

ALNWICK WILDLIFE GROUP

NORTHUMBERLAND ESTATES BIRD SURVEY

REPORT FOR APRIL 2021 – FEBRUARY 2022

This survey is carried out by members of the Alnwick Wildlife Group

About this Report

No surveys were carried out during the breeding season of 2020 due to Coronavirus restrictions. In order to produce realistic graphs, the records for the three previous years have been averaged and used to fill this gap in our data. An additional species in this report is the Cuckoo. In answer to the many queries regarding the very small numbers of them being heard, a graph has been prepared which is included with the other Target Species.

Aims of the Survey

The basic aim is to attempt to measure the effects of Northumberland Estates' management on the wild bird population in the area of the survey, also to record any other points of interest which the survey may reveal about the local wildlife.

Areas of the Survey

The survey is taking place on four areas where Northumberland Estates are attempting to increase the population of Red Grouse to a point where some sustainable shooting is possible. One other area is leased for private shooting and is under different management. These areas are: -

Post Office Pylon
Black Lough
Alnwick Moor
Hulne Moor
Kimmer Lough (private shooting)

All these areas are on the Fell Sandstone ridge, which runs roughly in a semi-circle round the base of the Cheviots. All except the Kimmer Lough rise to about 250 metres and have a typical upland vegetation of heather on shallow peat but there are some areas of Blanket Bog with a depth of peat at over 40cm, where heather burning should no longer be carried out. There is also a wide variety of other habitats. The average size of each area is approximately 120 hectares. The Estates management has been mainly heather burning to improve its feeding value for Red Grouse and suitability for breeding cover. More intensive control of some predators is carried out, improved water availability for dry periods and provision of limestone grit etc. Hulne and Alnwick Moors form the area of highest Grouse population at present, followed by the Post Office Pylon which is approx. one mile away and the Black Lough at two miles. Here there are only one or two pairs of breeding Red Grouse but it is hoped that the numbers will increase. Kimmer Lough is more distant and at a lower level. The shooting here is let and the management of the moor is less intensive. Few Red Grouse have been recorded.

Methodology of the Survey

The five sites are normally visited five times annually, three during the breeding season and twice in the winter. All birds are recorded but a small number have been selected as the "target species" which are those more commonly found in these areas and most likely to be affected by the Estate management. In an attempt to produce comparable results specific routes are used at each visit and approximately the same time spent there. Visits are made when weather is reasonable since recording is impossible in extreme weather.

Analysis of Data

The counts of the target species from each area are totalled and graphs produced from these results. To achieve the aims of the survey a comparison with population counts over a larger area must be made. An attempt is made to compare our figures with UK national averages produced by BTO from their annual Breeding Bird Surveys. National figures can often be misleading when used as a direct comparison in any one local area and these facts have to be taken into consideration when reviewing the results. BTO also produce some figures for the North East of England but this is by no means a complete list and only covers the period between 1995 and 2017. The "Bird Atlas" published by the British Trust for Ornithology also gives very useful information when comparing local trends in population over the ten-year period prior to 2011 when the last Atlas was produced but is becoming less relevant as time passes. The more recently published "Northumbria Bird Atlas" from the Northumbria and Tyneside Bird Club also provides much useful and more local information. Last produced in 2015 it is also becoming out-dated.

The numbers of some species can vary so much during the ten-year periods between National surveys that the results can be very misleading. A more accurate picture can be obtained from annual surveys such as this and the BTO Breeding Bird Survey which are made annually.

There are many factors affecting bird populations. Weather is easily shown to be the most important. Periods of severe winter conditions lead to starvation, especially in those species more dependent on insects for food. Very dry periods also affect insect development and can create a shortage for the species which are completely dependent on them (e.g., Wrens). The effects of the winter periods on some species between 2010/11, when there were two month-long periods with complete snow cover as well as low temperatures, can be clearly seen on the graphs. Late and wet breeding seasons also have had a depressing effect on some species. It is interesting to see how populations may change with improving weather conditions.

It is accepted that the populations of many of our bird species have fallen in recent years. The probable reasons are given as damaging agricultural practices, loss of habitat, global warming, etc. It may be that any of the target species in this survey which has maintained its numbers over a period of years could be claimed as a success within the scope of this survey.

Botanical List

The vegetation list for the five areas included in the NEBS surveys is now presented as a separate "NEBS Plant Records" item and can be found along with the results of other surveys in the "Archive" pages of the Alnwick Wildlife Group web site. (alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk)

Breeding Period Results for Target Species

Falling populations of many British birds in recent years have resulted in the grouping of species into three bands: -

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

BTO National figures give: -

(A) A long-term trend as a % rise or fall over the period 1995-2017

(B) A Breeding Bird Survey trend as an estimated average % rise or fall over the period 2017-2018

