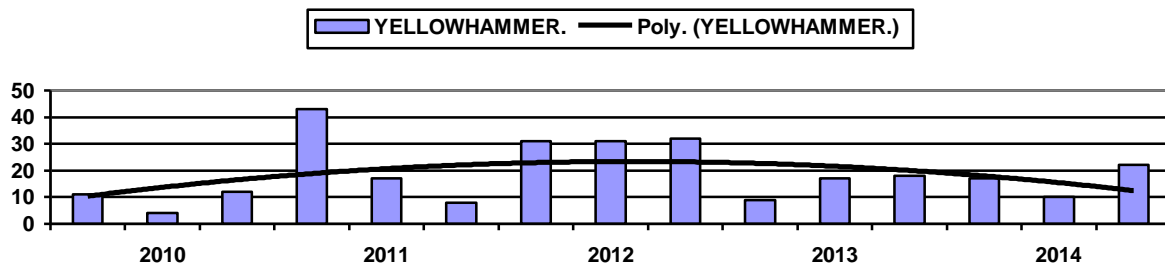
The high numbers of Goldfinches in late 2011 will be birds flocking together after breeding and probably mainly juveniles. In early 2012 the higher count will probably be of a similar group prior to dispersing to their breeding territories. These two high counts distort the true trend which shows a small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

Black listed. (A) +112% (B) -15%



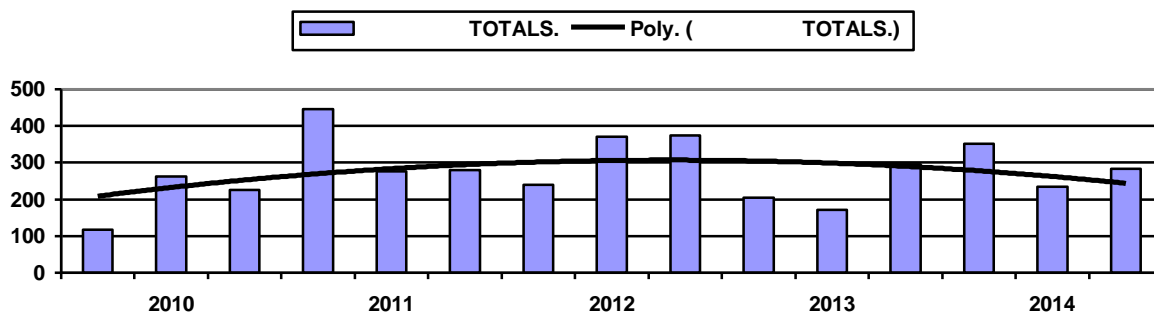
A regular small population of Reed Bunting, mainly along the river Aln at Townfoot. In the North East there has been a small increase during the last twenty years.

Amber listed. (A) +14% (B) +10%



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.

Red listed. (A) -14% (B) -10%



Total counts of the target species during the breeding periods are showing a slight downward trend in the last two years. This is more than likely due to poor weather conditions during the 2013 breeding period and the preceding severe winters.

Conclusions.

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

- Grey Partridge. (Red listed)
- Lapwing. (Red listed)
- Woodpigeon.
- Skylark, (Red listed)
- Meadow Pipit.
- Duncock.
- Blackbird.
- Yellowhammer. (Red listed)

