

BIRD SURVEY - FIELDHOUSE AND TOWNFOOT

REPORT FOR NOVEMBER 2021 TO OCTOBER 2022

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

The report covers the thirteen 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. Some of which are 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 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 etc. are usually much higher at Townfoot. The area of the old airfield at Fieldhouse, which in the early years of the survey was

a suitable habitat for Curlew, Lapwing and Meadow pipit, is now being changed to a more intensive arable rotation, to their detriment.

In this breeding season several of the target species have performed better than usual. Wrens have been recorded 13 times, Song Thrush 10 times and Whitethroat 16 times. Stonechats are not a target species for this survey but have been seen 16 times.

Looking back through the records, Corn Bunting have been recorded twice at Fieldhouse. In April 2011 and April 2018. Both were of singing males and probably only single birds. Corn Bunting have become very rare sightings in the North.

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.

An interesting exercise is to compare the graphs in this report with those produced by BTO from their Breeding Bird Survey. BTO Webb site (BBS population trend graphs.)

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: -

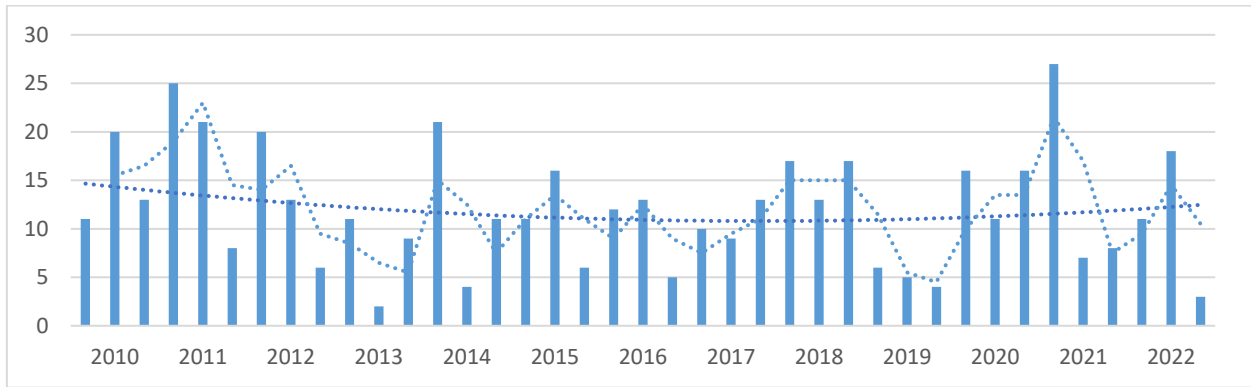
- Green.** For those not endangered.
- Amber.** Those for which there is some concern.
- Red.** For those at greatest risk.

BTO National figures give: -

- (A)** an average % rise or fall over the period 1995 - 2019
- (B)** an estimated % rise or fall over the period 2019 - 2020

These figures, which are the most up to date available, and colour classifications are given with the graph of each of the target species.

Pheasant



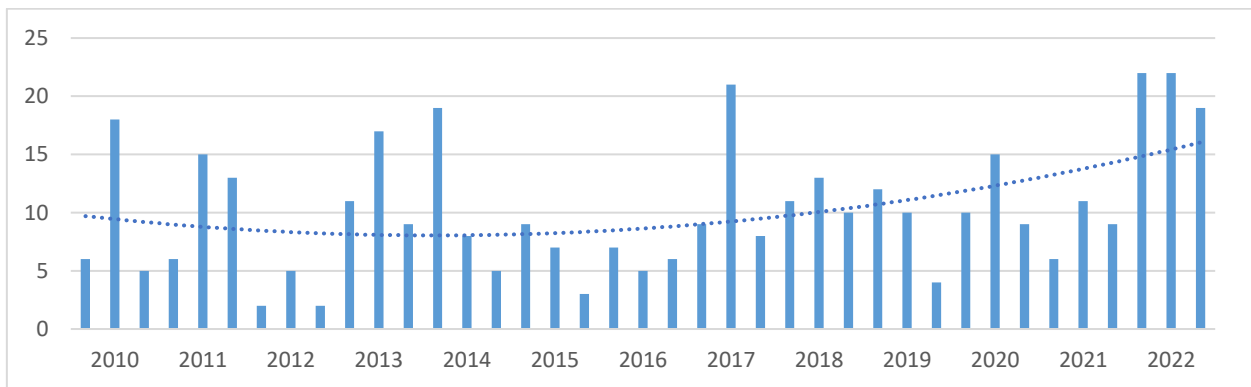
Nationally the number of Pheasants has risen with the release of large numbers of birds for shooting. In the survey area no hand reared birds have been released in recent years but numbers continue to be maintained by “wild birds” and immigrants from surrounding shoots, despite the fact that some shooting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

