

BIRD SURVEY - FIELDHOUSE AND TOWNFOOT

REPORT FOR NOVEMBER 2020 TO JULY 2021

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

This report covers twelve years of the survey.

Aims of the survey

The 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, e.g. 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 and Skylark, the nesting area can follow favourable conditions e.g. spring-sown crops or bare stubble. 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 more often found. This comparison between the two farms is now changing with the alterations in cropping policy 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.

Covid 19.

No breeding season surveys were possible during 2020 due to the Covid 19 restrictions. In order to maintain some level of accuracy in the graphs with this report, an average count of the three previous years has been used to fill the gap.

Breeding Period Records 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 have resulted in the grouping of species into three bands: -

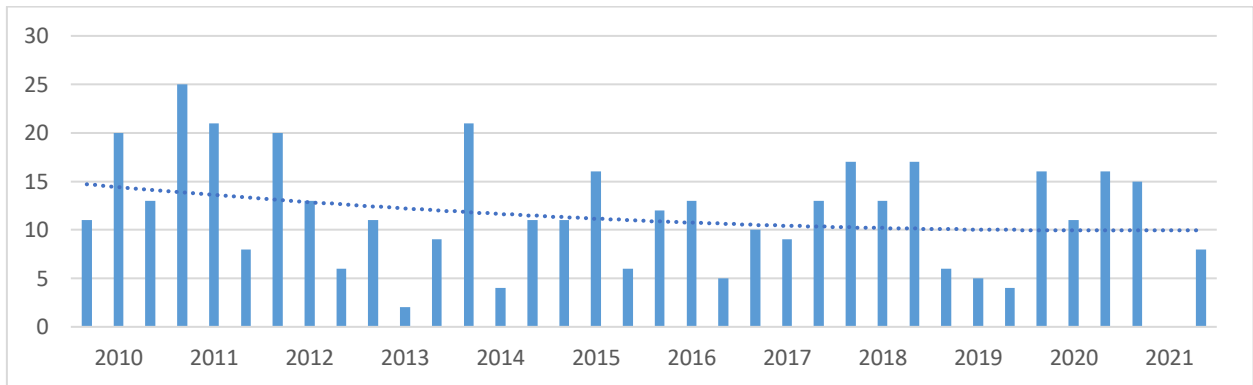
- Black.** For those not endangered.
- Amber.** Those for which there is some concern.
- Red.** For those at greatest risk.

BTO National figures give: -

- (A)** an average % rise or fall over the period 1995 - 2017
- (B)** an estimated % rise or fall over the period 2017 - 2018

These figures, which are the most up to date available, and colour classifications are given with the graph of each of the target species .Due to Covid 19 regulations no upto date list for the UK has been produced for 2019 - 2020.

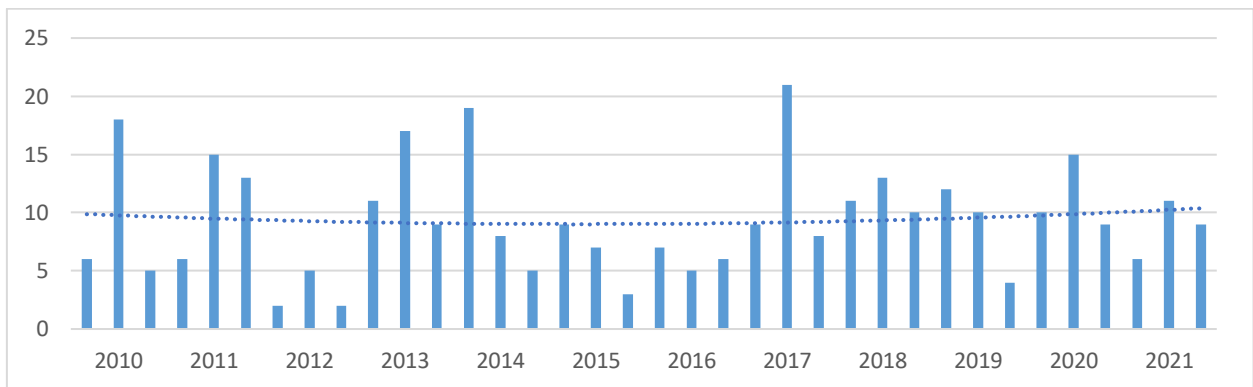
Pheasant.



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. These reproduce sufficiently to maintain numbers despite the fact that some shooting takes place.

Black listed (A) +34% (B) 0%

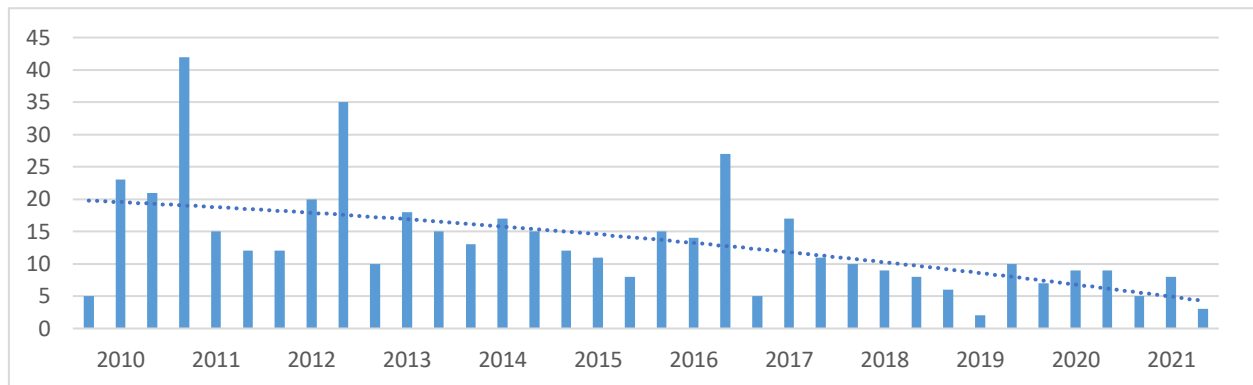
Lapwing.



Lapwing numbers have become more stable over the last four years. The crop rotation includes a substantial area of stubble or fallow land which is providing a regular source of suitable breeding habitat. Breeding birds move with the rotation, but any change in the current management may not always follow the same pattern. Here they are performing far better than the national average.