Nine species maintain similar results to national averages:-

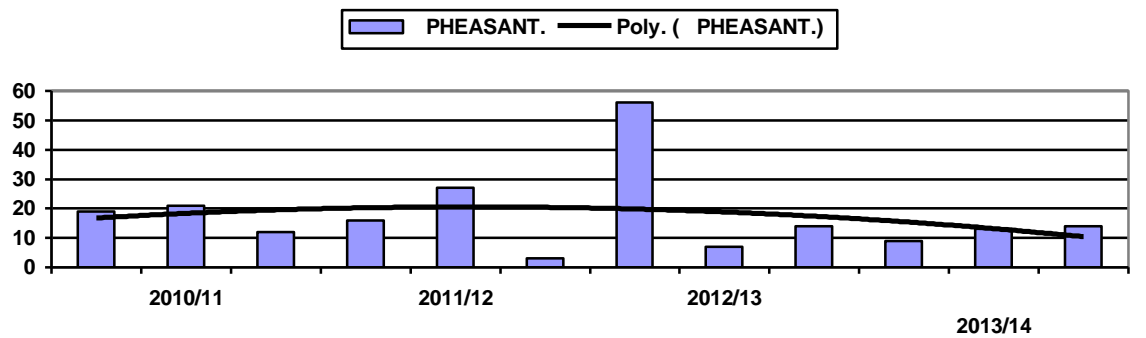
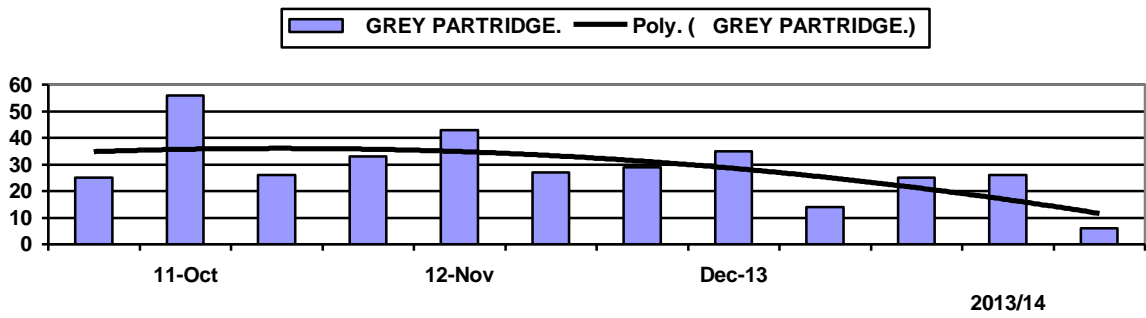
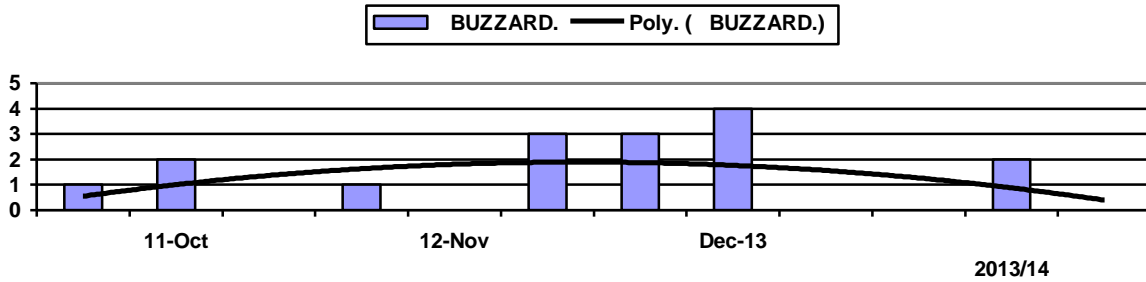
- Buzzard.
- Wren.
- Robin.
- Whitethroat.
- Tree Sparrow. (Red listed)
- Chaffinch.
- Linnet. (Red listed)
- Goldfinch.
- Reed Bunting.

