

RATCHEUGH and SNABLEAZES WILD BIRD SURVEY.

REPORT FOR YEAR 2020/21.

These surveys have been carried out by members of the Alnwick Wildlife Group.

Aims of the survey

This survey is aimed at assessing the effects on the wild bird population made by Northumberland Estates' gamekeeping and farming 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 two 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 and area of land 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 in Nov. Jan. and Feb. and monthly during the breeding period from late April to June.

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 those populations, e.g. Sparrowhawk and Buzzard.

General Observations

Twenty-two 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 long term trends in population change 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 commenced to further encourage the Grey Partridge population. Predators are now actively controlled and extra feed, game plots 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.

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 in a similar area. 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 period for the survey must be the counts made during the breeding period, since numbers of wintering birds vary from one year to the next.

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.

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 three previous years has been used to fill the gap.

Target species graphs for the breeding periods to 2021

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. No counts were made during the breeding season of 2020 due to Covid 19 restrictions. In order to maintain a reasonable continuation in the data, an average of the previous three years records has been used to fill the gap.

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.

The UK National average changes in population are shown below each graph as an increase or decrease in percentages. These figures are based on the BTO Breeding Bird Survey. (Last updated in 2018)

A (The percentage change between 1995 – 2017)

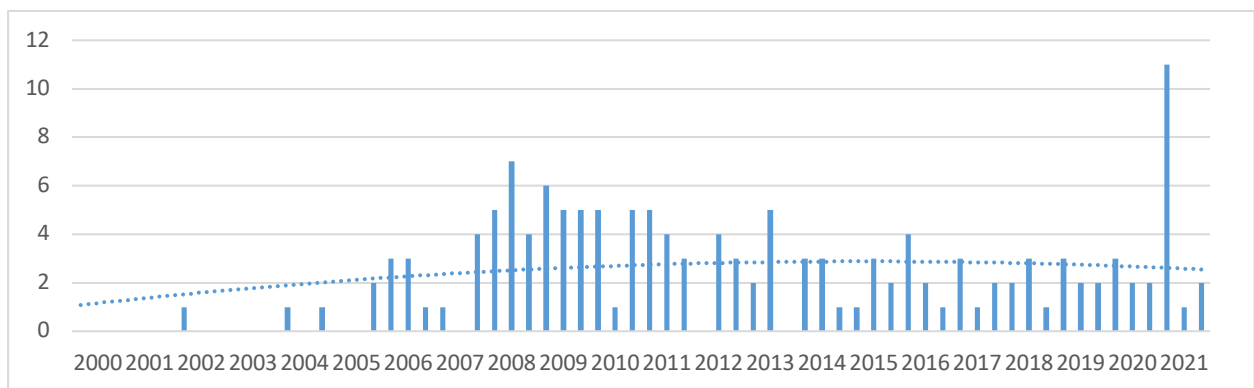
B (The estimated percentage change between 2017 – 2018)

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

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 or so and the population of many species can change in the short term.

The graphs that follow show the breeding period records for each of the target species, except for Sparrowhawk and Meadow Pipit, both having been recorded on very few occasions.

Buzzard



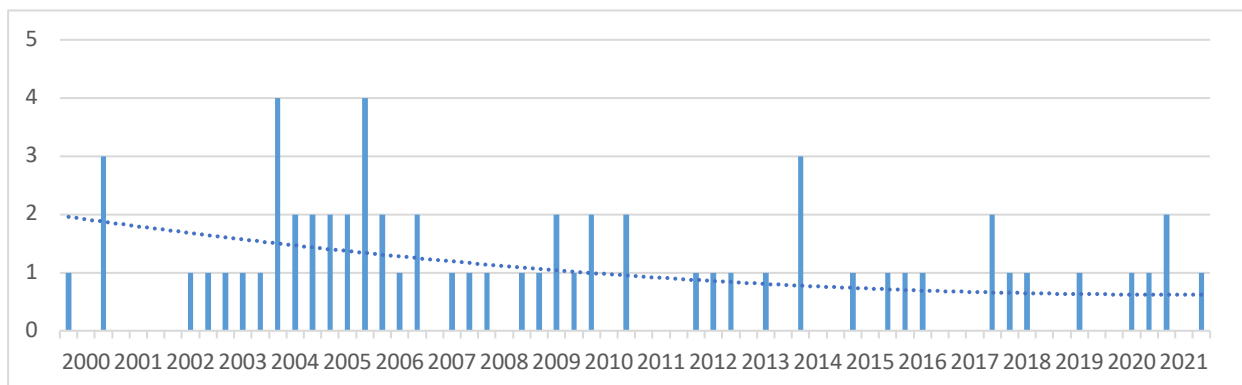
The Buzzard graph follows very closely the National trends. During that period of the survey, numbers have increased dramatically with movement from the west. Two territories were established within or very close to the survey area in 2006 and 2008 and have been occupied constantly since then.

Black listed

(A) +96%

(B) -3%

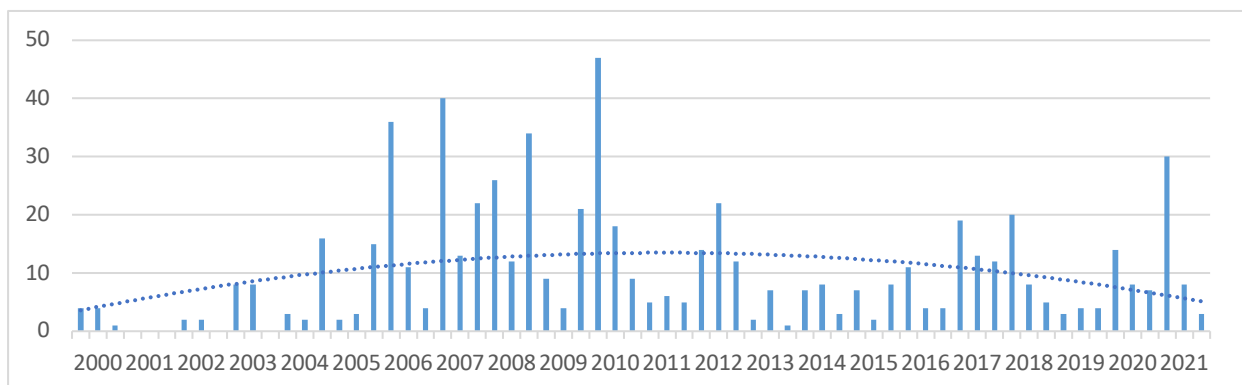
Kestrel



The small number of Kestrels recorded in the survey area shows little real change. National figures indicate a slow decline in numbers during the last few years which would agree with the survey figures. Intensive agriculture and the widespread use of rodenticides are mainly held to be responsible for the long-time gradual decline in Kestrels. In woodland areas the increase in Goshawks. Road kill is also claimed to be a common cause of losses.

Amber listed (A) -32% (B) +2%

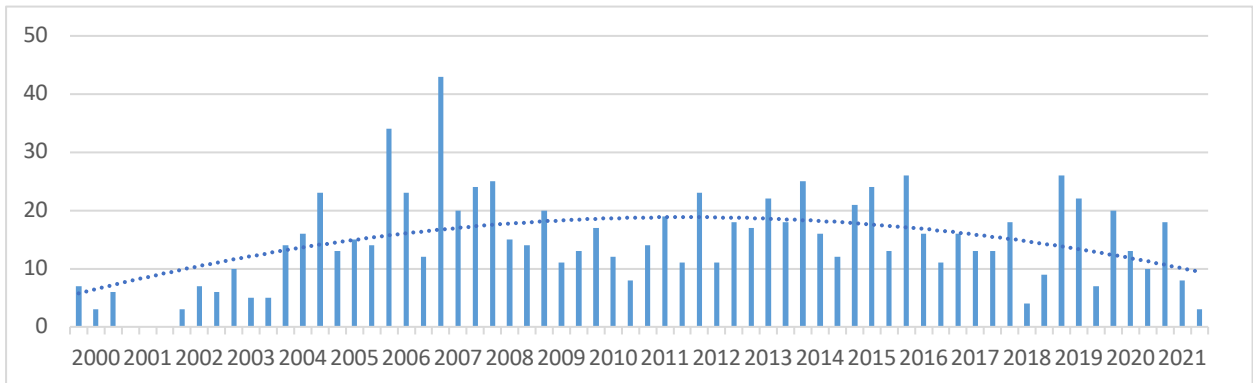
Grey Partridge



Higher counts in the North East coastal area, reported by NBA, can be attributed to the results of this Grey Partridge scheme. Ratcheugh and Snableazes farms are now seen as being the centre of the scheme, encouraging stock from here to populate the surrounding area. The hatching period this year was after the late frosts, which lasted into May and followed by a warm and dry period. This should have been the best start for young Partridges for several years. We do not have counts which include the fledgling birds.