Red listed (A) -42% (B) -5%

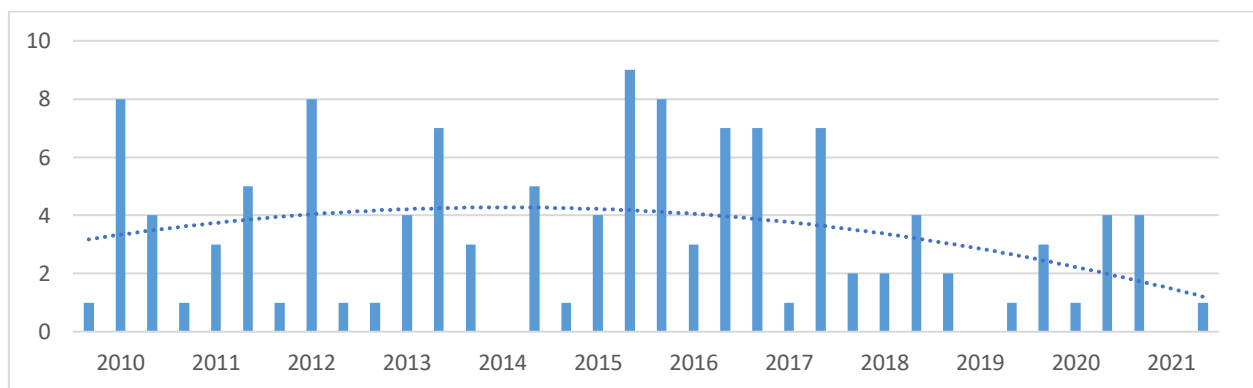
Meadow Pipit



Meadow Pipits require similar conditions to Skylarks in their breeding habitat and are more suited to permanent grassland or hill pasture than an arable or lowland situation. The graph shows a continual fall in numbers as they are affected by the changes in cropping, particularly at Fieldhouse.

Amber listed (A) -11% (B) -10%

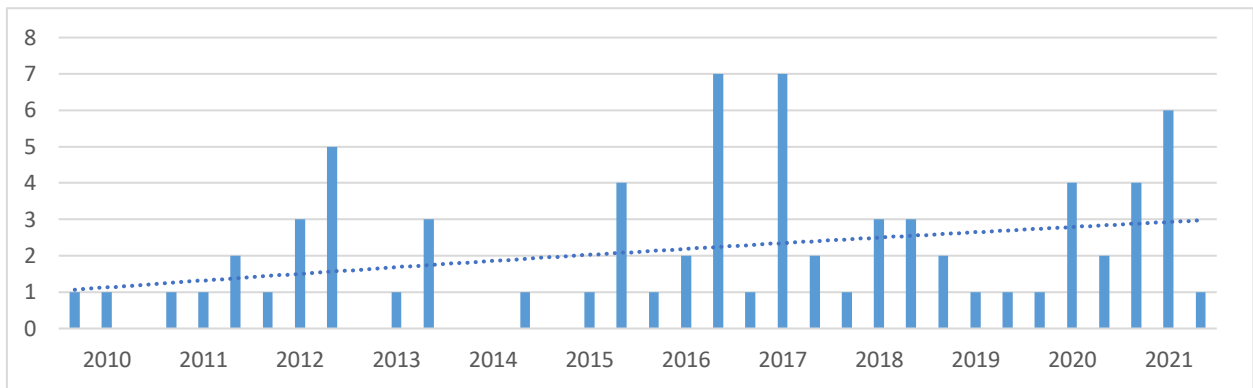
Wren



This chart continues to illustrate how numbers of Wrens vary throughout the years, with the higher numbers usually recorded at the end of the breeding period being reduced during the winter by cold weather and shortage of insect food. National estimates claim a 50% loss of Wrens in an average winter. Counts have remained very low in 2019 and 2021, this will probably be due to a short but quite severe period in the winter, late frosts in spring followed by a long dry spell, resulting in reduced insect food.

Black listed (A) +34% (B) -21%

Song Thrush



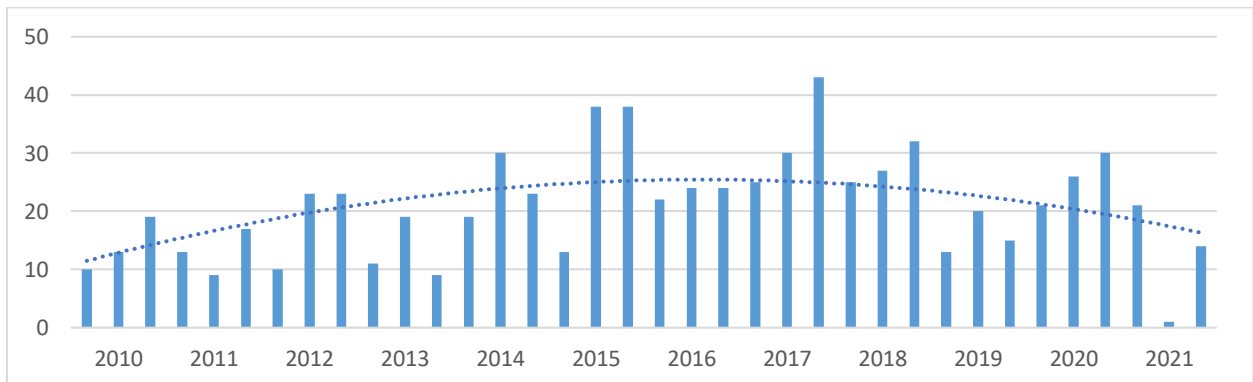
This graph is made with small numbers. After a long period of gradually reducing numbers, nationally, there seems to be a slow revival. Results are better than the National average.

Red listed

(A) +27%

(B) -15%

Blackbird



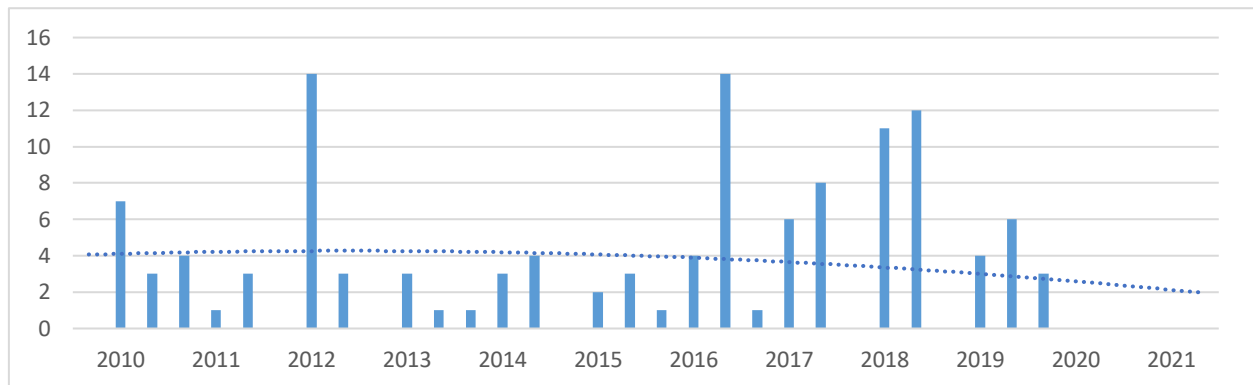
The increasing Blackbird numbers in the survey area which have been recorded during previous years have not been continued in this season's counts. I am at a loss to explain the very low count in May.