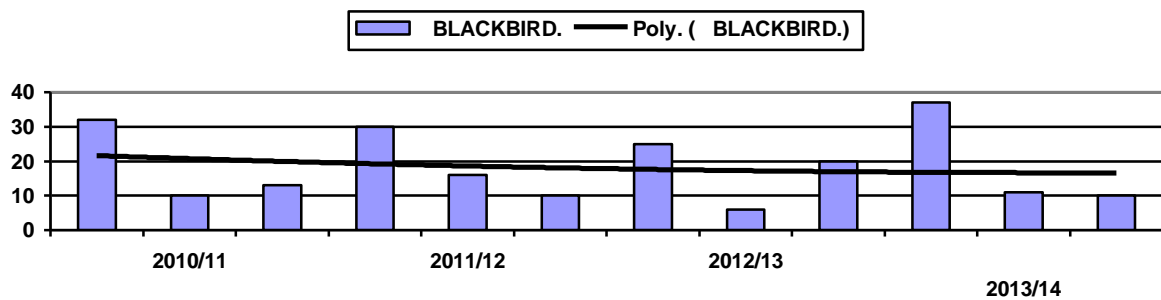
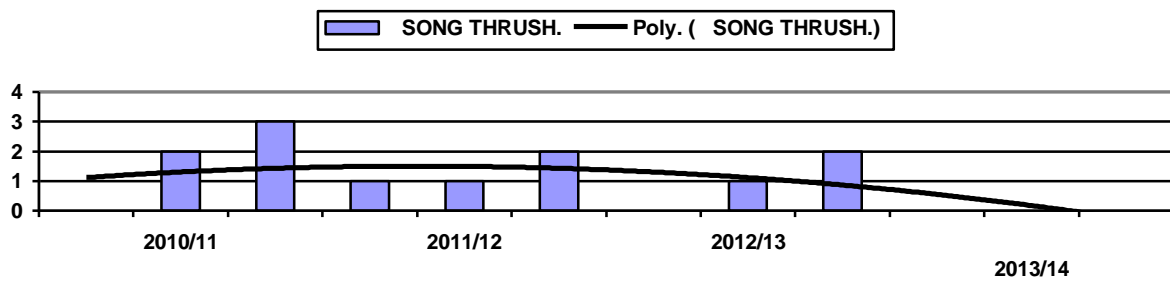
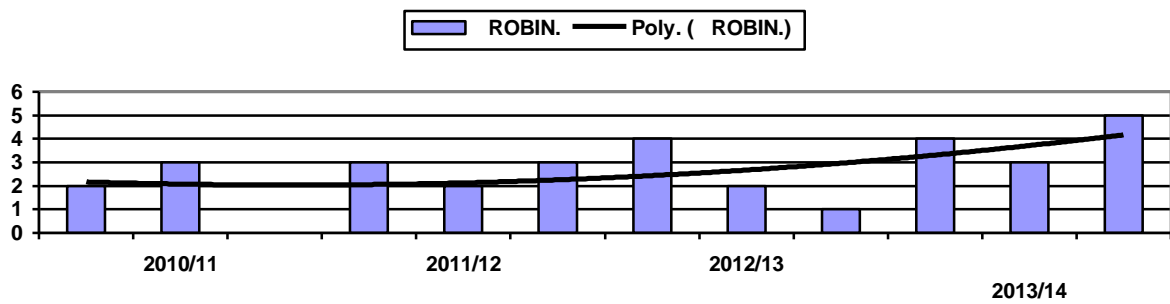
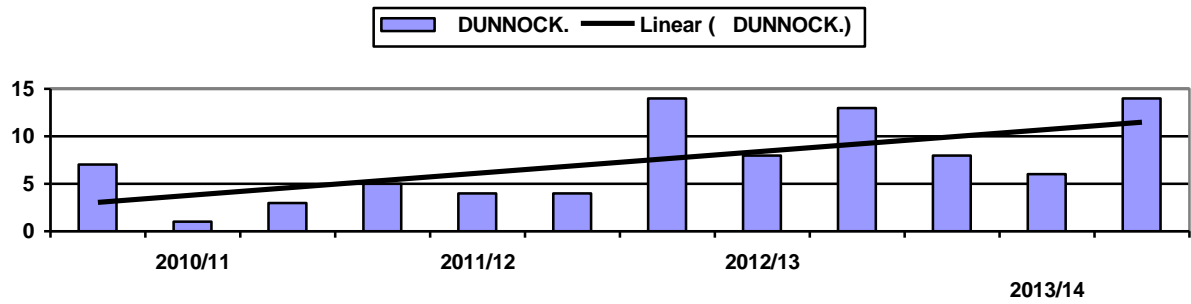
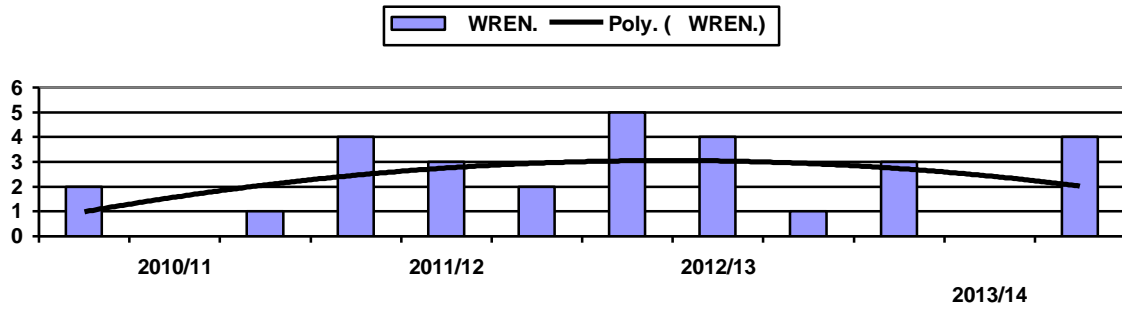
Two species are under performing:-