Red listed (A) -63% (B) -6%

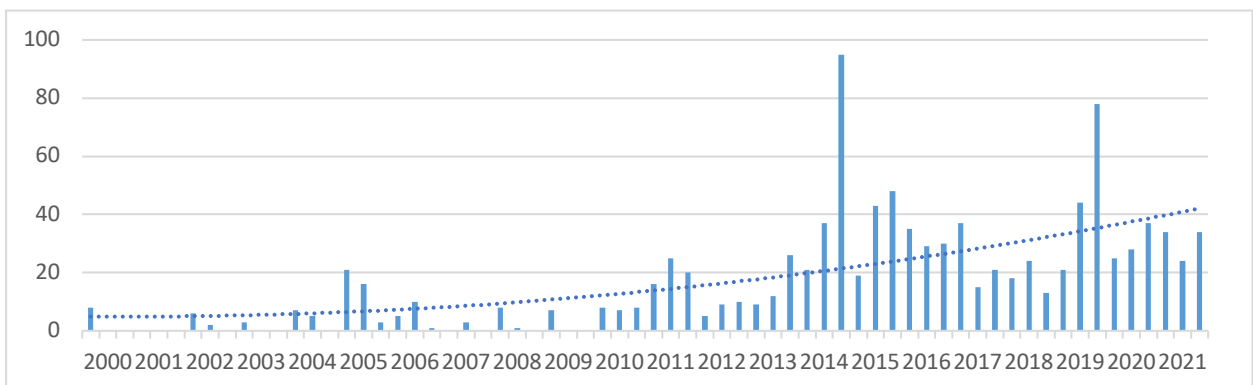
Pheasant



Little change from previous years. Although there are no releases of hand reared Pheasants at Ratcheugh and Snableazes, 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. There is a regular breeding population at R & which is sufficient to maintain the population.

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

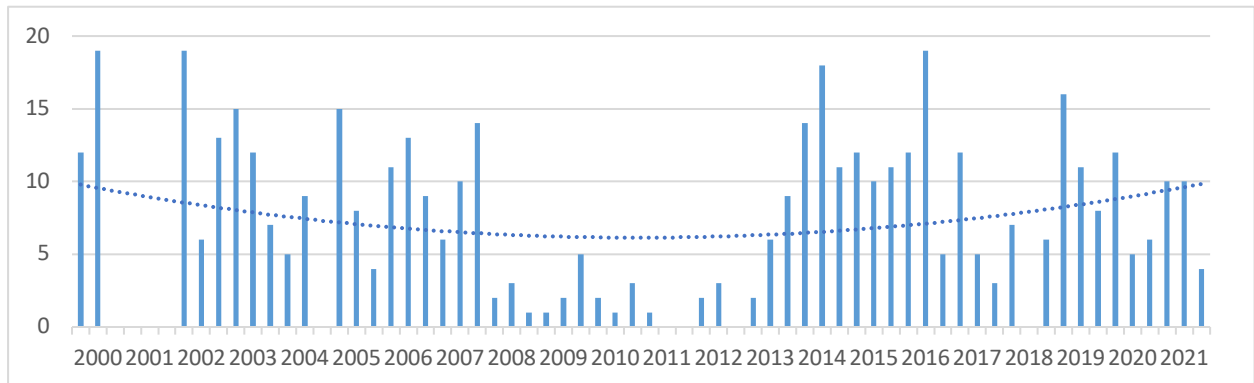
Lapwing



Changes in the annual rotation of crops which now include a large area of winter stubble or fallow ground, now provides excellent breeding habitat for Lapwings. The numbers are very high in comparison to other arable farms in the area, and the national averages. They follow the annual rotation from field to field, and these are not being cultivated until after the end of the breeding season. Birds were sitting on second broods at the time of the May survey.

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

Skylark



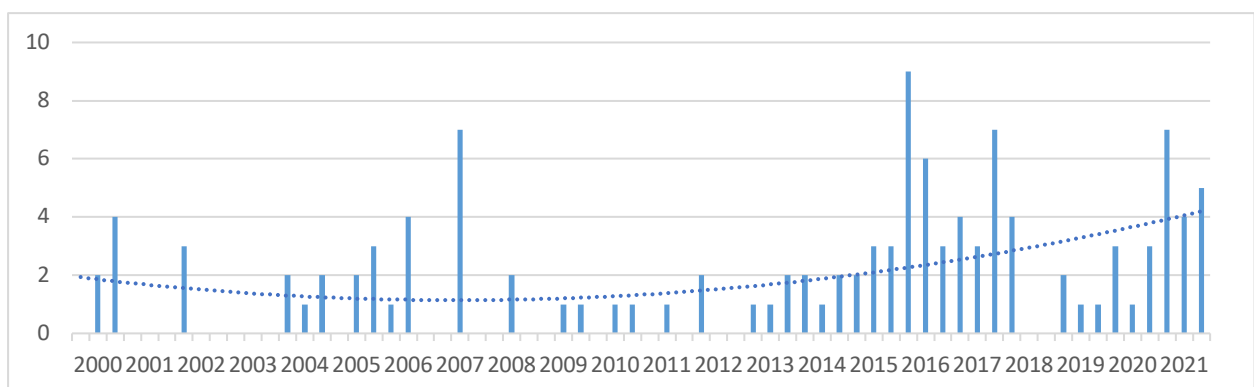
Conditions which suit Lapwings also favour Skylarks (BA. shows that most Skylark losses have occurred in Ireland.) (NBA shows more gains on the Northumbrian coastal area, than losses.) Although there has been a slight fall in numbers recorded lately, the population is still healthy and compares very well with the national averages.

Red listed

(A) -18%

(B) +3%

Wren



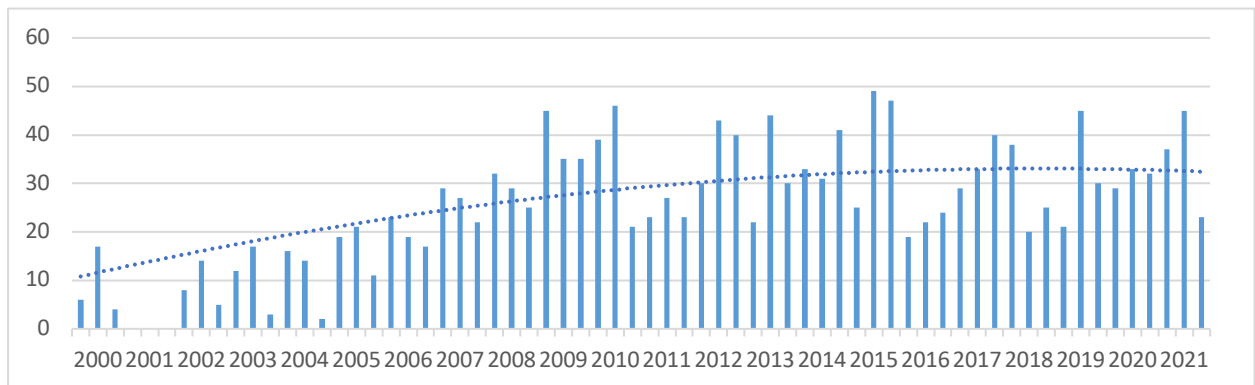
Wren numbers had slowly risen to their highest average in 2016/17 but a cold spell with some snow in the spring of 2018 appears to have reduced counts again. Since then numbers have increased again. Numbers can fluctuate so quickly that the atlases do not keep pace with the changes.