BTO North East figures give: -

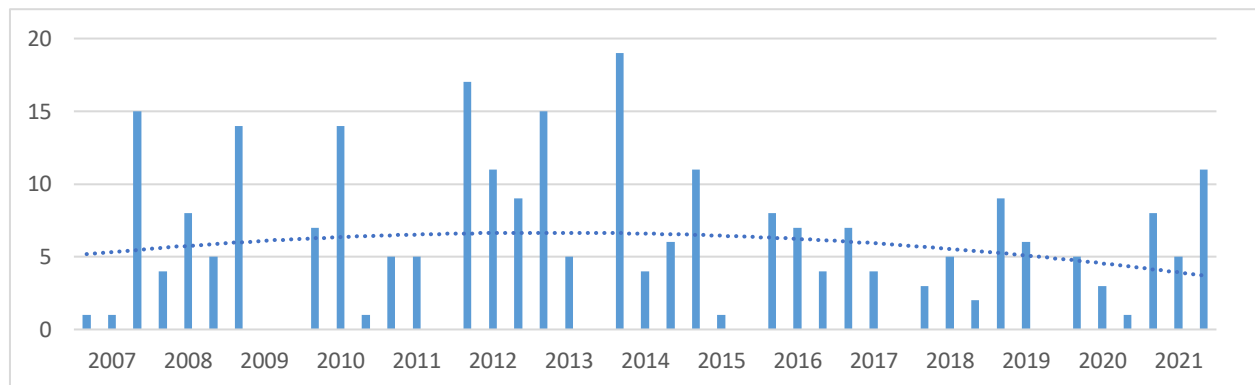
(C) A long-term trend as a % rise or fall over the period 1995-2017

Please note that these are the latest complete figures published by BTO, due to the Covid pandemic, and are approx. three years behind our own counts.

Information taken from the BTO National Bird Atlas is shown as “**(BA)**” and from the Northumbria Bird Atlas as “**(NBA)**”. These figures and the altered colour classifications are given along with the graph for each of the target species.

The graphs that follow show the breeding period records for each of the target species.

Mallard



Mallard have been recorded in very irregular numbers, which may include young birds at some counts and therefore may not give a true picture of their breeding status but it would now seem that there has been a gradual decrease in counts, especially in the last four years of the survey. Both the (BA) and (NBA) indicate a very gradual increase in numbers over a long period, but a sharp decrease over the last four years, which would appear to agree with our survey results. It is difficult to understand why, in most years, the count made in the June visit is most often the lowest.

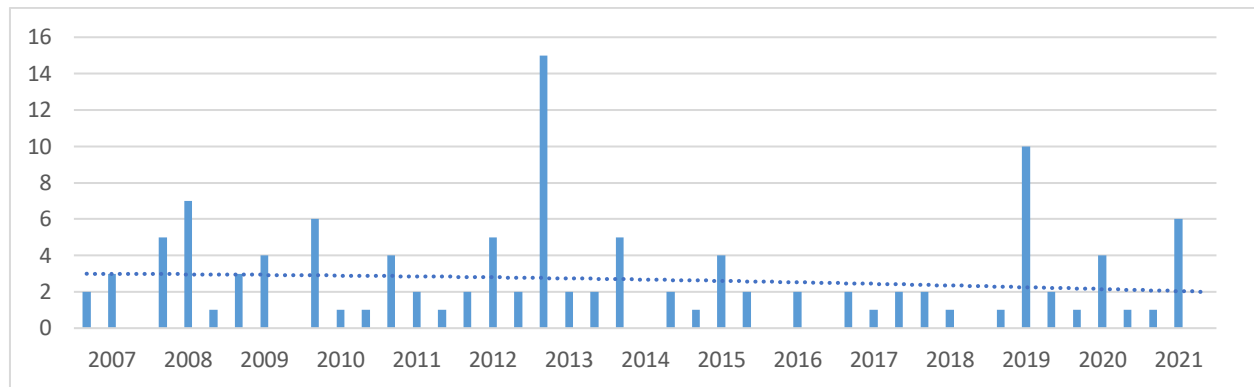
Amber listed

(A) +12%

(B) -6%

(C) +56%

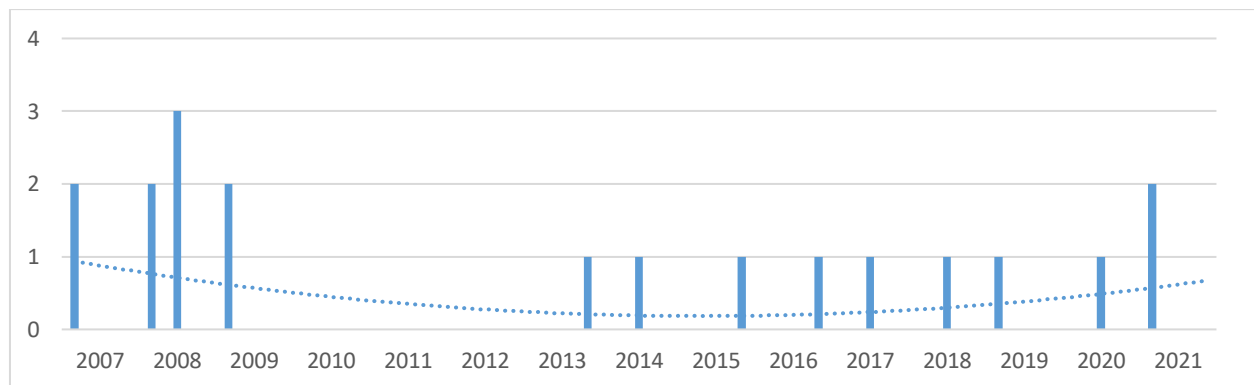
Red Legged Partridge



Red Legged Partridge in the survey areas are probably the remnants of birds released here in previous years or from releases on neighbouring estates. Hand-reared birds released for shooting do not make good breeding stock in the wild. The survey area is not the natural habitat for Red Legged Partridge although many are now released on heather moorland for shooting in other areas.