Green listed

(A) +44%

(B) +11%

Lapwing



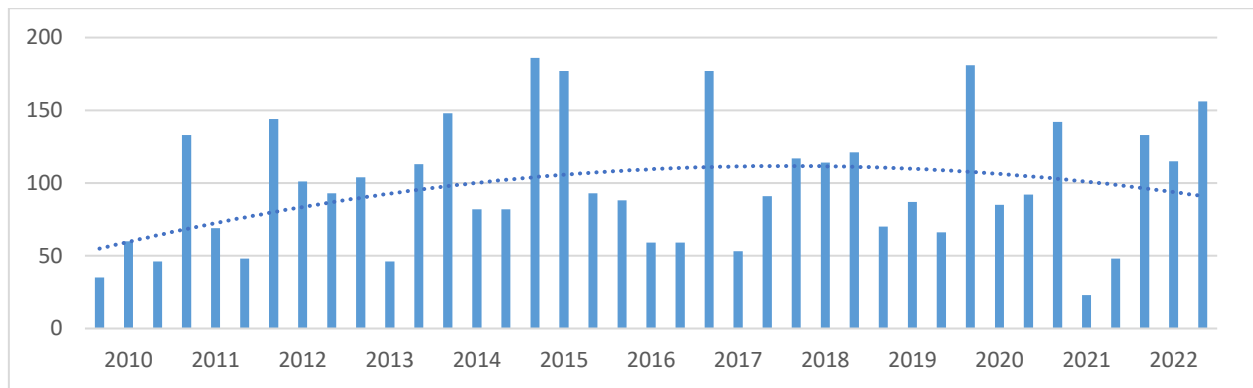
Lapwing numbers seem to have become more stable over the last three years. The crop rotation has been providing a regular source of suitable breeding areas. The change in management may not always follow the same pattern. Here they are performing better than the national average, especially in the last year.

Red listed

(A) -34%

(B) -2%

Woodpigeon



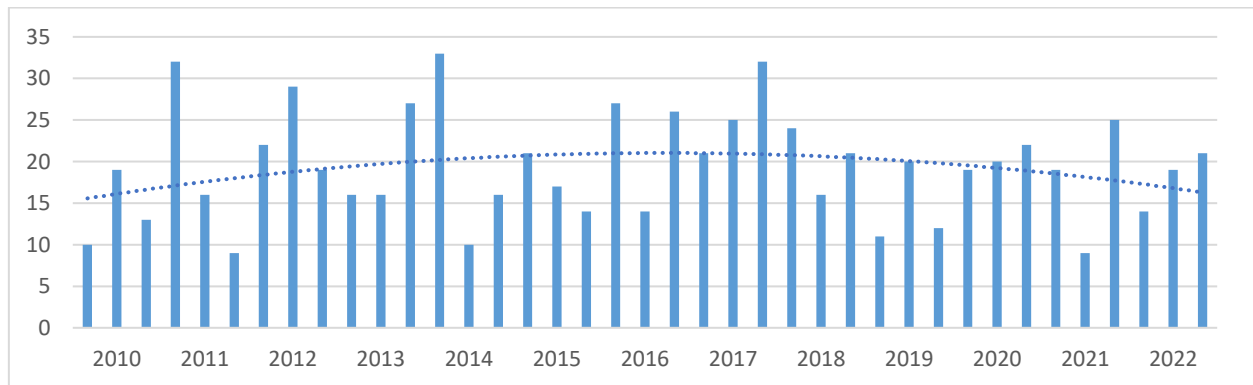
High numbers of Woodpigeons can be damaging to some agricultural crops and cause considerable losses, particularly to oil seed rape in the winter and cereal crops as they ripen towards harvest time. Improved hedges provide better breeding sites for Woodpigeons and numbers remain high.