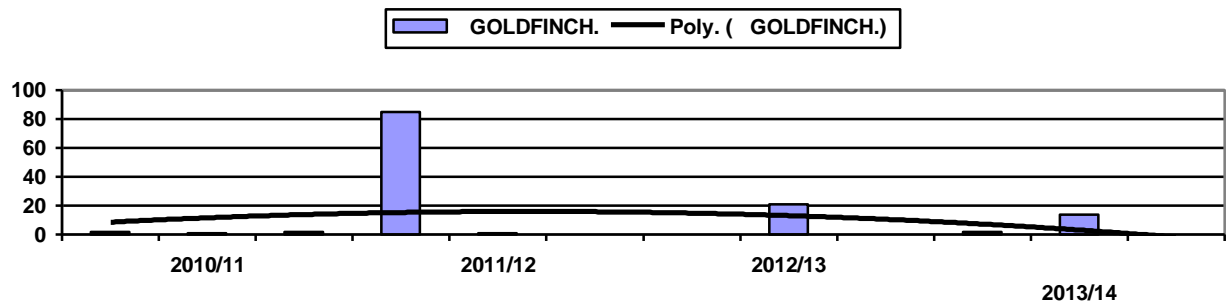
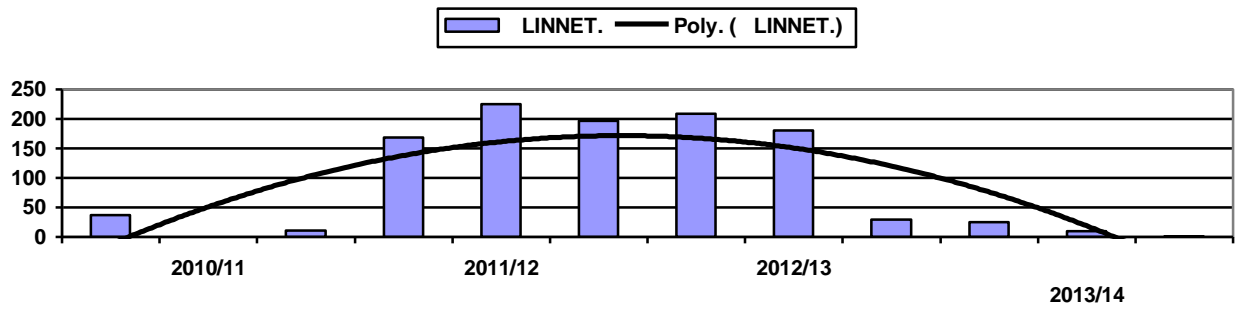
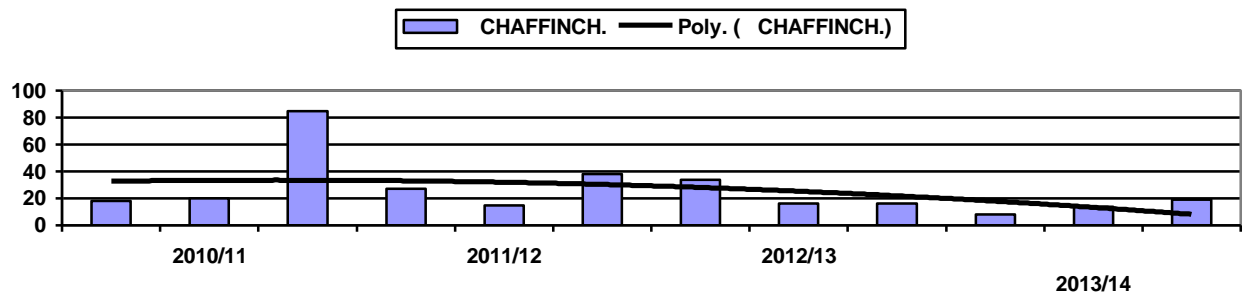
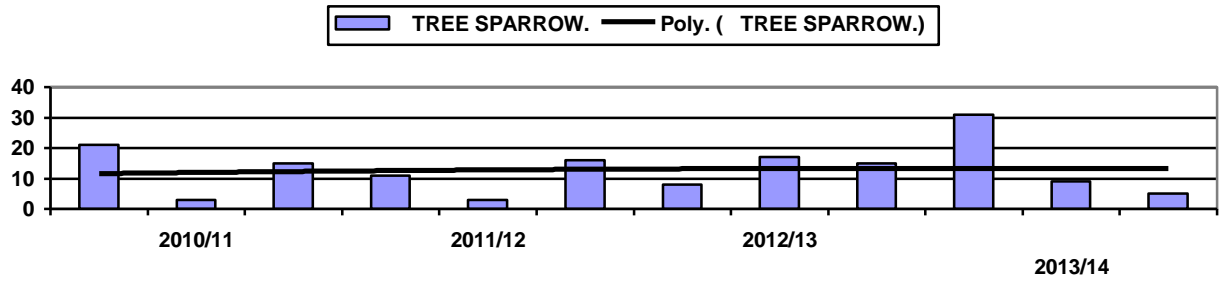
- Pheasant.
- Song Thrush. (Red listed)