Green listed (A) +10% (B) -12%

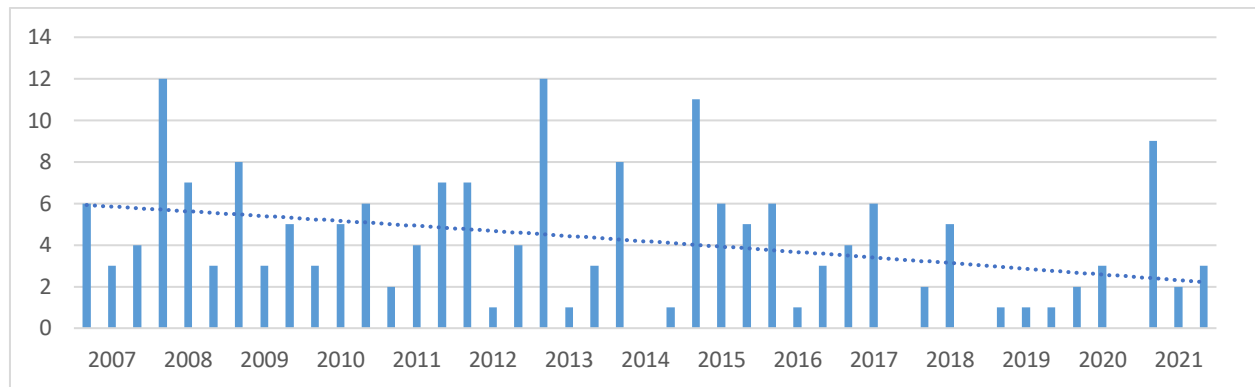
Grey Partridge



The areas covered by the survey are not natural habitat for Grey Partridge. It is therefore not surprising that the population has remained very low, but (NBA) records a healthy increase in Grey Partridge counts in the area to the east of Alnwick which will no doubt be due to the Partridge scheme being carried out by Northumberland Estates in that area. It would not be surprising to see some movement of Greys into the NEBS survey areas on Alnwick Moor.

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

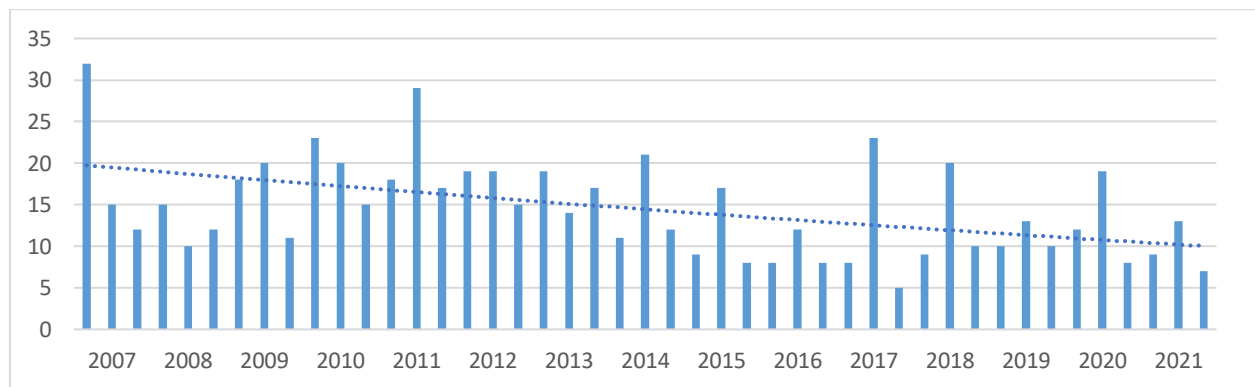
Snipe



The higher counts of Snipe made in late April of most years will include birds which were still on passage. Counts made later in the season would indicate a small but regular population of breeding birds. (BA) results indicate that there has been a reduction in their lowland breeding habitats. (NBA) results show a stable population but our graph shows a downward trend.