Green listed

(A) +37%

(B) +5%

Skylark



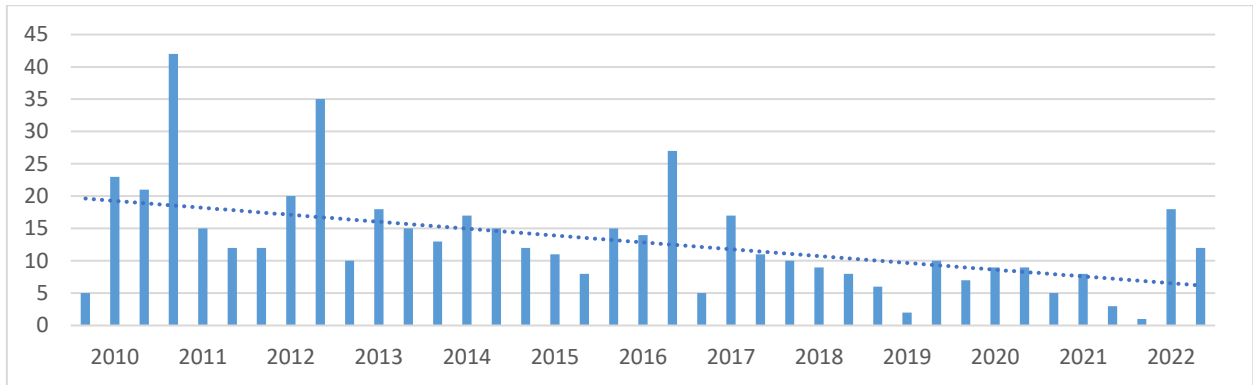
National figures show a continual drop in Skylark numbers over a long period, particularly in arable areas. Counts, particularly on the more open parts of Fieldhouse farm, show that numbers have not fallen here but changes in cropping may well influence numbers in the future with grassland being replaced by arable crops.

Red listed

(A) -19%

(B) +7%

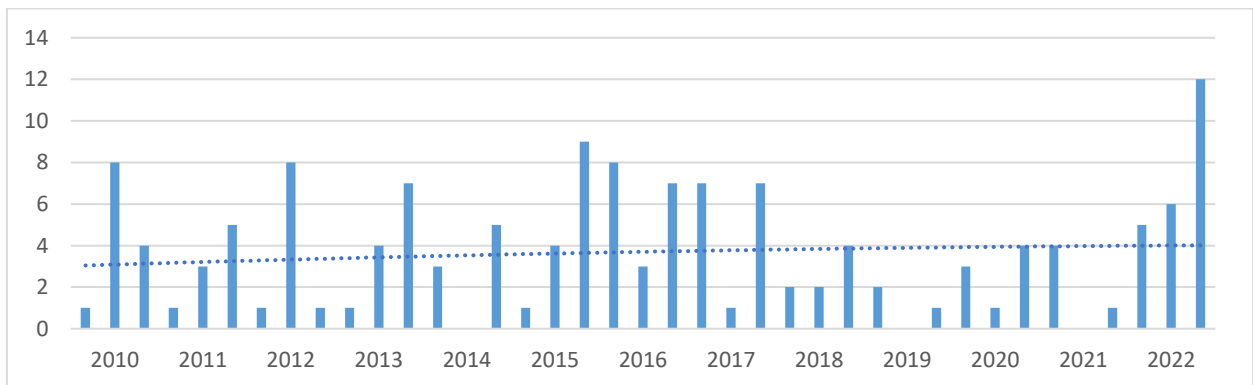
Meadow Pipit



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 gradual fall in numbers, this will be affected by the changes in cropping here. National figures show a fall in recent years.