Black listed

(A) +25%

(B) -4%

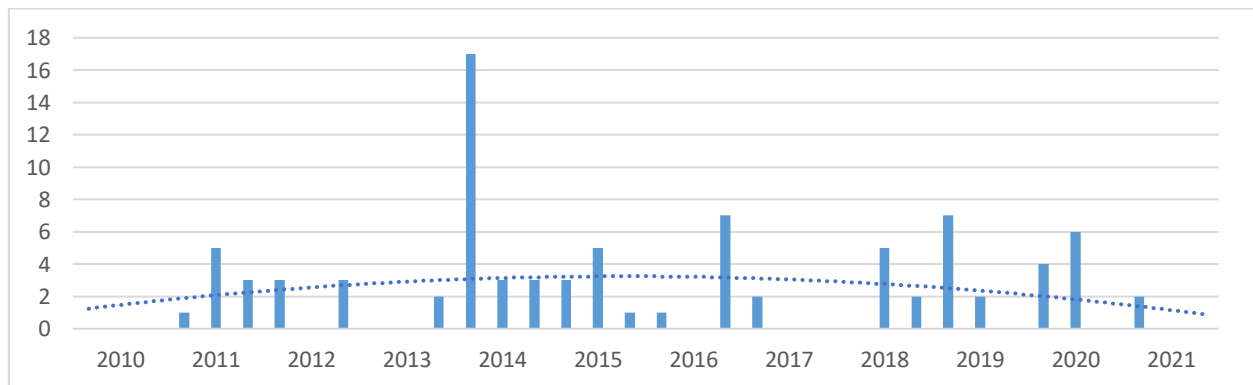
Whitethroat



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 habitat and during movements to and from Africa. Whitethroats are therefore not a good indicator of the effects of any management in this country alone. The chart shows that no Whitethroats have often arrived in the April Counts, but it is unusual for none to be present in May or June.

Black listed (A) +18% (B) -18%

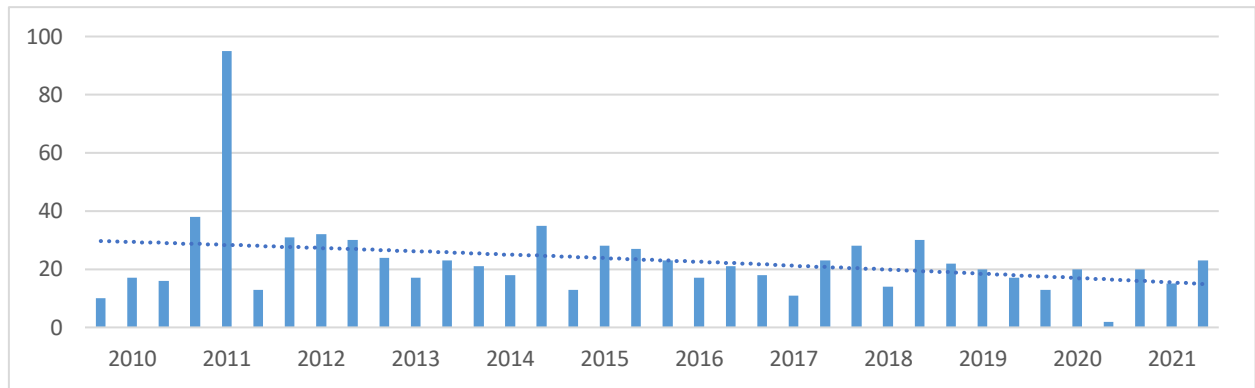
Tree Sparrow



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 is of flocking birds before their breeding season had started and distorts the graph. More Tree Sparrows are seen during the breeding season, closer to human habitation.

Red listed (A) +113% (B) +9%

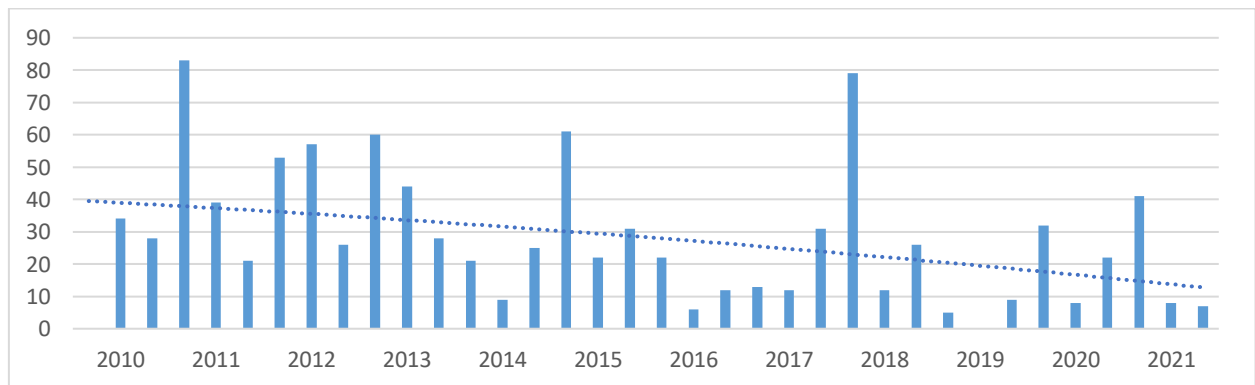
Chaffinch



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 continues to be slightly better than the national average

Black listed (A) -14% (B) -2%

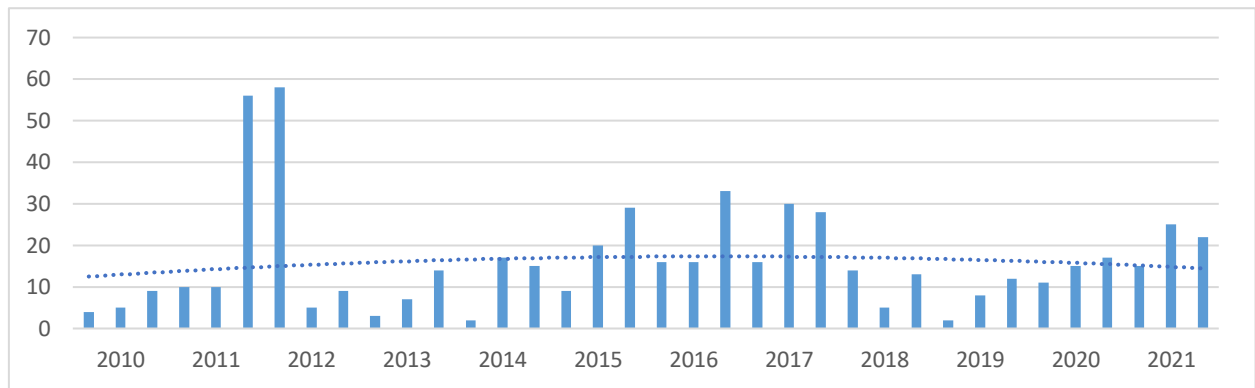
Linnet



This survey has had a higher population of Linnets than other arable areas but numbers are now declining along with the national average.