Black listed

(A) +34%

(B) -21%

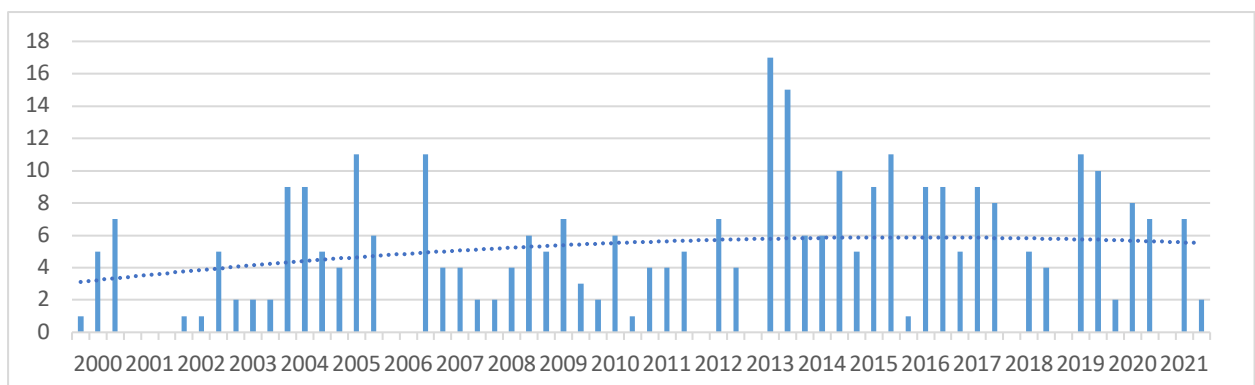
Blackbird



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

Black listed (A) +25% (B) -4%

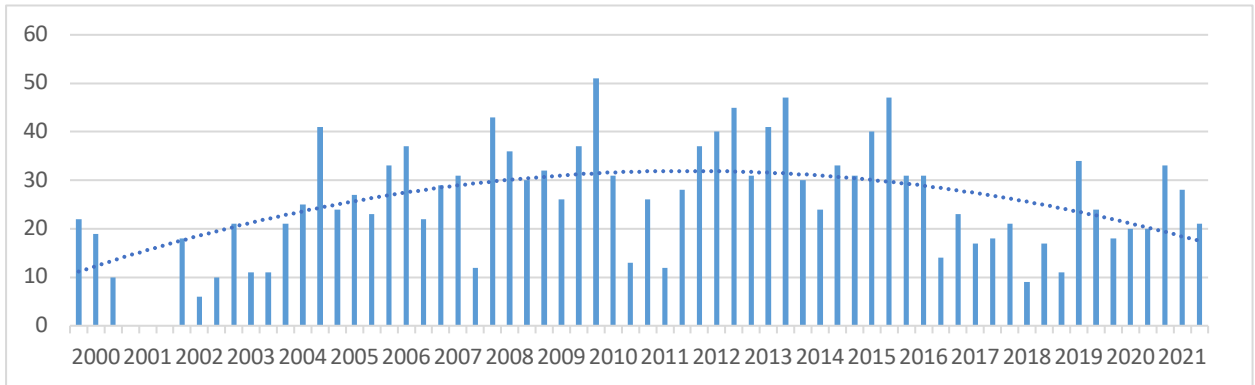
Whitethroat



Whitethroats made a late arrival this spring with none being recorded at the April survey. The graph shows that this is not unusual. Being migrants, they are subject to other extremes of weather or food shortage when in their African winter sites, south of the Sahara. This can result in reductions in the number returning to breed.

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

Chaffinch



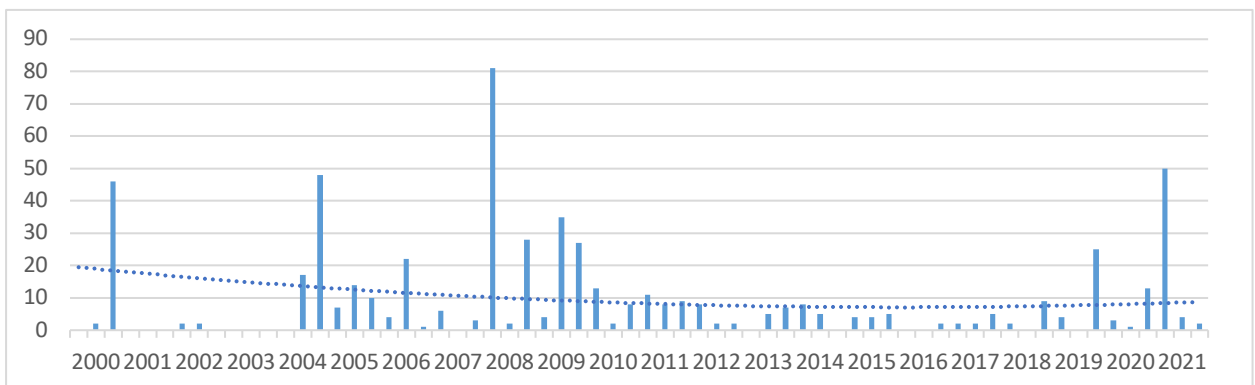
Chaffinches have shown a healthy increase since the start of the survey, but counts since 2017 have fallen slightly, which is reflected in the national figures but the population here still compares well with the national average.

Black listed

(A) -14%

(B) -2%

Linnet



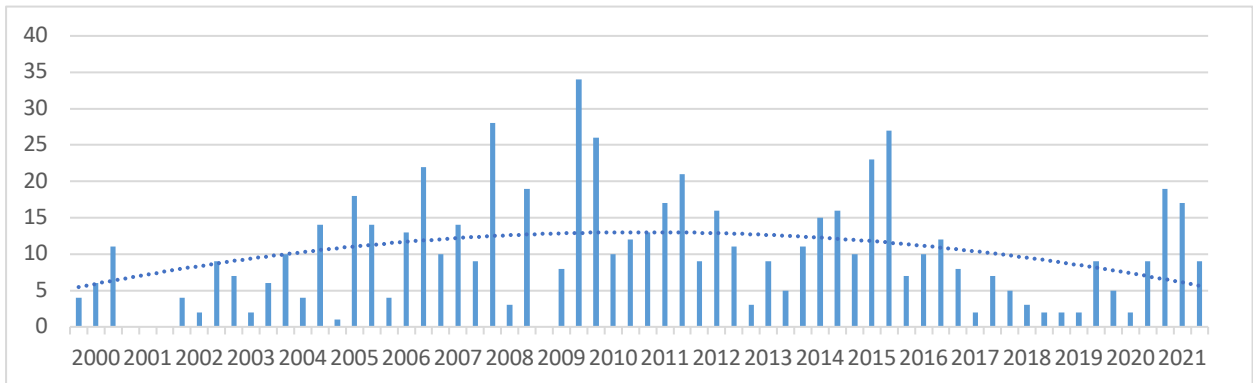
There are very few suitable breeding sites for Linnets in this survey area, since they prefer areas of denser bush, the most popular being Gorse thickets. Nationally they are in decline which would agree with the survey trend. Goldfinch are sometimes seen during the surveys still in flocks before breeding in April and again in June after breeding.

Red listed

(A) -17%

(B) -4%

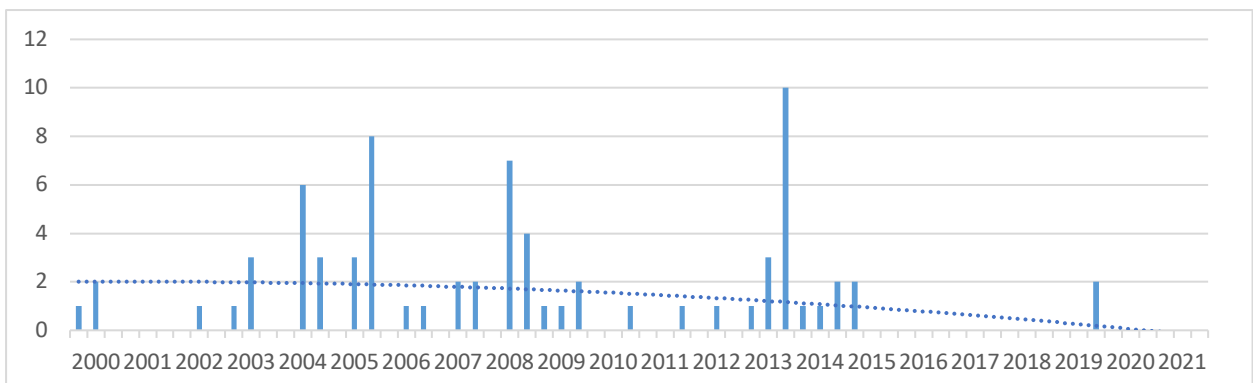
Goldfinch



Smaller counts in 2018 to 2020 have been followed by a healthy rise in 2021. In the north east, there has been a higher increase in numbers than most other parts of the country, a result which is not mirrored by these survey counts. (BA. They continue to extend their breeding range to the north of Scotland.)