Amber listed (A) -21% (B) +9%

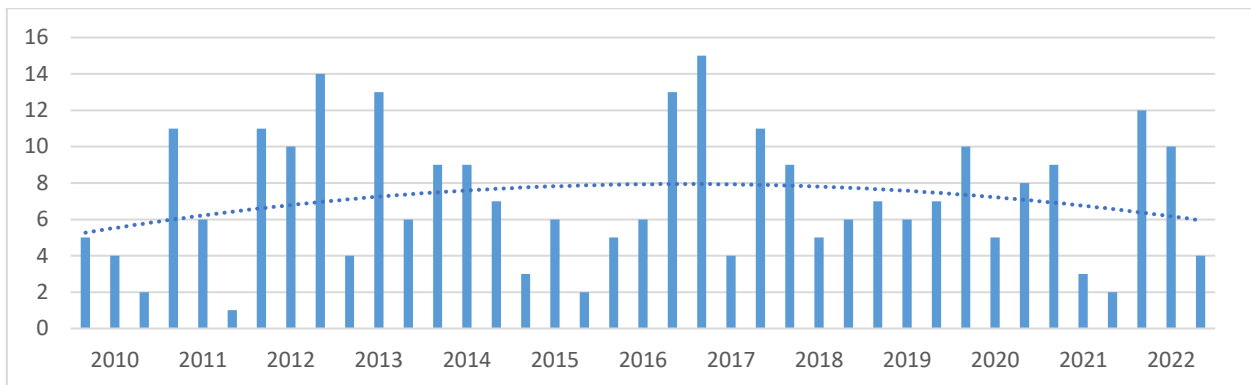
Wren



This chart continues to illustrate how numbers of Wrens vary throughout the years, with the higher numbers at the end of most breeding period which are normally reduced during the winter by colder weather and shortage of insect food. National estimates claim a 50% loss of Wrens in an average winter. Counts remained very low in 2019, probably due to a short but quite severe period in the winter and the hot and dry conditions in early spring resulting in reduced insect food. This was repeated in 2021 with very late and cold period in the spring, but conditions in 2022 have provided better breeding conditions.

Green listed (A) +19% (B) -3%

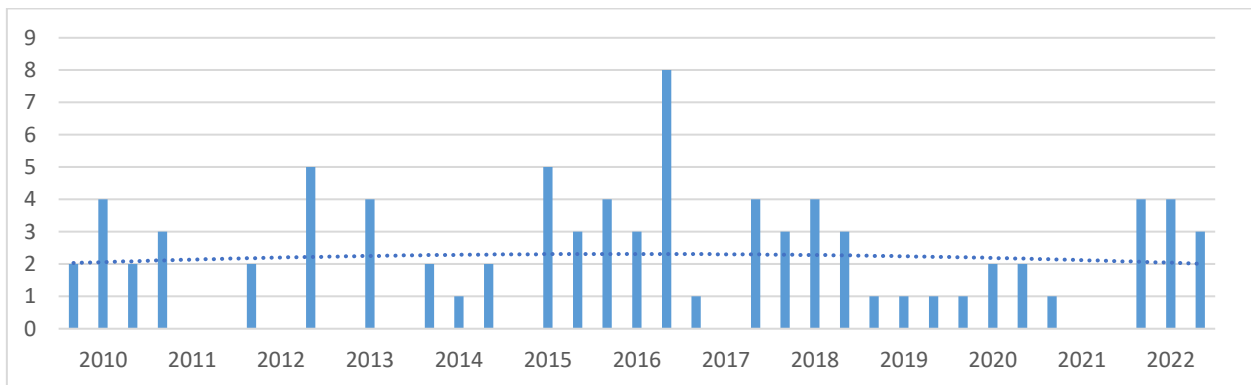
Dunnock



The national increase in previous years is due to their spread into areas in the west. (BA) Dunnocks have been recorded in consistent numbers in the survey area during the last few years.