Red listed (A) -17% (B) -4%

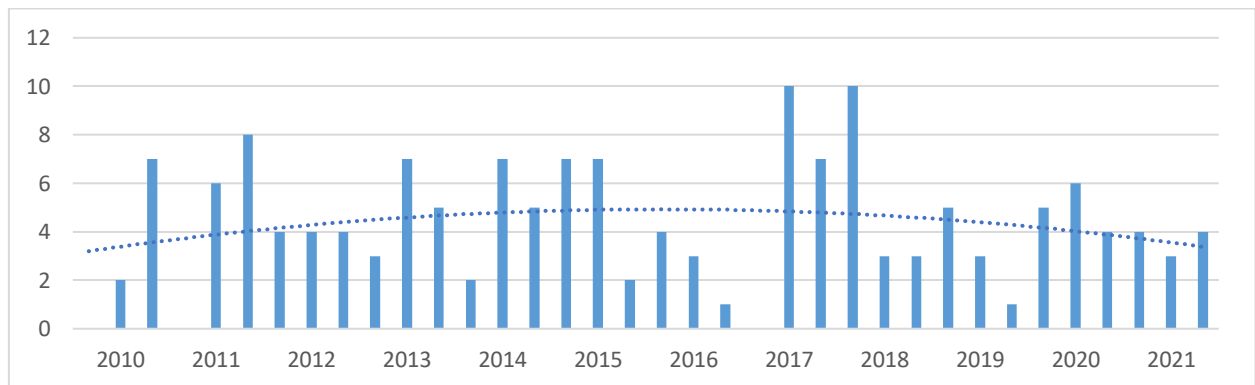
Goldfinch



The high numbers of Goldfinches recorded in late 2011 was caused by birds flocking together after breeding and included many juveniles. In early 2012 the higher count will be of a similar flock prior to dispersing to their breeding territories. These two high counts distort the true trend which has shown an increase until 2018/19 when numbers seemed to fall but are rising again in 2021.

Black listed (A) +146% (B) 1%

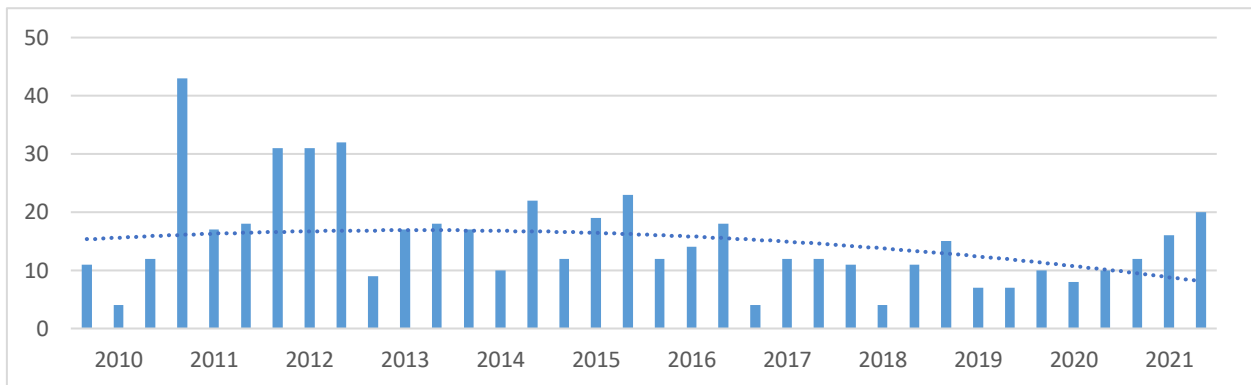
Reed Bunting



This shows a regular small population of Reed Bunting, mainly along the river Aln at Townfoot which is one of the few suitable habitats on these survey routes. (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 which possibly included newly fledged birds.

Amber listed (A) +37% (B) -13%

Yellowhammer



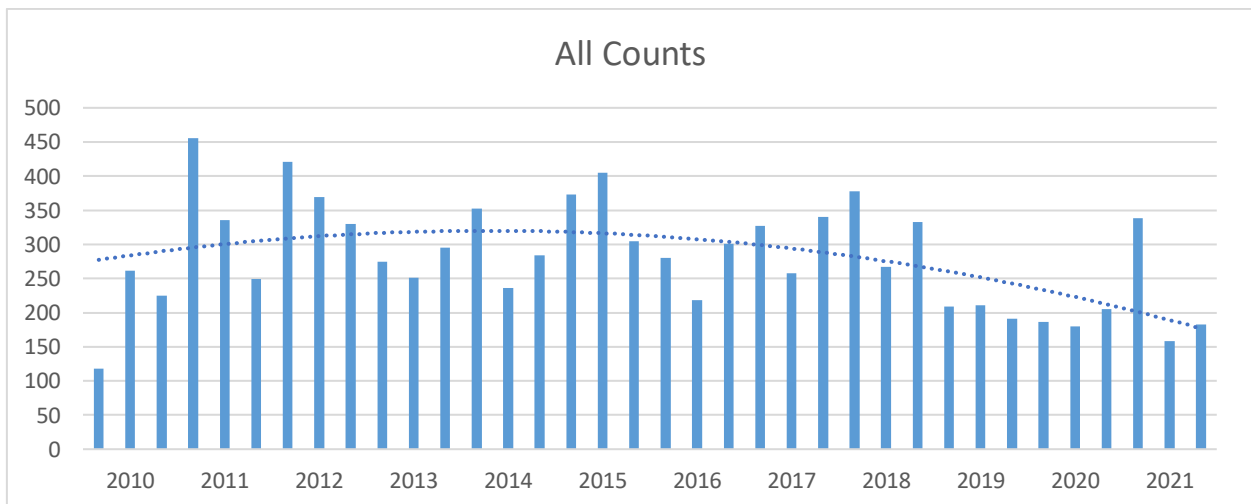
They have had a better year, after a slow decline in past years, numbers counted have increased in this breeding season. (They are closely associated with cereal growing areas and the highest populations are on the east of the country. BA) Here they are performing better than the national averages.

Red listed

(A) -21%

(B) -3%

Total of All Breeding Period Counts (Target Species)



Average counts over the whole period of the survey show a slow decline in the total of birds recorded at Fieldhouse and Townfoot.

Conclusions.

The results of this survey compared with national averages indicate that six of the target species are performing more satisfactorily. Five of which are Red listed. Those are: -

- Grey Partridge (Red listed)
- Skylark (Red listed)
- Yellowhammer (Red listed)
- Lapwing (Red listed)
- Song Thrush (Red listed)
- Chaffinch

Seven species maintain similar results to national averages: -

- Goldfinch
- Buzzard
- Woodpigeon
- Dunnock
- Reed Bunting
- Pheasant
- Blackbird

Six species have not followed the same trend as the national records would suggest, but some of these are short term and will probably improve with better conditions.

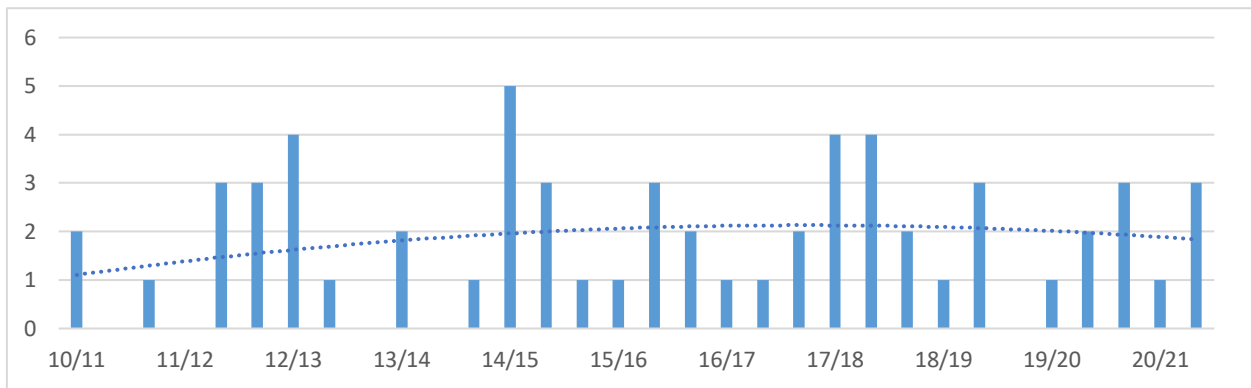
- Tree Sparrow (Red listed)
- Linnet (Red Listed)
- Meadow Pipit (Due to change in cropping)
- Whitethroat (Due to late arrival)
- Wren (Short term)
- Robin (Only in the last surveys)

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.