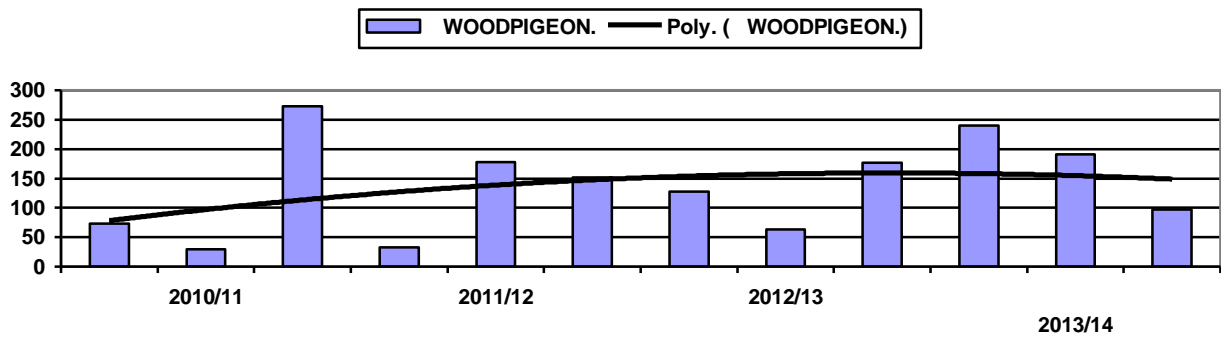
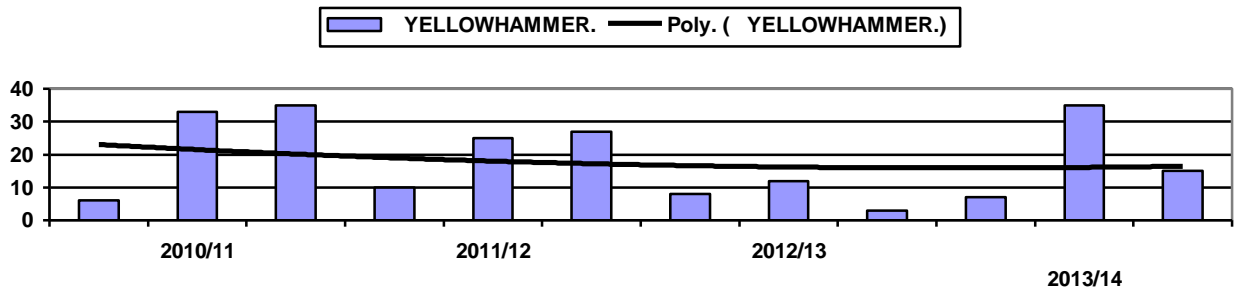
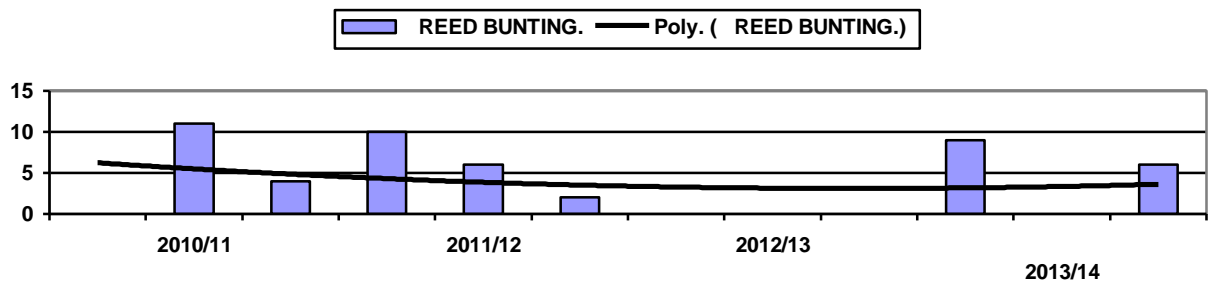
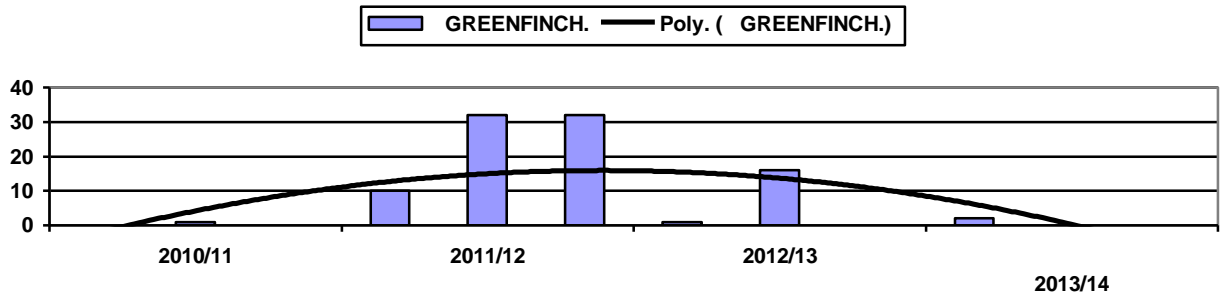
Winter period Records.