Amber listed (A) +32% (B) 0%

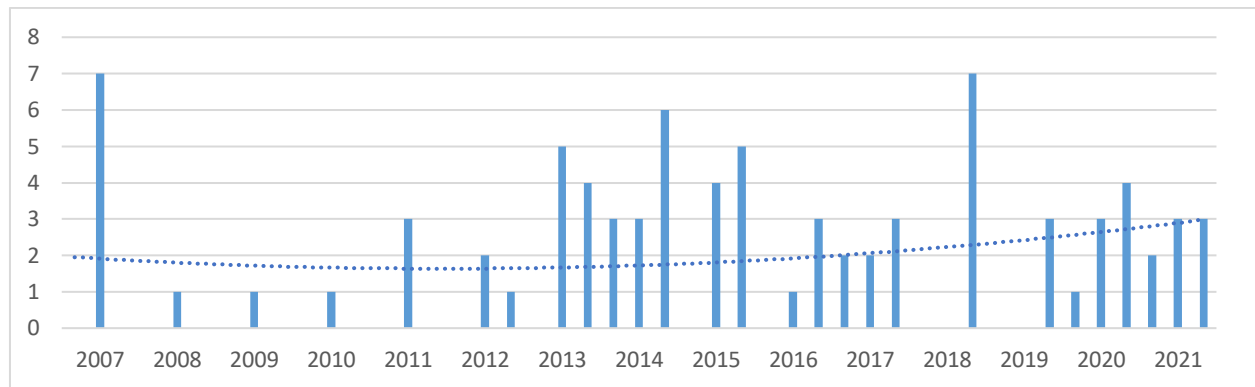
Curlew



Curlew are showing a slow decline in the survey area which is disappointing since (NBA) records a stable population in the North East. National figures show a steady decline overall. The highest counts appear to be in the late May visits when there are likely to be young hatched and much more activity amongst the adults. Curlews have a life span often up to thirty years but even with regular breeding numbers are falling. Survival rates in young are very low and it is not fully understood if this is due mainly to predation, loss of suitable habitat that provides adequate insect food for their survival or some other reason.

Red listed (A) -48% (B) -3% (C) -28%

Whinchat



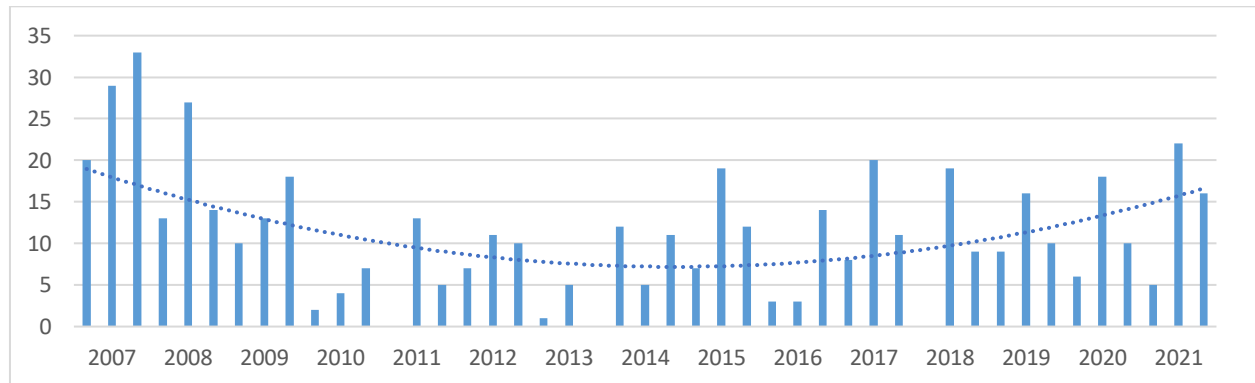
Whinchats have had several better years, with sightings of successful family groups on several occasions. National losses have been general throughout the British Isles over a long period, losing breeding habitat in England more than in Scotland or Wales (BA). This trend appears to have been reversed in the survey areas. As a migrant species, Whinchats are not affected by our winter weather but will be subject to conditions in their winter quarters where drought has been a problem in the Sahel.

Red listed

(A) -56%

(B) -12%

Stonechat



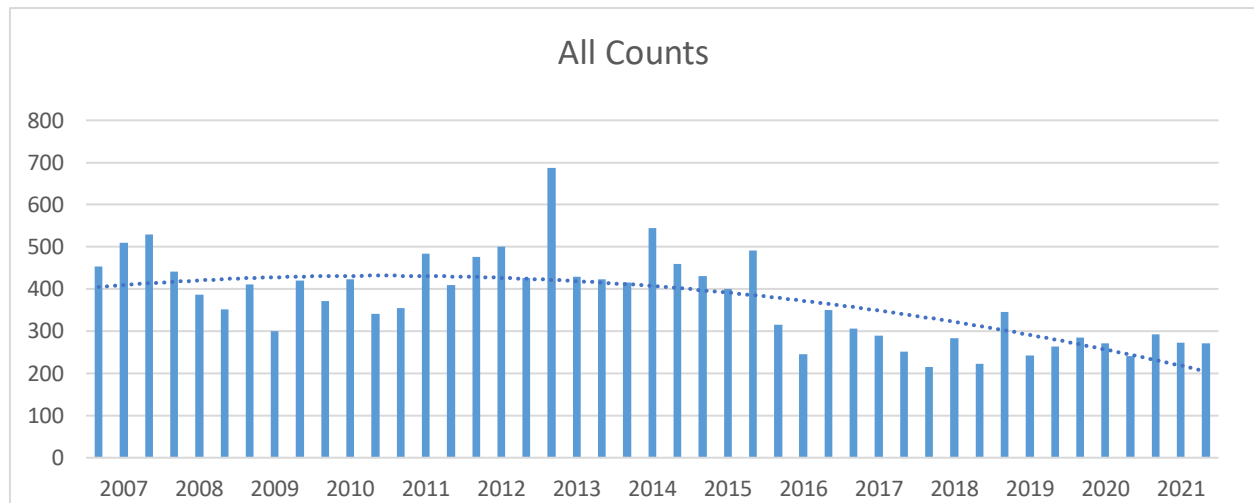
Stonechats in the survey area show signs of recovery after the period between 2010/13, which the graph would indicate, had affected them severely. In the twenty years up to 2008 there had been a steady increase in numbers moving into the North East of England and eastern Scotland from the west. (BA) National figures show a steady increase.