Amber listed (A) +10% (B) +1%

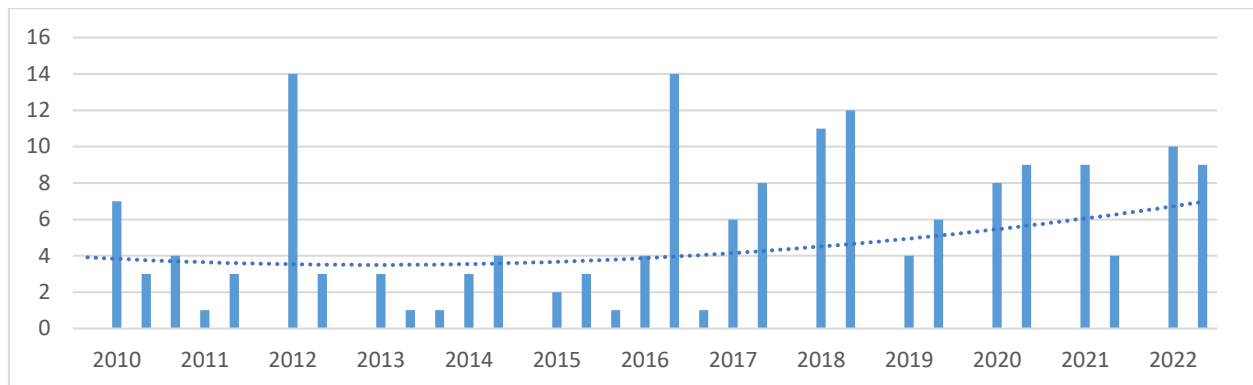
Robin



Counts of the Robin population are very variable. They can be very secretive during the breeding season and not easy to spot when hedges are in full leaf. I suspect that the population may be higher than the records suggest. National counts show an increase in recent years.

Green listed (A) +29% (B) +16%

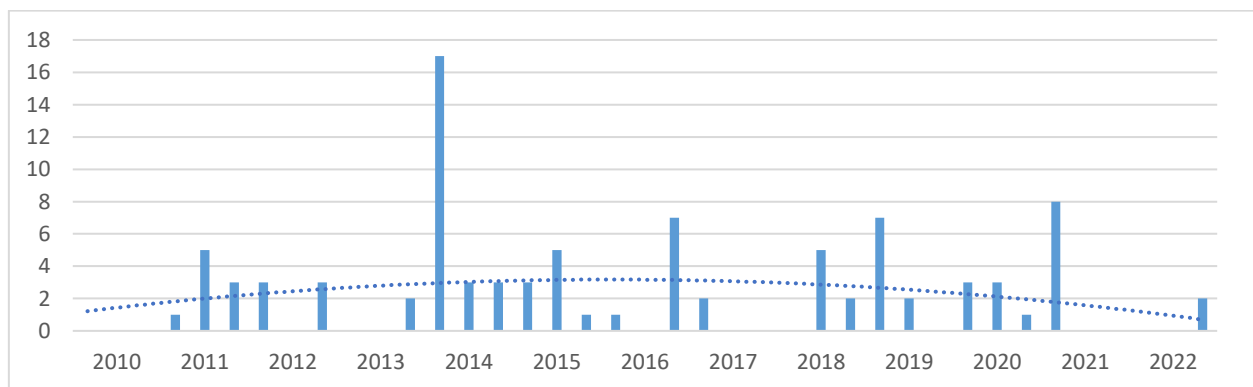
Whitethroat



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 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. There is a small but regular count, which has increased in recent years. Zero counts in the first visit of most years has been made before their return from wintering in Africa.