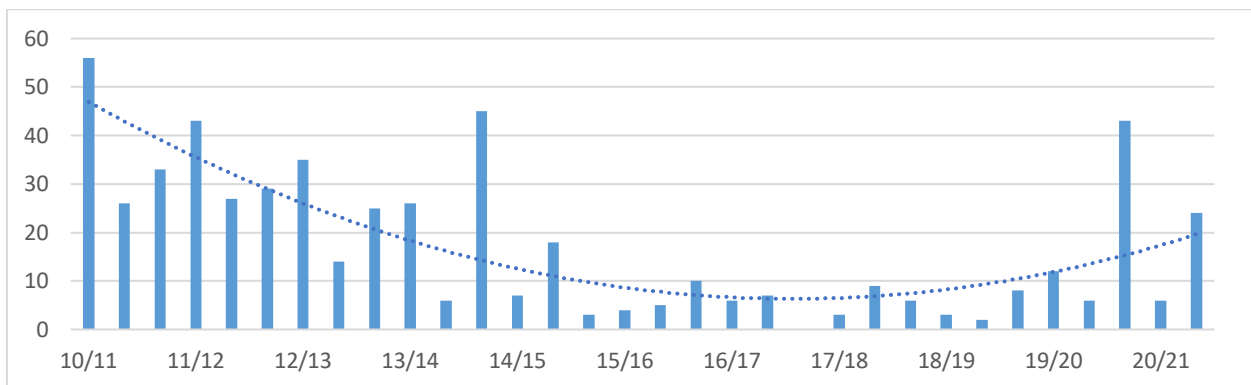
- Kestrel. Few sightings.
- Sparrow Hawk. Few sightings.
- Skylark. Mainly move away from the area in winter.
- Meadow Pipit. As the Skylark.
- Mistle Thrush. Small numbers.
- Lapwing. Only three records of flocks, usually when there is more severe weather affecting their wintering areas nearer the coast.

Buzzard



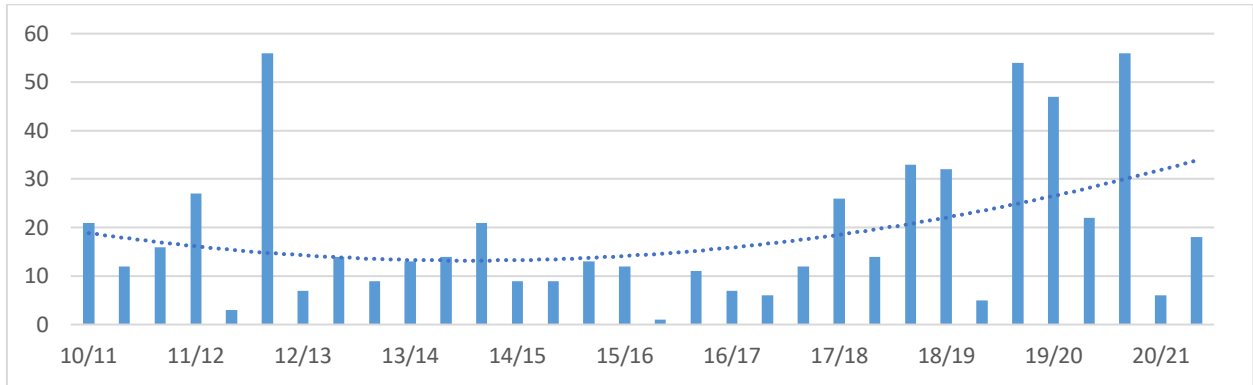
Similar to the breeding period, the Buzzard population appears to be stable.

Grey Partridge



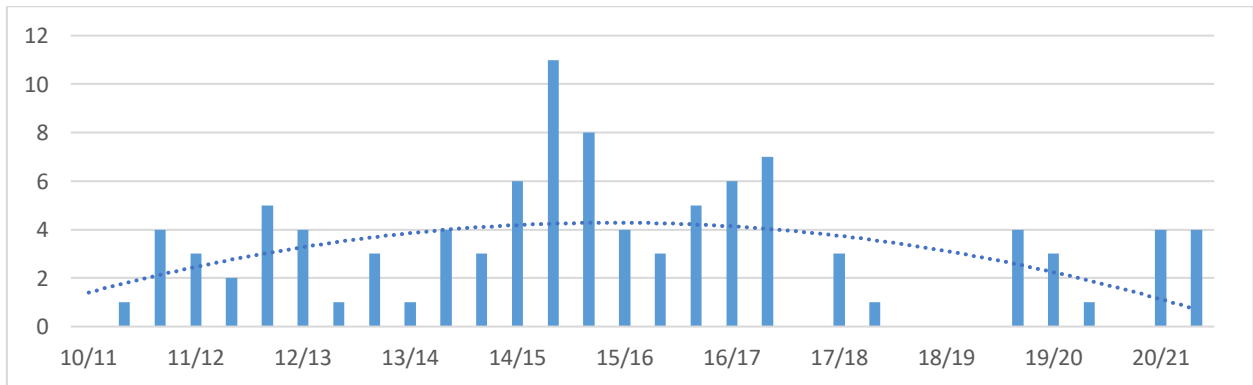
Grey Partridge numbers in winter have declined. This may be due to the level of shooting which could be putting the breeding population at risk.

Pheasant



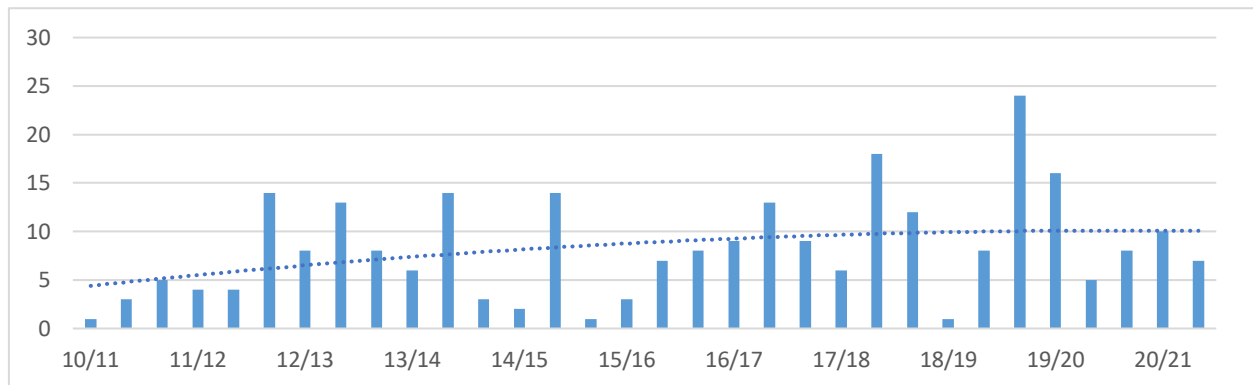
Pheasants may be affected by the numbers shot during the season. There was little shooting due to Covid restrictions in the 2020 / 21 seasons.