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

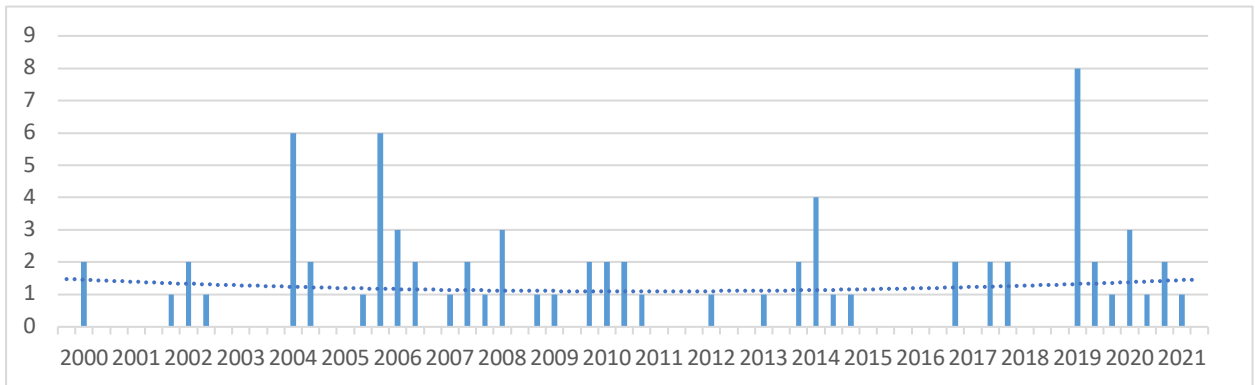
Greenfinch



Only one record of Greenfinch has been made between 2015 to 2021, which follows the national trend. Losses of birds are partly due to the disease trichomonosis. (NBA. This is another species increasingly found more in urban gardens.) National figures show a continued fall.

Black listed (A) -59% (B) -3%

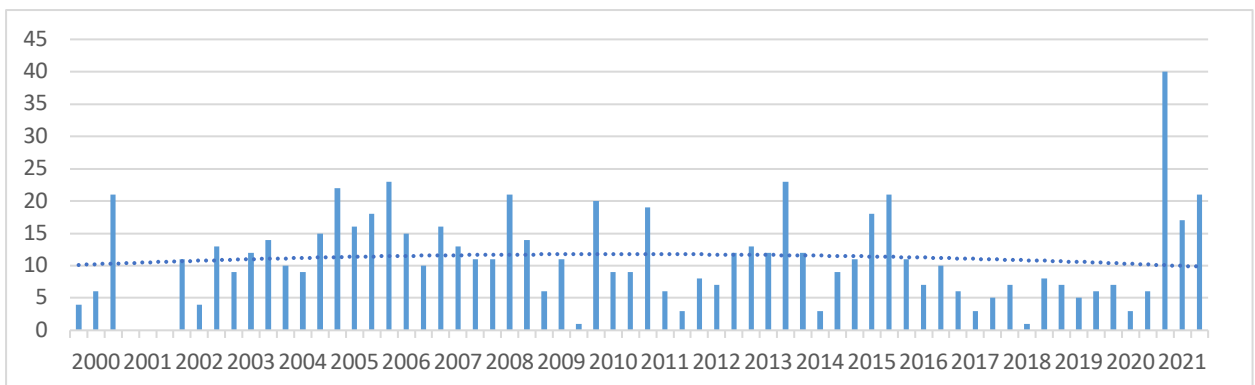
Reed Bunting



There is very limited scope for Reed Buntings to breed here with practically no suitable habitat for them. (NBA. More Reed Buntings are recorded adopting oil seed rape crops as an alternate breeding site.) This move has been reported from this survey area. There are only one or two breeding pairs normally recorded at the pond at Ratcheugh.

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

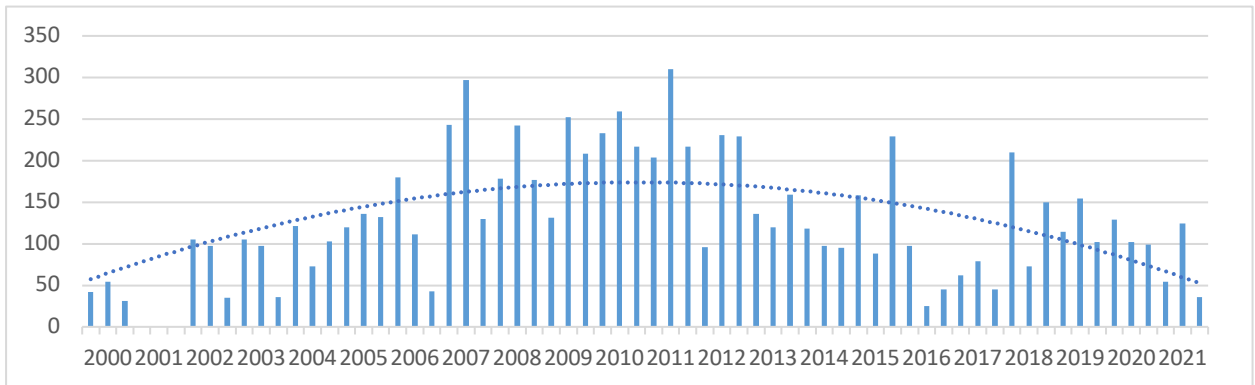
Yellowhammer



Yellowhammers seem to be holding their own on the east coast with most losses occurring on the west of the country. Numbers recorded in 2021 have been higher than the last few years and are higher than the average for the north east.

Red listed (A) -21% (B) -3%

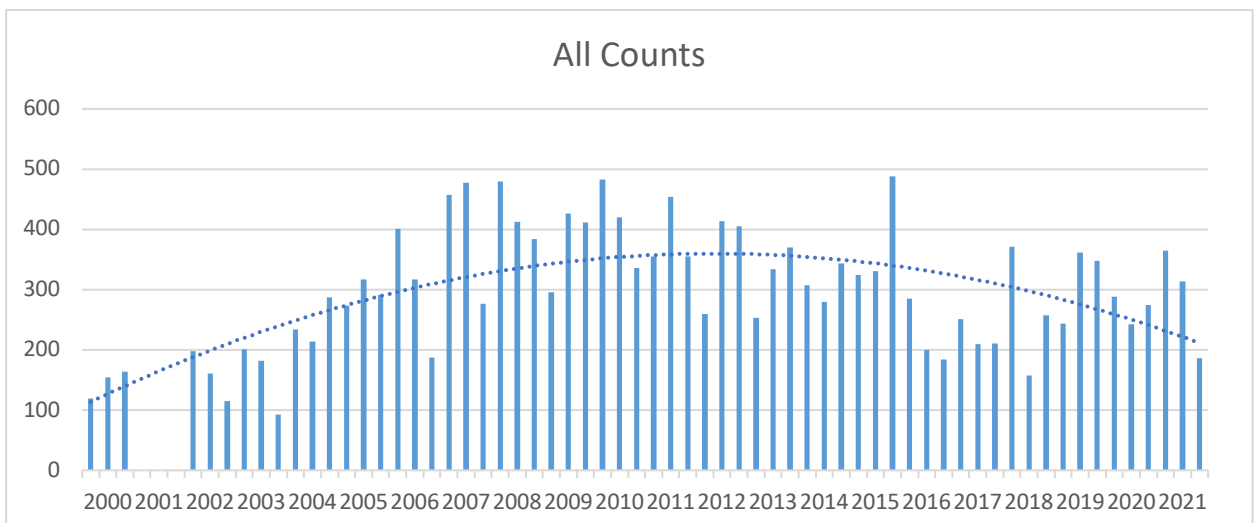
Woodpigeon



An average fall over the last few years is difficult to understand when the availability of food here is so high in both summer and winter. Bird scarers are in use here on oil seed rape crops, perhaps they are more effective than one would imagine.

Black listed (A) +36% (B) +8%

Total of All Breeding Period Counts (Target Species)



Total numbers often depend on high counts of some species such as Woodpigeon etc, which can be high enough in some years to affect the balance of this graph. There has been an average fall in total numbers recorded over the later years of the survey.

Conclusions from the breeding period counts for 2021.

There are considerable changes to the following tables.

The results of this survey compared with national averages shows that eight species have performed well: -

- Grey Partridge (Red listed)
- Lapwing (Red listed)
- Skylark (Red listed)
- Duncock (Amber listed)
- Blackbird.
- Chaffinch
- Song Thrush (Red listed)
- Yellowhammer (Red listed)
- Wren

The following have performed equally as well as the National averages: -

- Buzzard
- Robin
- Pheasant.
- Reed Bunting (Amber listed)
- Whitethroat

The following have not performed as well as the National averages.