Amber listed (A) +17% (B) -8%

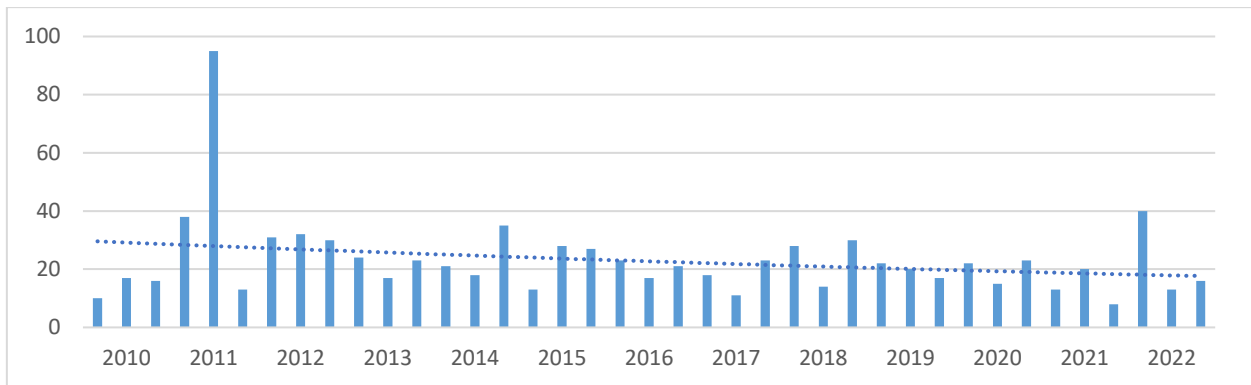
Tree Sparrow



In the years leading up to 2000 breeding Tree Sparrows were scarce. Increasing numbers from the continent wintering on the East coast in subsequent years appeared to give a boost to the numbers left to breed in the area. This graph shows a very small number breeding in the survey area. The high count in the first visit of 2014 are of flocking birds before their breeding season had started and distorts the graph.

Red listed (A) +48% (B) -21%

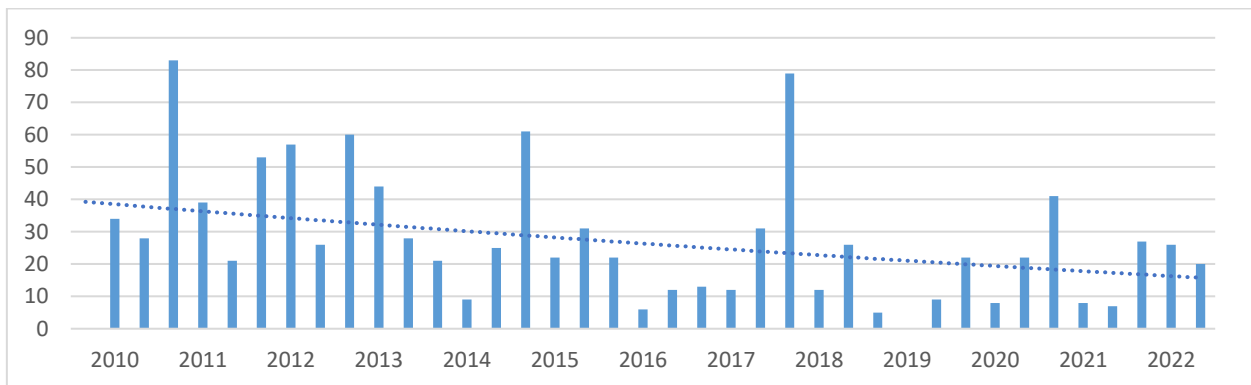
Chaffinch



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 which is showing a slow decline in numbers.