Green listed

(A) +87%

(B) -39%

Total of All Breeding Period Counts (Target Species)



As the trend line shows, the counts of target species in the last few years of the survey are little more than half that of the first few years. This is following the national downward trend which is being recorded, in the majority of species, by all other ornithological organisations with warnings that it is likely to continue.

Others of the Target Species in the Breeding Season

The following list of birds, which were originally included with the target species, have not been recorded in sufficient numbers to enable any useful graphs to be produced for them. They have therefore been excluded from the list, although any sightings are still recorded. They are: -

Merlin

Recorded occasionally in four areas, not including Kimmer Lough, and mainly seen in April but there has been no evidence of breeding. No recordings in the last nine years. The total number of breeding Merlin in Northumberland has been estimated at fifteen pairs.

Golden Plover

Alnwick Moor seems to be the favourite area for these, with flocks numbering from 19 to 400 recorded in the April surveys on six occasions. They would at that time be on their way to their breeding territories in the north. A further group of 70 birds were recorded in April of 2019 at the Post Office Pylon site. Two other flocks were reported, both again from Alnwick Moor, one of 96 in Dec of 2021 and a 200 strong flock in Feb. 2022. These may well have moved inland for shelter in a period of severe weather.

Jack Snipe

Very occasional records of single birds, mainly in the autumn passage. Smaller than Common Snipe with shorter bill and legs, their flight is usually more direct and shorter.

Woodcock

Often seen as winter visitors, arriving in late autumn. Originally seen as a game bird but now a protected species.

Nightjar

A record from Alnwick Moor of a pair during May 2009 and another from the adjoining area of Hulne Moor, which may have been a breeding pair. The area in which they were recorded would seem to be very suitable for breeding. The number of breeding birds in north Northumberland is very gradually increasing.

Raven

There have been a good number of records from most of the survey areas of Ravens. They are increasing their range to the east and are recorded in increasing numbers. A pair were recorded in late February in the Hulne Moor area and another pair were seen on three occasions at the Black Lough, both of which may have been breeding pairs. Ravens are very early breeders and could possibly have completed their nesting before the start of our breeding period of surveys had commenced. The only record of Ravens in the last two years was of a pair on Alnwick Moor in Dec. of 2021.

Conclusions

Despite the relatively small amount of data gathered by the survey, an attempt to compare these with National averages appears to be the only way to achieve the aims of the survey.

Taking into account the fifteen years of the survey, the following table is a result which should be viewed critically. Other opinions would be welcome.

In view of the fact that there is a reduction in numbers of many species nationally, it could be taken as a satisfactory result if the local population of any species is being maintained at a constant level.

Species with higher counts during recent breeding periods than National averages.

Skylark (Red listed)
Whinchat (based on very small counts) (Amber listed)
Stonechat (Green listed)

Species with lower counts during recent seasons than the National averages.

Yellowhammer (Red listed)
Red Legged Partridge (Green listed)
Linnet (Red listed)
Reed Bunting (Amber listed)
Grey Partridge (Red listed)
Cuckoo (Red listed)
Meadow Pipit (Amber listed)

Species with little variation in recent seasons from the National averages.

Red Grouse (Green listed)
Pheasant (affected by birds released for shooting) (Green listed)
Song Thrush (Red Listed)
Wren (weather related) (Green listed)
Lapwing (Red listed)
Mallard (Amber listed)
Buzzard (Green listed)
Curlew (Red listed)
Meadow Pipit (Amber listed)
Wheatear (based on small numbers) (Amber listed)
Carrion Crow (Green listed)
Snipe (Amber listed)

Summary of the five areas.

Kimmer Lough. Breeding Season 2021.

For the first time since we began producing NEBS records in 2007 it has not been possible to compare the current 2021 figures with the previous year because Covid put paid to the breeding season surveys in 2020. However, it is still possible to view the 2021 records against the breeding season patterns from the previous 13 years.

There were no new species to report in 2021, but it was good to see that the fairly recent slow increase in Chiffchaff numbers was maintained, at least in April and May, this year.

Surprisingly, no Cuckoos were seen or heard despite this species being well in evidence on the Beanley and Titlington Moors to the west of the site.