Wren



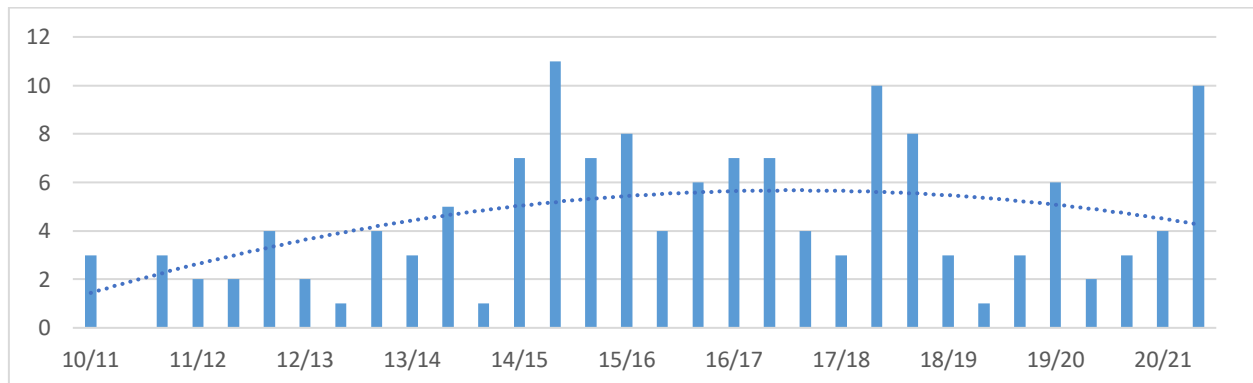
Wren populations always show big variations over relatively short periods. The current apparent collapse in numbers is probably due to a series of unsuitable winters with periods of very wet or cold conditions and insufficient insect feed. In average winters numbers normally fall by an estimated 20%.

Dunnock



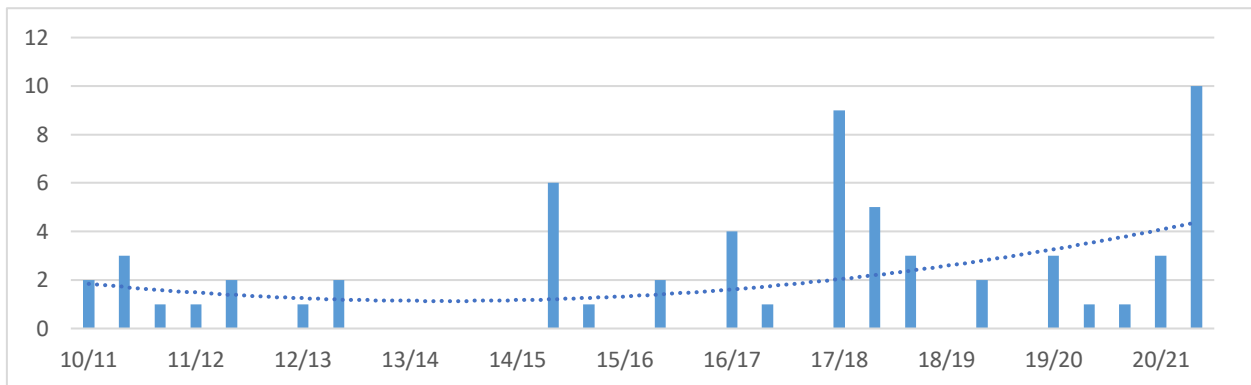
Dunnocks show a good average population which has improved slightly since the very severe conditions in the winters of 2010/11. Counts are higher in winter when there is less cover on hedges.

Robin



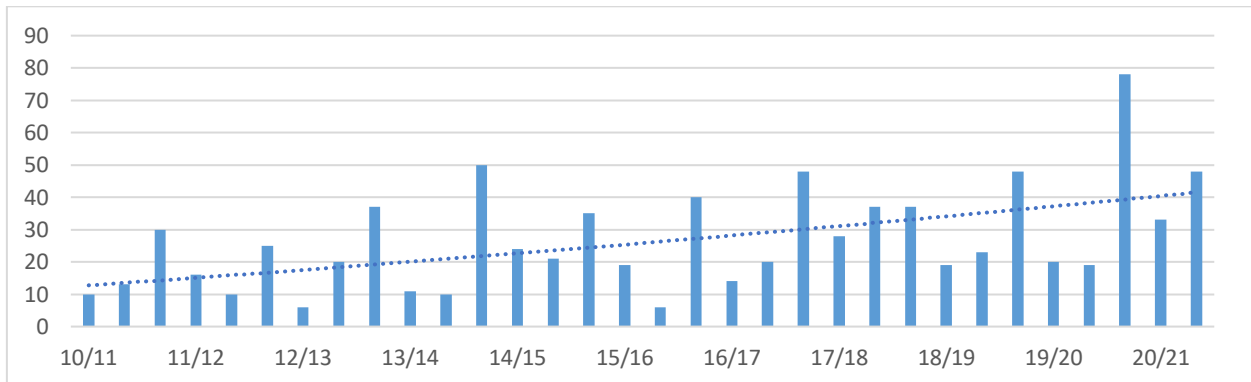
Robins are being recorded in gradually increasing numbers. Winter numbers will be affected by immigrants from the continent, in some years more than in others. Counts in winter are normally higher than in the breeding season since they are more vocal at this time.

Song Thrush



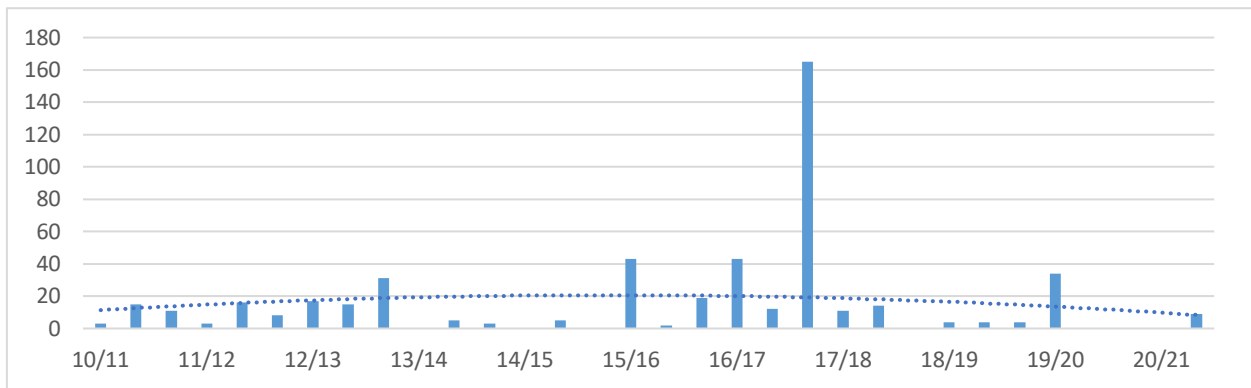
Very irregular counts during the winter period, they tend to be seen in more sheltered habitat such as in game plots and woodland rather than open arable land.