Green listed (A) -34% (B) -12%

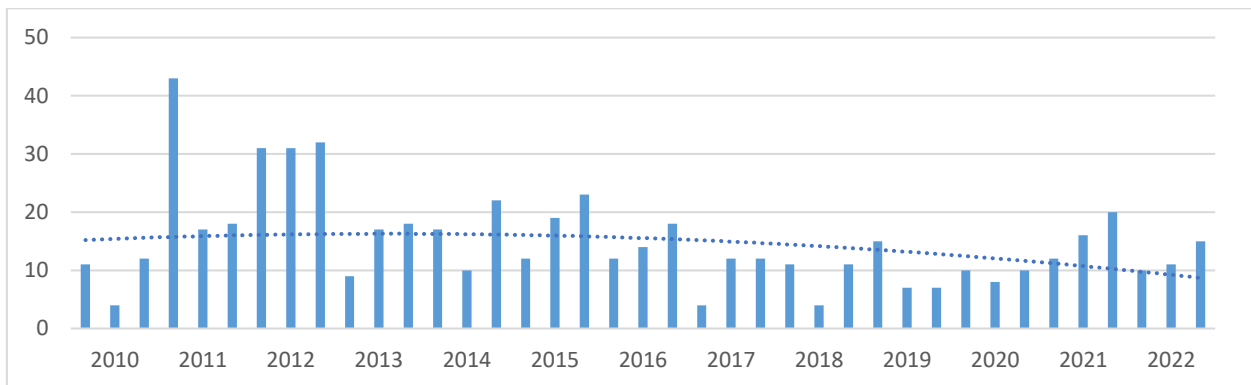
Linnet



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) -24% (B) +13%

Yellowhammer



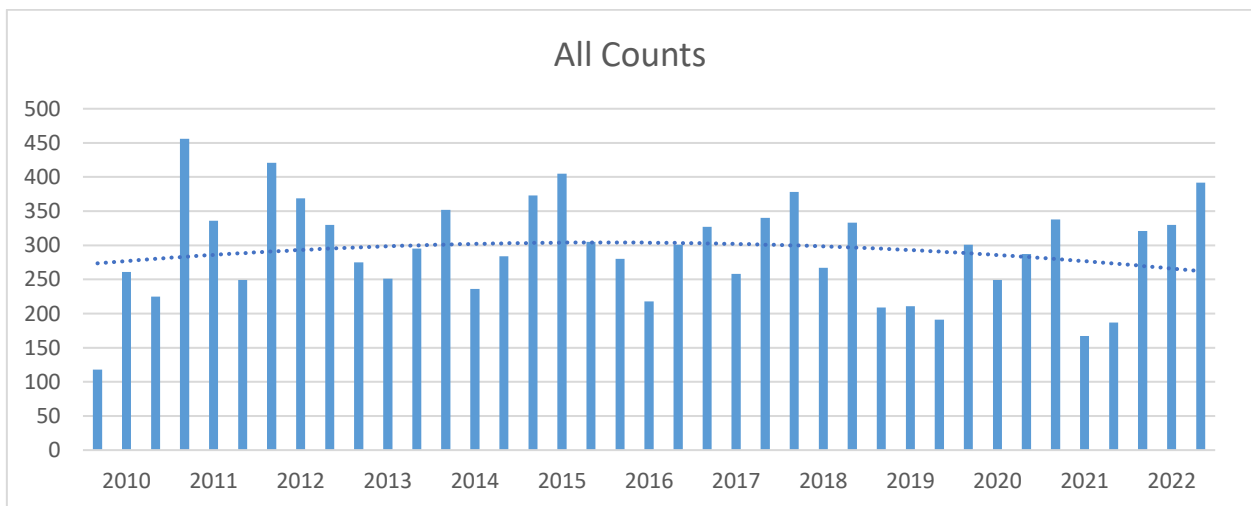
There have been irregular counts of Yellowhammers but on average the population here is performing better than the national trend. They are closely associated with cereal growing areas and the highest populations are on the east of the country. (BA)

Red listed

(A) -33%

(B) +6%

Total of All Breeding Period Counts (Target Species)



Total counts continue to be roughly level.

Conclusions.

The results of this survey suggest that in the last few years eight of the target species are increasing their numbers. Those are: -

Grey Partridge (Red listed)
Lapwing (Red listed)
Buzzard
Song Thrush (Red listed)
Wren
Yellowhammer (Red listed)
Reed Bunting (Amber listed)
Whitethroat

Eight species have maintain similar counts to their usual annual averages.