In some years total numbers have been swollen by large numbers of various Gulls on the Lough. This year, apart from a count of 25 Lesser Black Backs in May, there were very few about on the days of the counts. In April there were two anglers at the Lough which may have explained the sparsity of Gulls and the low numbers of other wildfowl.

Over the years occasional Shelduck have been recorded, but it was notable this year that, by June, there were two adults with four fully fledged young on the water, which might suggest that they have bred here.

Of the target species, none showed notably higher or lower numbers than might have been expected, given the natural year-on-year fluctuations.

Kimmer Lough. Winter 2021/22 Summary

The winter has largely been mild and dry but has been dominated by the effects of the three winter wind storms. On the Kimmer Lough site there are few trees and those that are present are rather scrubby and, with the exception of a few birches in the southern corner, not very old. As a result, there has been very little damage.

The total count in December was 68 birds, of these were Mallard (20) and Pheasant (32). A single Cormorant on the Lough was a comparatively unusual sighting and a lone Magpie was the first ever sighting in the fifteen years of the surveys.

The February count was carried out in cool calm and dry weather, but despite this there were only 27 birds recorded. The only notable sighting was a single Red Grouse. There have been only two winter sightings of this species in fifteen years – one in February 2011 and then this bird.

Richard Poppleton.

10/2/22

Black Lough. Summary for 2021/22.

Bird species and numbers were relatively low on both visits. (Dec. – 16 and Feb. -- 37) Most were Fieldfares in a flock of 25. Meadow Pipits (2) and Carrion Crows (2) were recorded on both visits. Seven Wrens were recorded on the December survey with surprisingly none in February. There were three Common Snipe in December and none in Feb. – this is fairly typical for upland ground in the depth of winter. Other birds of note in December were Mistle Thrush (1) and Kestrel (1). Seven Widgeon were on the Black Lough in Feb. – this is a good record. (not sure that this species has been recorded on the Black Lough in the winter period). Other birds included Common Buzzard (1) and Robin (1). Unfortunately, no Red Grouse were seen on either visit.

George Dodds.

Alnwick and Hulne Moors. Summary of 2021/22.

The small ponds on the road side to the west end of Alnwick Moor are difficult to observe being surrounded by small trees and a lot of rush growth but Graylag geese and Mallard are regular breeders here. This winter a number of Wigeon were recorded, with 16 in December. Named as the Gull Ponds on some maps but no Black Heads have bred here during the survey years.

Stonechats are regulars in both seasons. Small numbers being always recorded, and a family of 8 at the May visit. One pair of Whinchats is the only record, also in May and at the same time our only sighting of one Wheatear during the breeding season. The reduction in the breeding numbers of Wheatears in our survey areas is alarming.

Freeman's Gap Pool is always an interesting spot to creep up to. In the breeding season, Mallard, Greylag Geese and Tufted Duck are regulars, in the winter they were joined by 32 Wigeon and 7 Teal. In some years the Teal numbers can be over 100. Little Grebe have also been recorded here in the breeding season.

It always seems strange that Hulne Moor does not have any regular breeding Curlews, only a single bird was recorded there last year. Whereas Alnwick Moor, just over the wall, does have a small but regular breeding population, but probably only three breeding pairs last season.

The counts of Meadow Pipits on Hulne Moor have stayed reasonably high, but on Alnwick Moor they do seem to have reduced. The small group of Lapwings which only nest on Alnwick Moor have also reduced, with only 4 being recorded in May and none in the earlier months.

The count of 85 Red Legged Partridge on Alnwick Moor in February would indicate a new release of birds for shooting.

An estimate of 200 Golden Plovers on Alnwick Moor in February is very early for them to be on the move to their breeding grounds and was more likely to be as a result of gale force winds driving them inland for shelter.

The winter gales have wreaked havoc with the woodland around Brizlee Tower and access by the usual route to the Hulne Moor was quite impossible. It was made possible by using the gate by the MOD establishment thanks to Peter Hooley.

Post Office Pylon. Summary of 2021/22.

Curlew have maintained their small breeding population here with probably 3 breeding pairs, but a smaller number of Red Grouse have been recorded than in previous seasons.

Stonechats are in evidence having been recorded at every visit, in winter as well as in the breeding season.

Meadow pipits are not as plentiful as in previous years, a decline that is being seen at all the Moorland sites.

An excellent close-up sighting of a Hen Harrier was made in June, a "Ringtail", either adult female or juvenile bird. Most likely a juvenile at this time of year which was wandering away from its usual home area, probably in the Border Moors. Unfortunately, an unwelcome visitor at this time of the season.

Jim Clark.