Blackbird



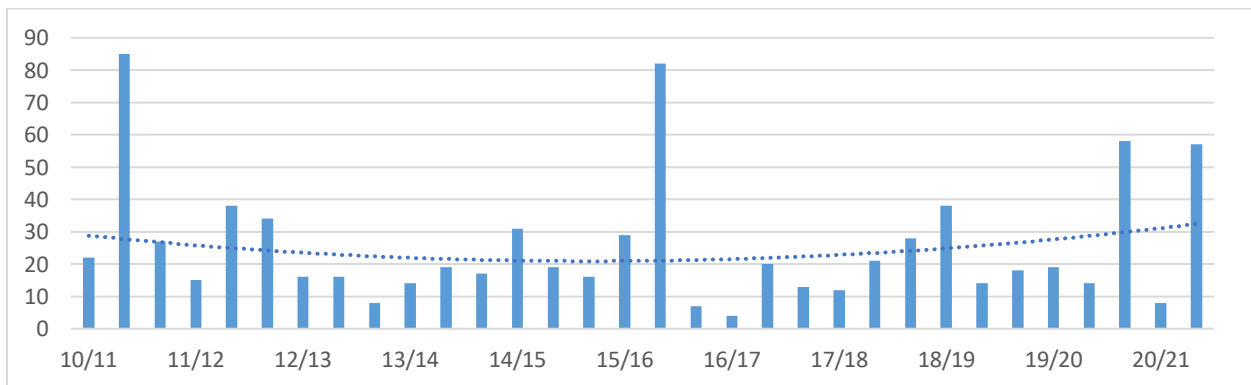
Numbers are apparently increasing and will be affected by winter immigrants. The first survey of the winter has always been the highest count when it is influenced by the arrival of large numbers of birds from the Continent. This is clearly shown on this graph.

Tree Sparrow



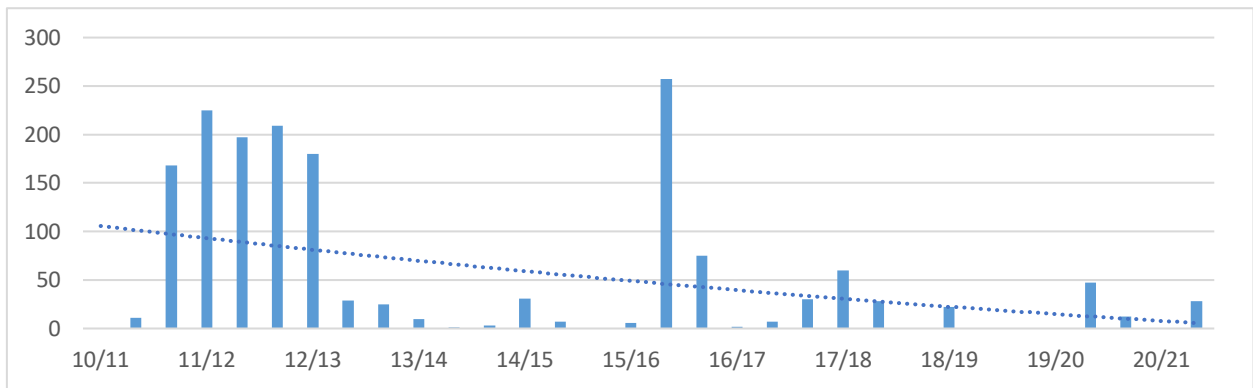
Winter counts are increased by immigrants from the Continent and Scandinavia, occasionally being recorded in large flocks. Only one of which appears on this graph.

Chaffinch

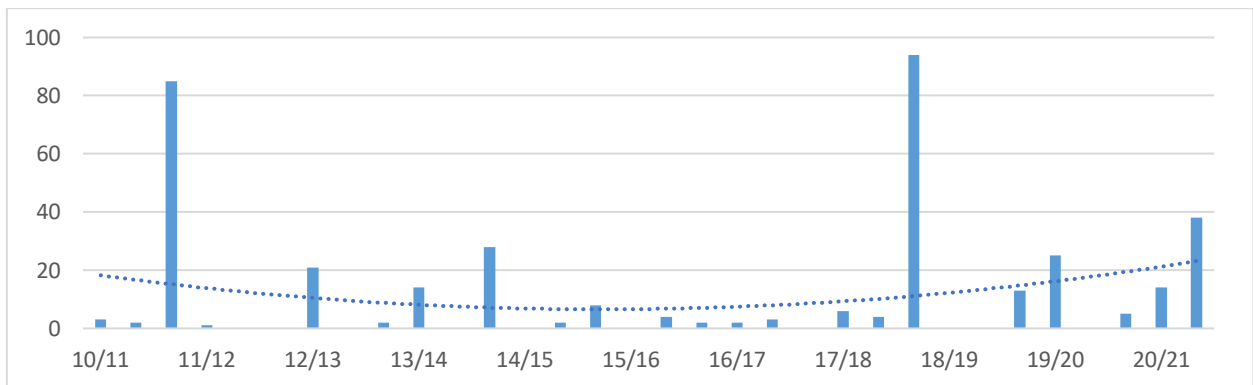


Flocking in winter, usually with other finches in variable numbers. This also applies to all the following Finches.