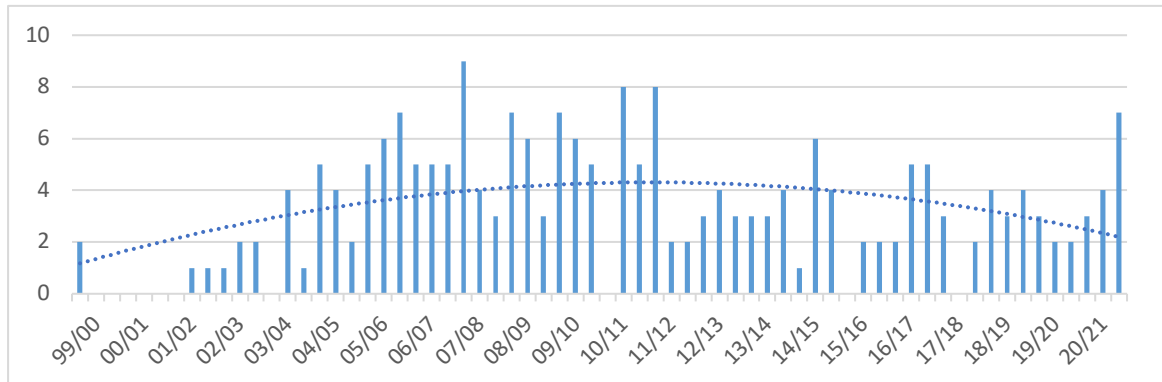
- Kestrel (Amber listed)
- Goldfinch
- Greenfinch
- Mistle Thrush (Red listed)
- Woodpigeon
- Linnet (Red listed)

It is good to note that all except one of the Red listed species included in the Target list are performing better the national averages and that the Mistle Thrush and Linnet performances are based only on a very small number of records.

Target species graphs for the winter period.

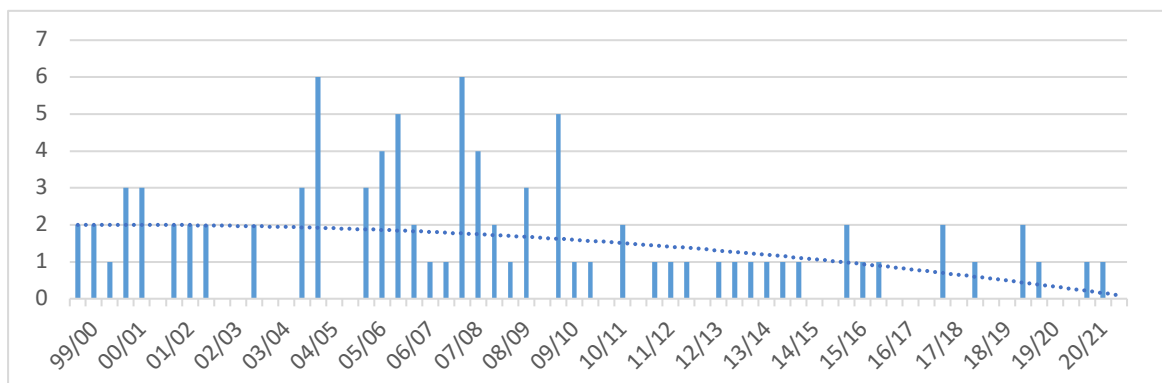
No figures are available from National sources to use as a comparison with the winter counts. It was not possible to make any counts in Jan. 2011 because of severe weather with a long period of complete snow cover, when disturbance to birds was considered to be detrimental.

Buzzard



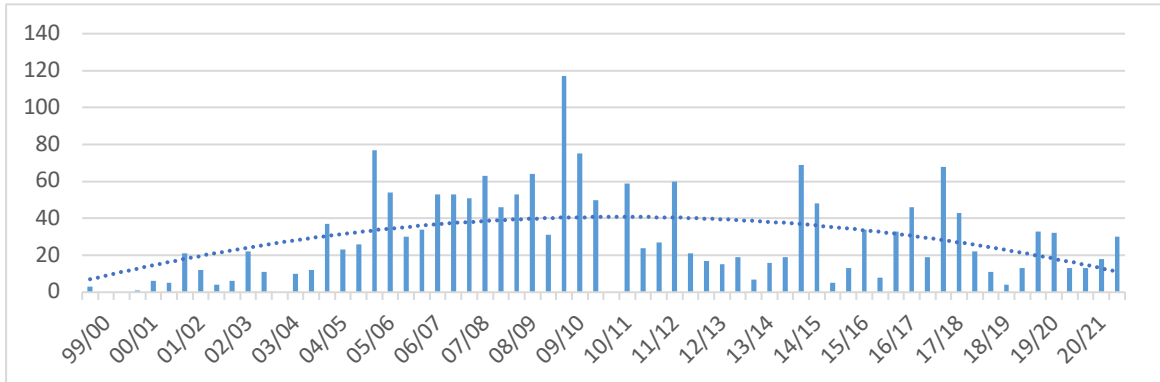
Average numbers for Buzzard remain fairly constant supporting the conclusion that the population has now settled at a sustainable level, after the huge build up in numbers from the west. Buzzards are a sedentary species with very little movement during the winter months.

Kestrel



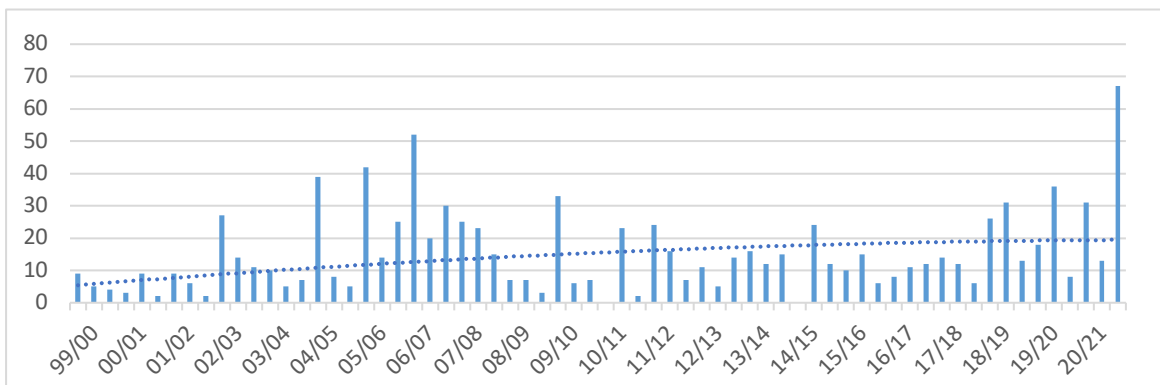
The graph, although based on small numbers, illustrates the continued fall in Kestrel numbers, no longer our commonest bird of prey. See the summer graph for more details.

Grey Partridge



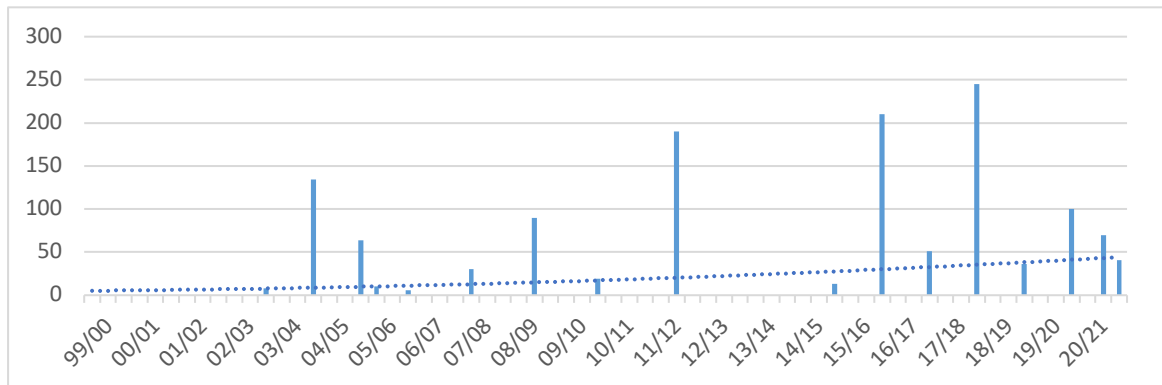
No shooting was carried out in the 2020/21 season due in part because of the Covid 19 regulations but also to maintain the breeding population on these two farms. In previous years numbers had been affected by the level of shooting.

Pheasant



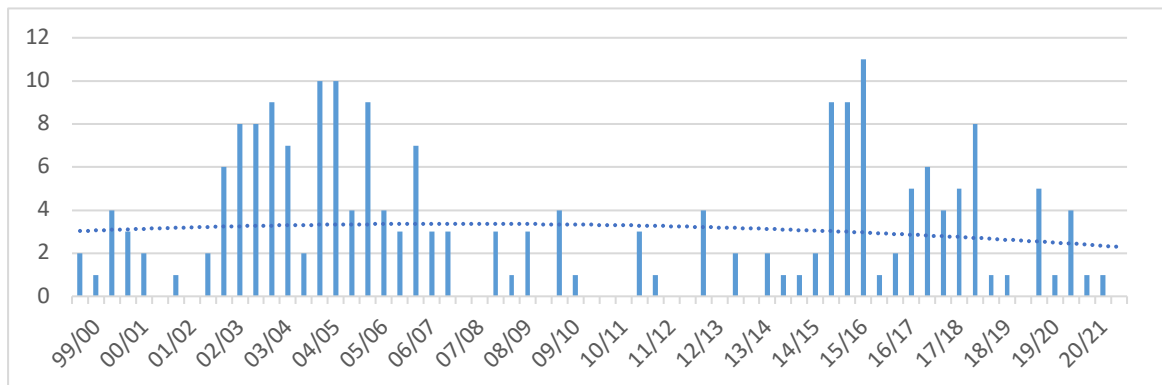
Little or no shooting in 2020/21 appears to have allowed the numbers of pheasants to have increased dramatically. It will be interesting to see what effect this has on numbers after the current breeding season.