Winter 2021/22

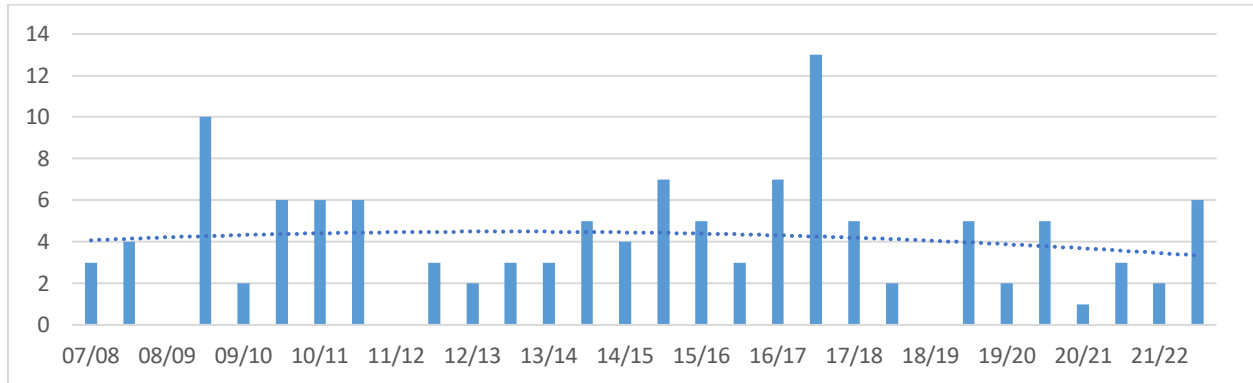
Meteorological records tell us that the winter of 2021/22 has been one of the mildest on record, with practically no snow nor very wet in our survey area, but we have been subjected to much more windy weather in January and February. Three main gales have caused so much damage, not only to property, which can be repaired, but worse in the woodlands which in many cases have been more or less destroyed. One wonders how birds can weather these gales of up to 100 miles per hour.

By the beginning of March, the weather pattern seems to have settled and the longer-range forecast indicates the possibility, hopefully, of an early mild spring.

Conditions bode well for the population of wintering species, Wrens, Robins and Stonechat etc.

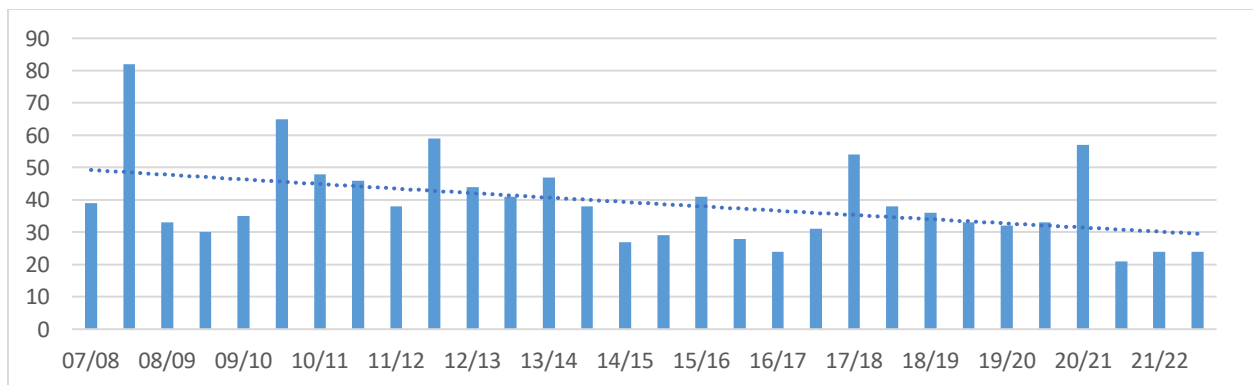
All species are recorded through the winter period, but sightings can be very irregular and numbers are usually quite low. Most species which breed on our moorlands are semi-migratory, often not leaving this country but moving to coastal areas or to places where food and shelter are more readily available. The areas of moorland covered by the survey are usually quiet in the winter and total counts can be very small. Nothing would therefore be achieved by creating graphs for most of the target species, but the following three species are of interest although there are no national figures which can be used as a comparison with our records.

Buzzard



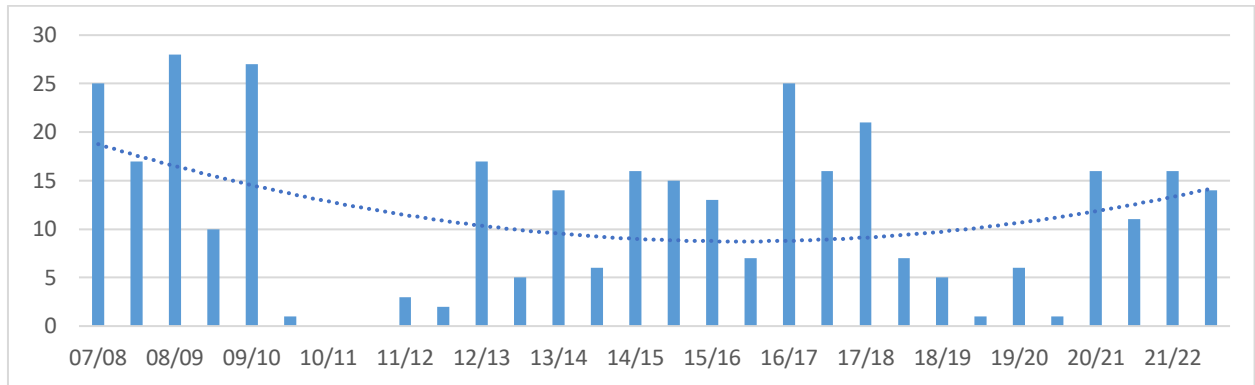
Buzzard numbers continue to maintain a more or less level population.