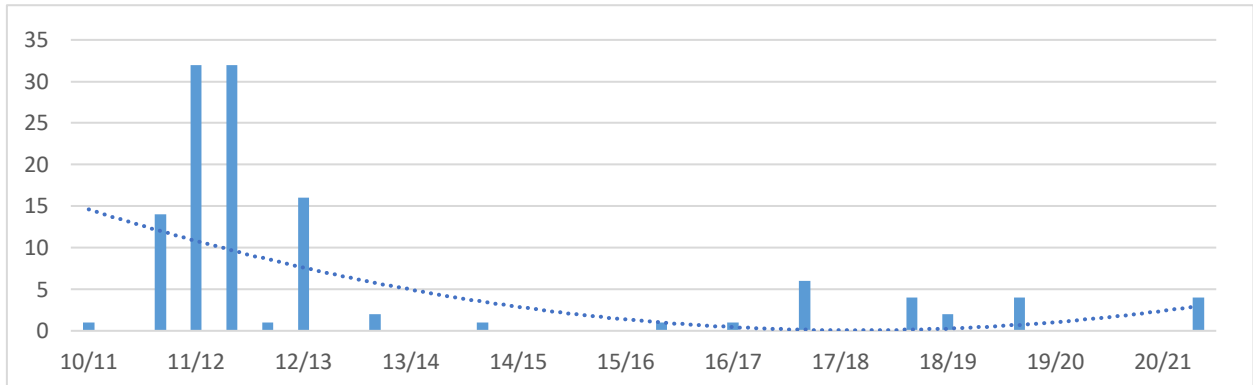
Linnet



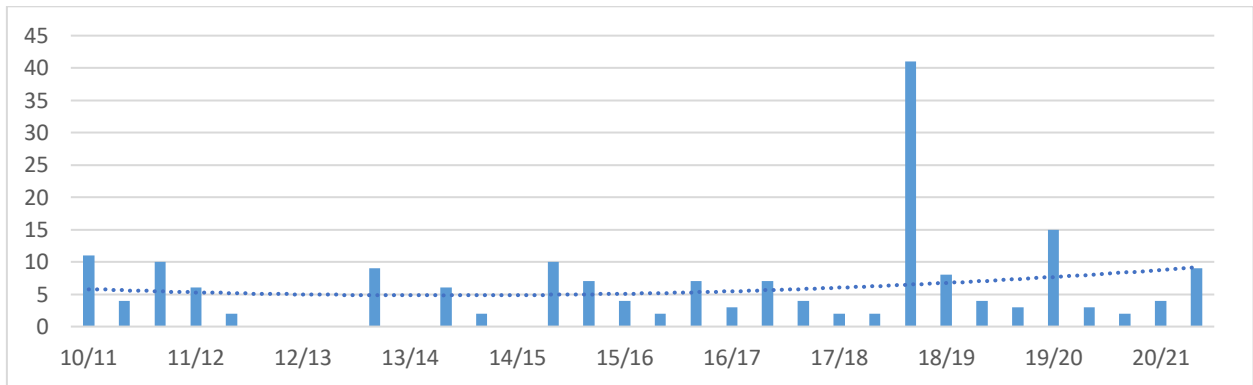
Goldfinch



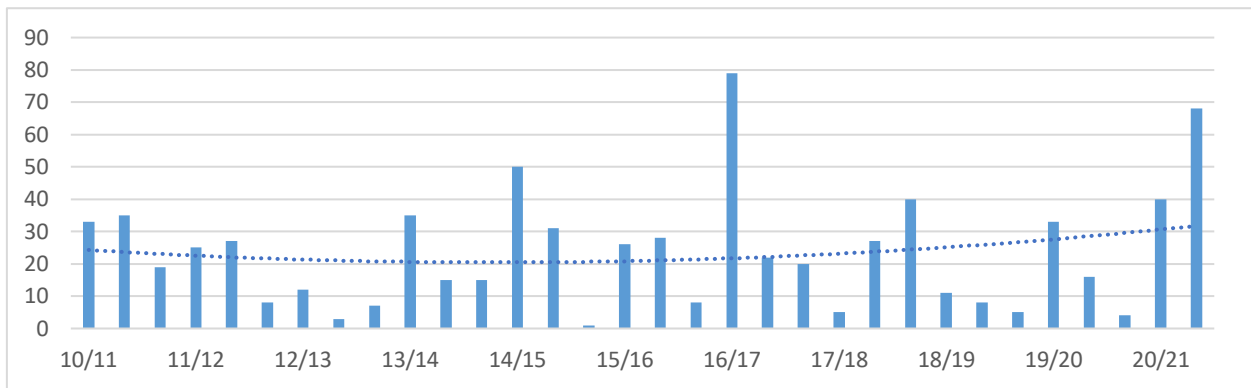
Greenfinch



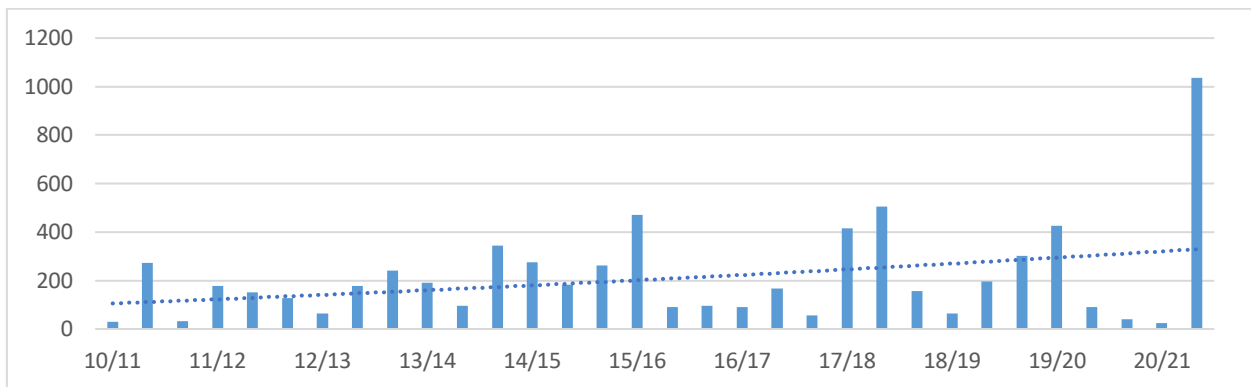
Reed Bunting



Yellowhammer

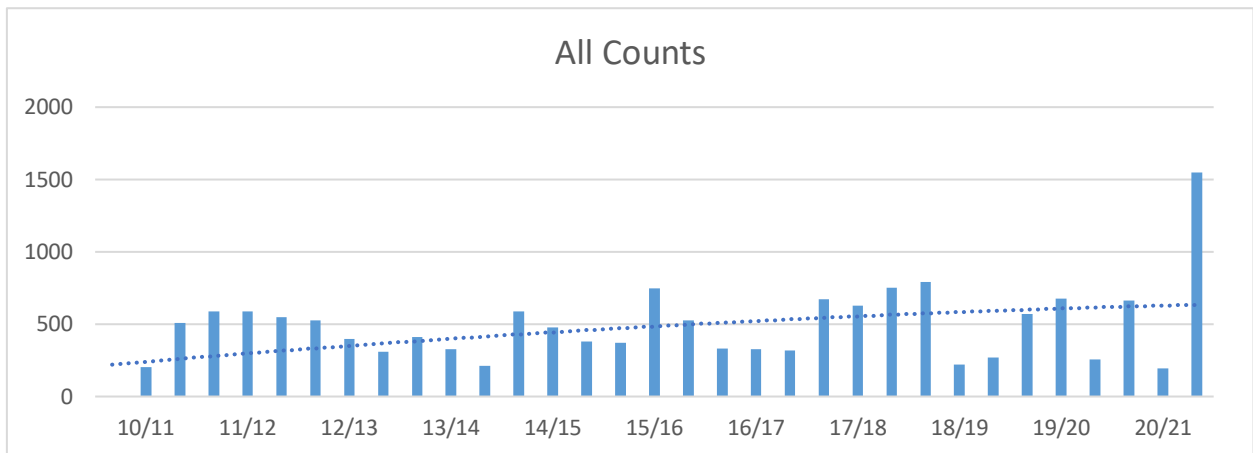


Woodpigeon



Winter numbers are increased by visiting birds from the Continent. The numbers arriving each winter depend to some extent on weather conditions on the Continent and in Scandinavia and the availability of food there. Crops of Oil Seed Rape are an attraction to Woodpigeons which can be recorded in very large numbers.

Total of All Winter Period Counts (Target Species)



Annual total counts are fairly even when averaged over the whole period of the surveys. The very high count of February 2021 is unusual, being caused by a huge number of Woodpigeons at Fieldhouse.

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 little value.

J.C. (July 2021)