Lapwing



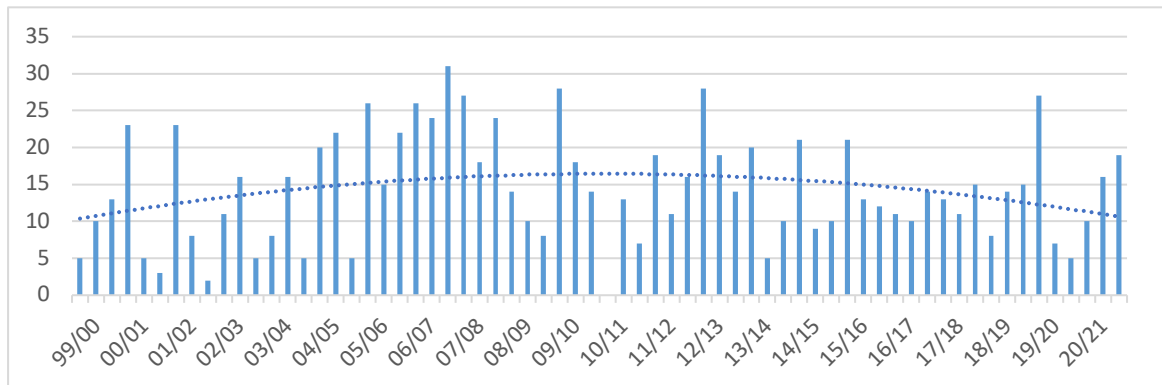
In winter Lapwings flock together and spend most of their time feeding at the coast, inland waters or further south, to be replaced by movements from the north. In severe weather they will move to more sheltered areas a little way from the coast as is illustrated by the occasional groups record at Ratcheugh,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

Wren



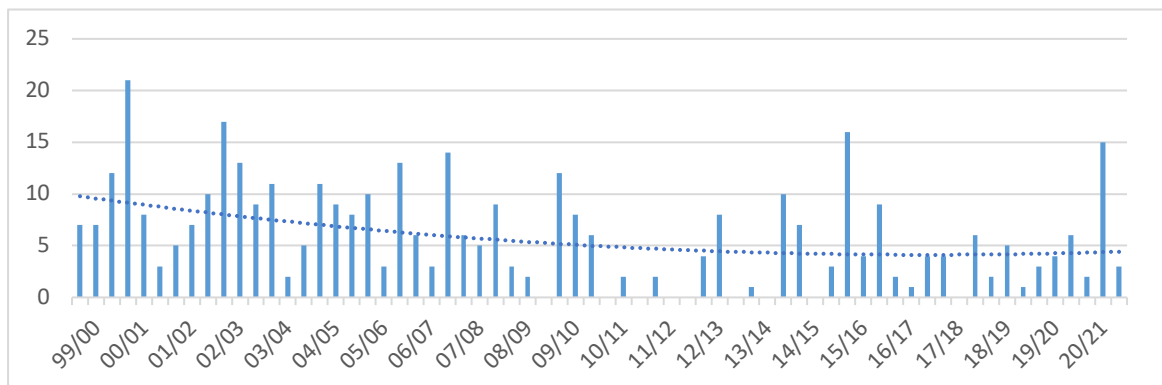
Increased counts of Wrens in 2016 to 2018 seemed to indicate that the population was again building up but 2019 produced very low numbers once again. Only one or none were recorded at each visit last winter of 2020/21. This does not seem to agree with the counts made during the breeding period of 2021, when counts have been high.

Dunnock



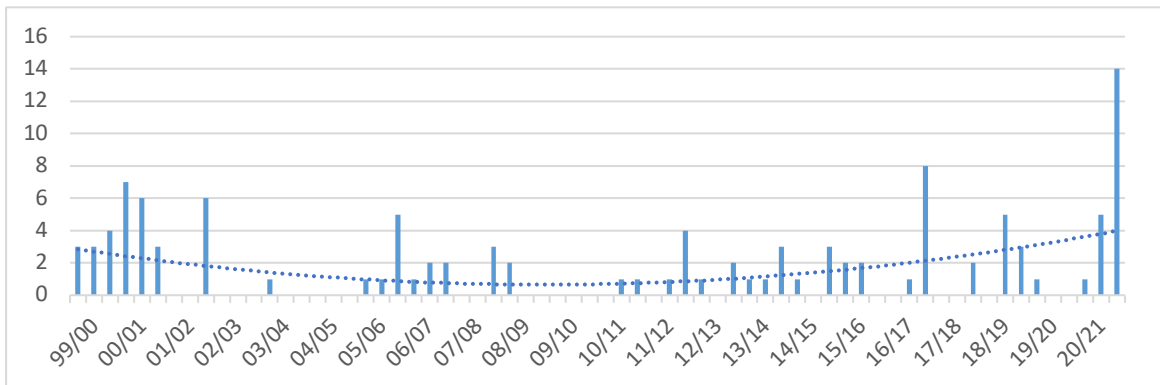
The winter graph for Dunnocks would appear to be maintaining a constant population during the last few years. Both the breeding period and winter graphs show the effect of severe winter conditions in 2010/11 on this species. They have returned to more normal counts very quickly in the following years.

Robin



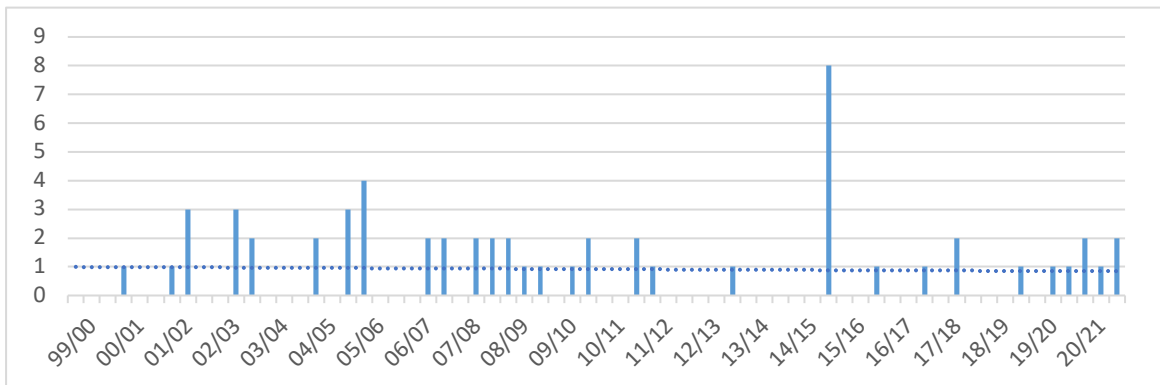
Counts of robins tend to be very erratic. Apart from singing birds they can be difficult to spot and are more likely to be found in higher numbers in woodland or urban gardens. Winter populations are bolstered by migrants from northern UK or Europe. Here again the effects of severe winter weather in 2010/11 are seen with only a slow increase in counts in the following years. This situation seems to agree with the Breeding period chart.

Song Thrush



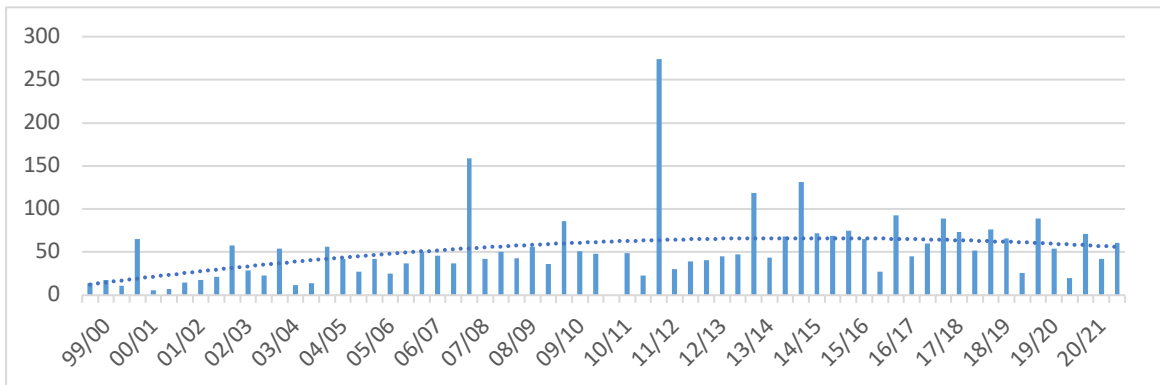
Winter numbers may have been increased by an influx of migrants from northern Europe, but counts have been very erratic during the winter period. They appear to prefer more sheltered areas of woodland or game plots, than the open arable fields.