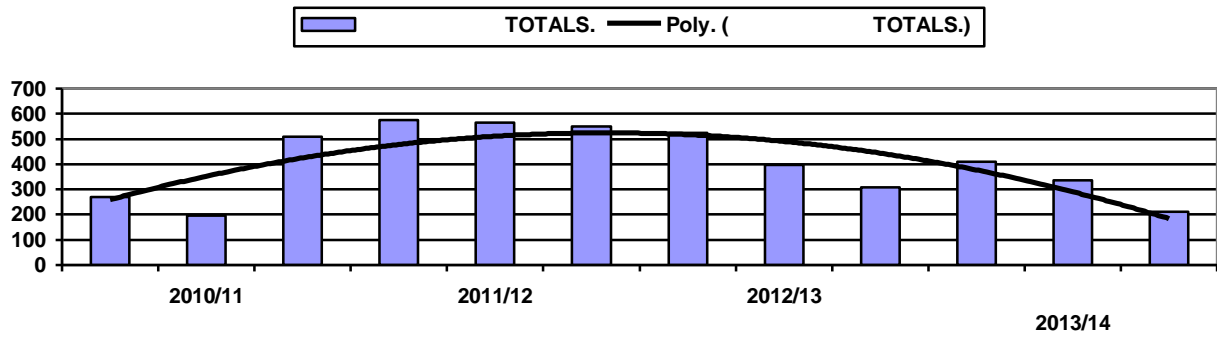
Most winter records are more irregular than those of the breeding period, being determined by weather, food availability and shelter, etc. Graphs have been produced for those of the target species which are winter residents and may have some bearing on the results of the survey.











The trend line would appear to indicate a reducing number of birds recorded during the winter period. This is misleading because high numbers of finches were recorded when game plots were on the survey routes. These were providing an excellent food source for large numbers of birds.

The graph for Blackbirds shows quite clearly when there is an increase in numbers in autumn, due to winter immigrants arriving from Northern Europe.

JC.(Sept.2014)