Red Grouse



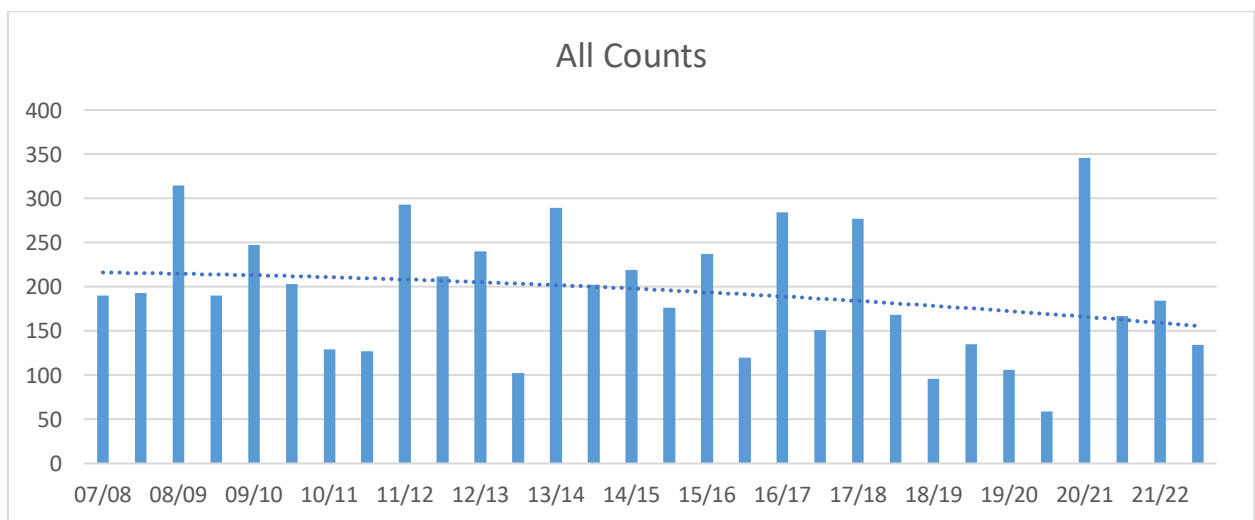
Counts of Red Grouse in the winter have always been higher than in the breeding season when they appear to be much more secretive. After several years without any shooting the proportion of birds that are now mature enough to breed will form a sound basis for a healthy increase in the population. Hopefully there will be better prospects of an increase in numbers from the main breeding area of Hulne and Alnwick Moors to the other nearby survey areas. This will be made a little more difficult since these are not actually adjoining and are also of comparatively small area.

Wren



Counts of Wrens in both the summer period and the 2016/17 and 17/18 winters reached a similar level to that of pre-2010, but numbers fell dramatically again in 2018/19 and 2019/20. In the last two years there has been another revival. A good breeding season will hopefully see a continued increase in their numbers.

Total of all Winter Counts (Target Species)



Average winter counts in the winter of 2018/19 and 2019/20 have been smaller than usual with no obvious explanation. The unusually high count in 2020/21 is as a result of larger gatherings of Mallard, Red Grouse, Pheasant and Red Legged Partridge. Otherwise, total counts have returned to average.

Others of the Target Species in Winter

Meadow Pipit

Mainly move south and west, some into France, Spain, Portugal and Ireland. The few winter records in the survey may well be visitors from northern UK or the continent, but small numbers of our local birds do occasionally remain on their home ground.

Skylark

Few remain in the survey area but move south and east, often being seen in large flocks on the north east coastal dunes, with some crossing the Channel to winter.

Lapwing

Flock together and move to coastal areas or to inland lakes and rivers to feed. Occasionally seen in large numbers during surveys nearer the coast or at Branton Ponds for example. Bad weather conditions on the coast will encourage them to move inland temporarily.

Curlew

Similar to Lapwing, feeding on the coast, and nearby areas of arable and grassland. Sizable flocks are often recorded at Fieldhouse and Townfoot, where Natural England were initially interested in our records, resulting in extra areas being put down to grass. These areas have now been returned to arable cropping.

Whinchat and Wheatear

Summer migrants, spending the winter in Africa, where conditions have not been the best for them in recent years, with droughts in the Sahel. Wheatear in particular have fallen in numbers in recent years.

Stonechat

Some remain in the area, others move into southern UK or France, Spain and Ireland. More have been recorded in our surveys in the winter of 2021/22 than in previous years.

Reed Bunting

Mainly sedentary but leaves the upland in winter, often forming flocks with other finches, Chaffinch, Yellowhammer and Tree Sparrows etc., to feed on stubble and game plots in this area.

Jim Clark. (5/3/2022)