Mistle Thrush



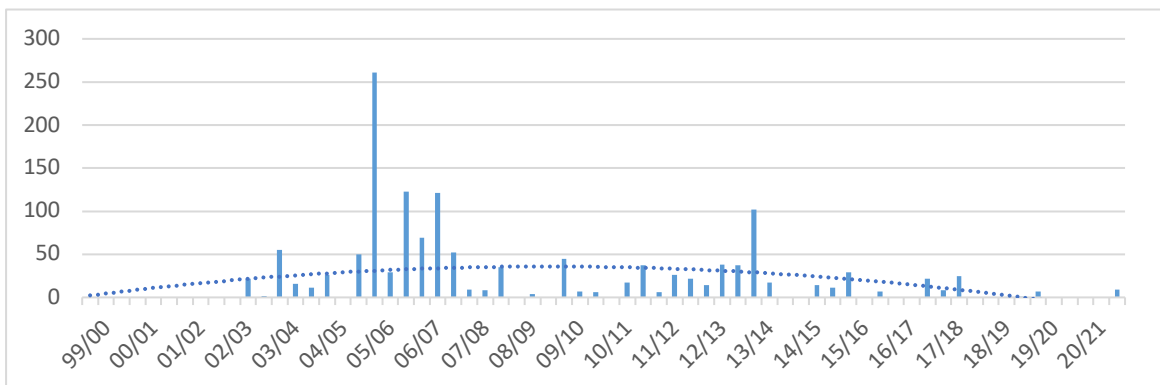
The one pair of Mistle Thrush recorded here is not enough to produce figures which could indicate any population trend. The record of eight birds in Feb. of 2015 was probably of one family group.

Blackbird



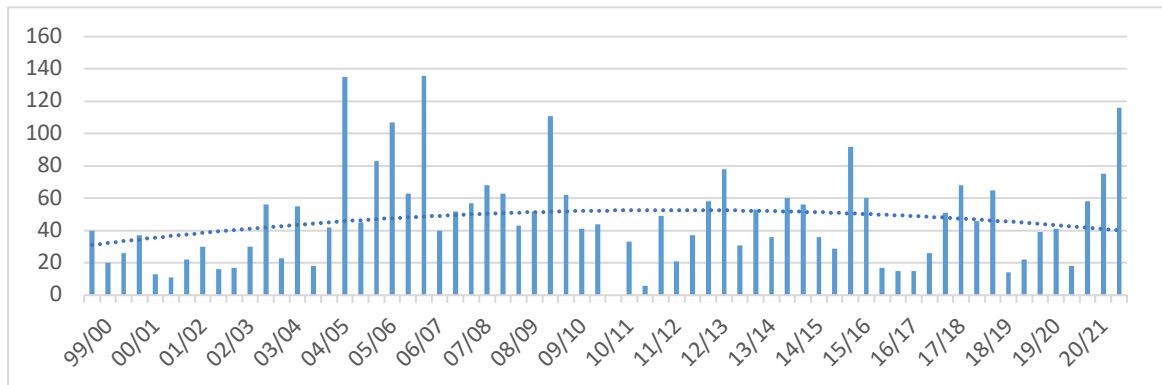
A continuing increase in Blackbird numbers arriving here in the winter. The first count of most years clearly shows a much higher number of birds arriving from Europe and being recorded here in November, before they become more widely scattered throughout the rest of the country. The very high counts would indicate very recent arrival of vast numbers of them as winter visitors .

Tree Sparrow



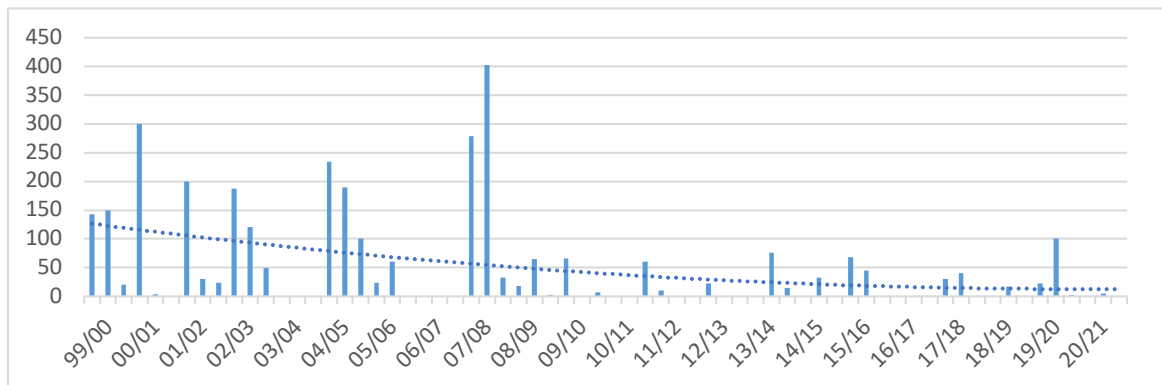
As for other finches in the winter the graph illustrates how they were concentrated into the few areas of available feed in the 2005/7 period, after which more feed areas were provided and finch flocks became more fragmented and more widely spread and often not on the survey route. The number of Tree 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. Tree Sparrows in winter are more widely reported from garden feeding stations.

Chaffinch



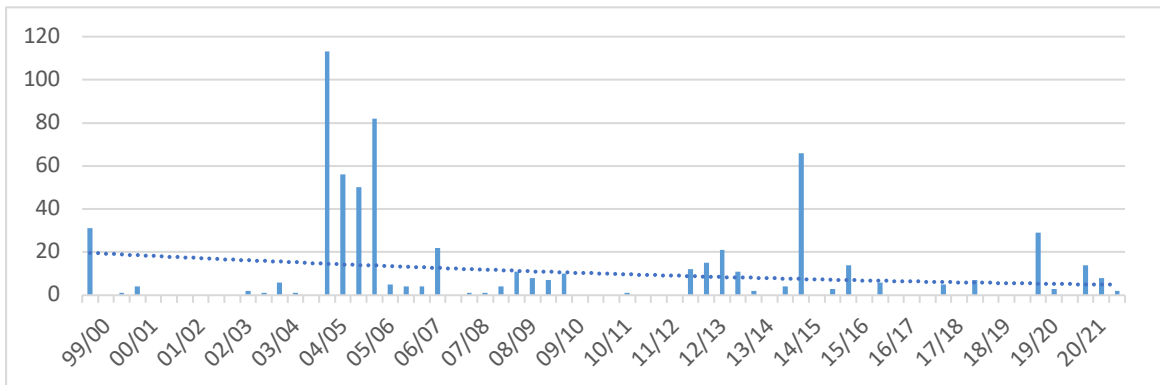
The commonest of the Finch family. In winter most often seen in mixed groups with other finches, gathering where food is available.

Linnet



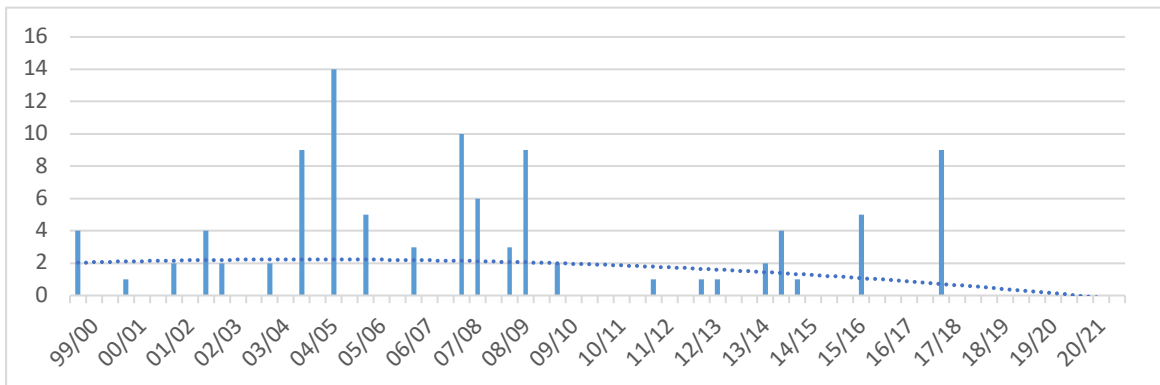
In winter Linnets tend to move and feed in larger flocks and are therefore seen either in large numbers or not at all. The Linnet graph follows the same pattern as other finches. Most Linnets wintering with us are from northern UK or Europe and numbers can vary from year to year with fluctuating conditions.

Goldfinch



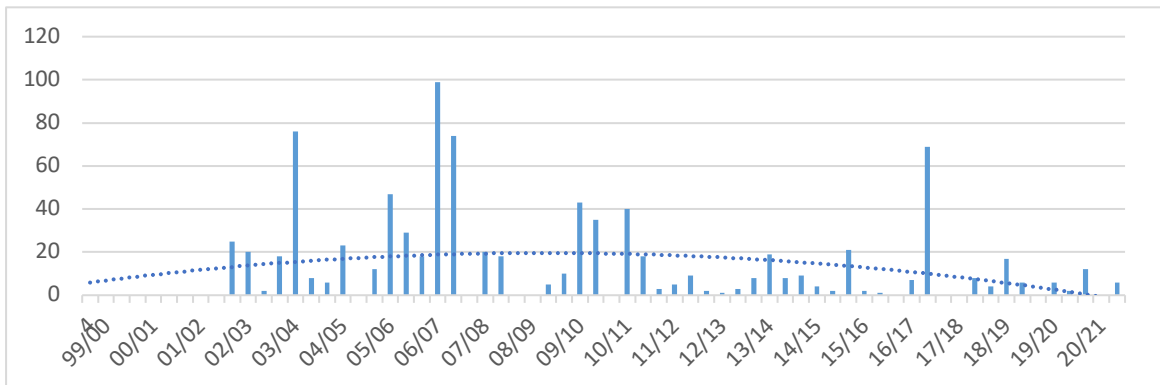
The Goldfinch graph again follows the same trend as other finches in winter. Mixing with other Finches, where feed is available. At Ratcheugh and Snableazes there is a wide choice of game plots for this.

Greenfinch



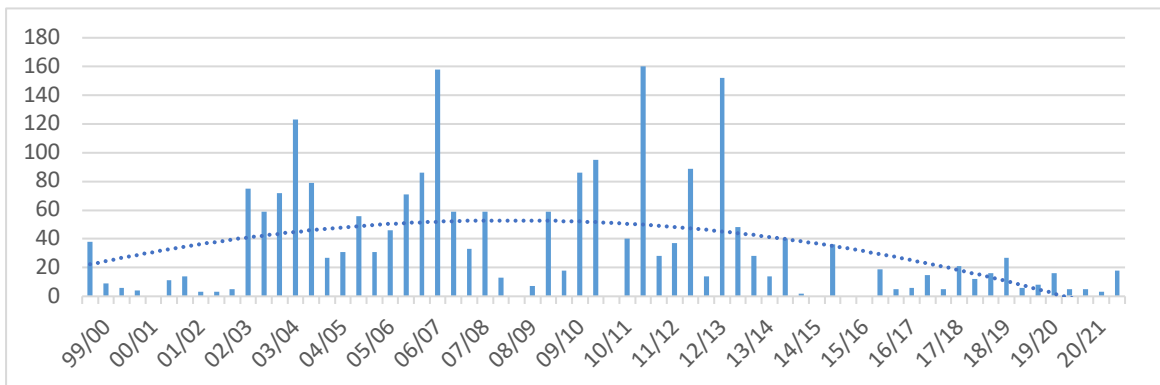
Greenfinches have not been recorded in large numbers. They tend to remain in families or in small groups during the winter. Despite the small numbers seen the trend line still follows the same pattern as other finches. Garden bird counts show good numbers of Greenfinches in more urban areas.

Reed Bunting



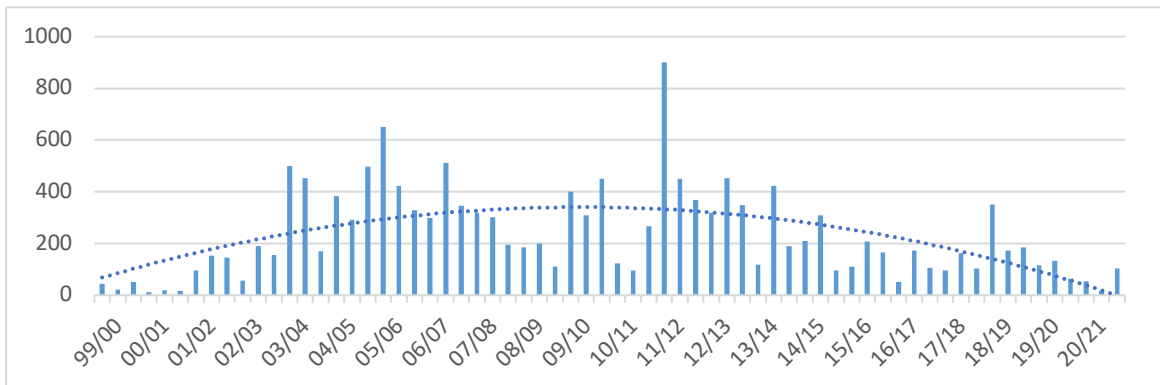
Occasionally seen in larger groups in winter but more often in smaller numbers mixed with flocks with other finches. Again, showing a similar trend line to other finches in the survey area.

Yellowhammer



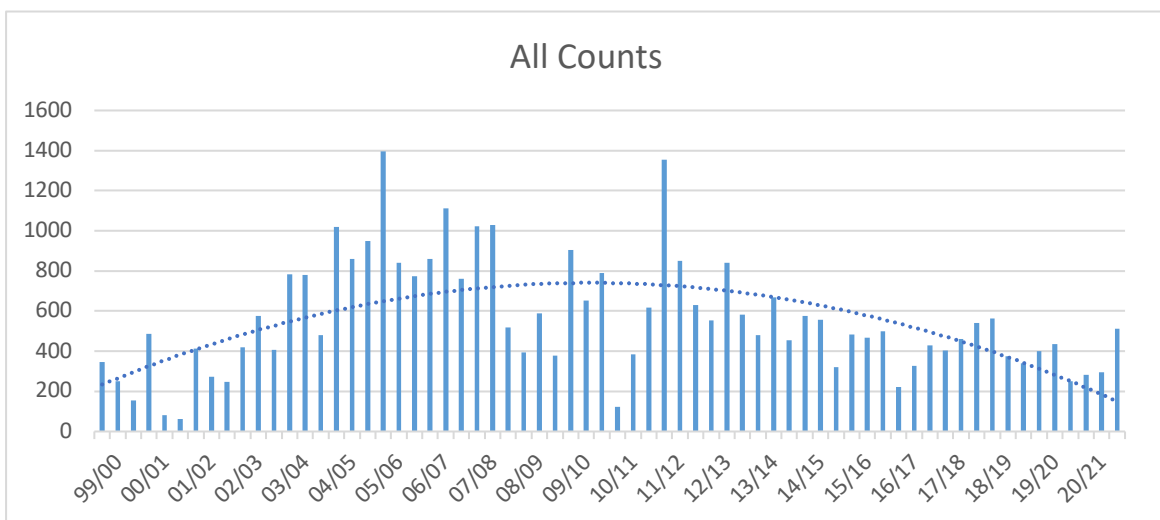
One of our endangered species which has previously been recorded at Ratcheugh and Snableazes in healthy numbers, and sometimes in quite large flocks. Since 2014 winter counts have been much lower, following the trend of the other finches.

Woodpigeon



Woodpigeon compete with Game Birds for the feed which the Estate provides. Numbers increased in the earlier years of the survey but have since been reduced. This may be explained by a reduction in the acreage of Oil Seed Rape being grown here. 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.

Total of All Winter Counts (Target Species)



There is an obvious drop in the total of birds being seen in the winter. This may be partly explained by the changes in the feeding pattern of most of the Finch family and the reduction of Woodpigeon numbers.

Conclusions Based on Winter Counts

The main reason for the apparent fall in numbers in the winter period can be traced to the reduced number of the Finch family being recorded. As explained, the extended areas of game crops planted has given these species a more widespread winter habitat, much of which has been outside the original routes taken by the survey.

Another factor which is making itself felt is the increased efficiency of modern combine harvesters in the reduction of lost grain at harvest. This, together with the effect of herbicides, leaves stubble fields with very little for birds to glean. It is, of course, noted that the first twelve metre margins of some cereal crops, have not had any weed control at Ratcheugh or Snableazes.

JC. July 2021