Robin
Dunnock (Amber listed)
Goldfinch
Woodpigeon
Chaffinch
Skylark (Red listed)
Pheasant
Blackbird

Three species have Lower counts than their usual annual averages

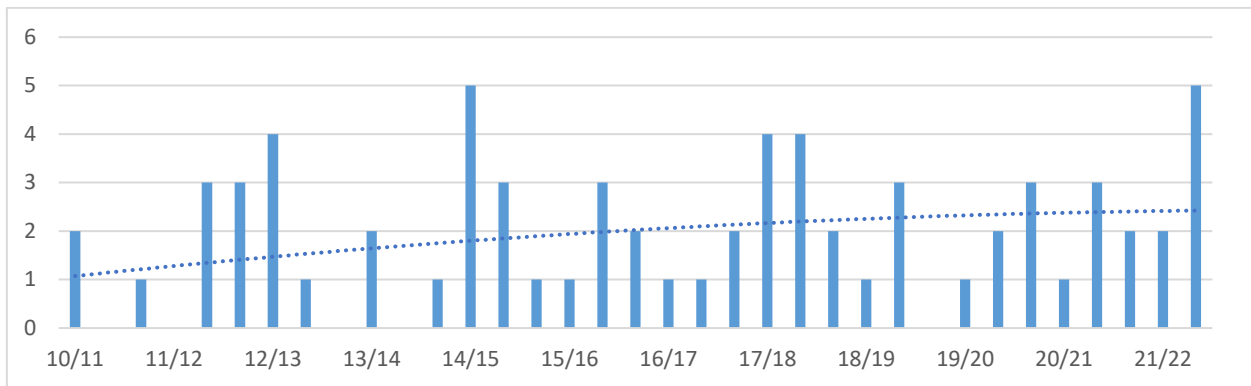
Tree Sparrow (Red listed)
Meadow Pipit (Amber listed)
Linnet (Red listed)

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. 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.

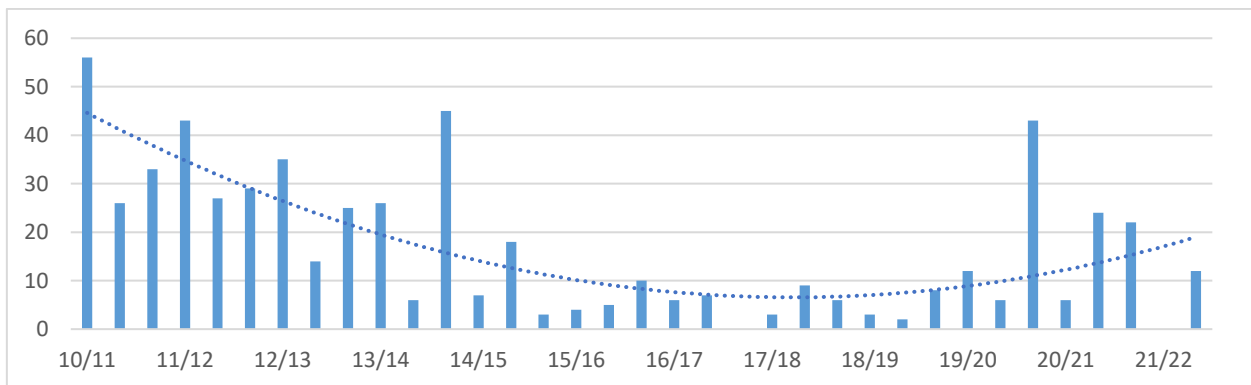
- Kestrel. Few sightings.
- Sparrow Hawk. Few sightings.
- Skylark. Mainly move away from the area in winter.
- Meadow Pipit. As the Skylark.
- Mistle Thrush. Small numbers.
- Lapwing. Only three records of groups, usually when there is more severe weather affecting their wintering areas nearer the coast.

Buzzard



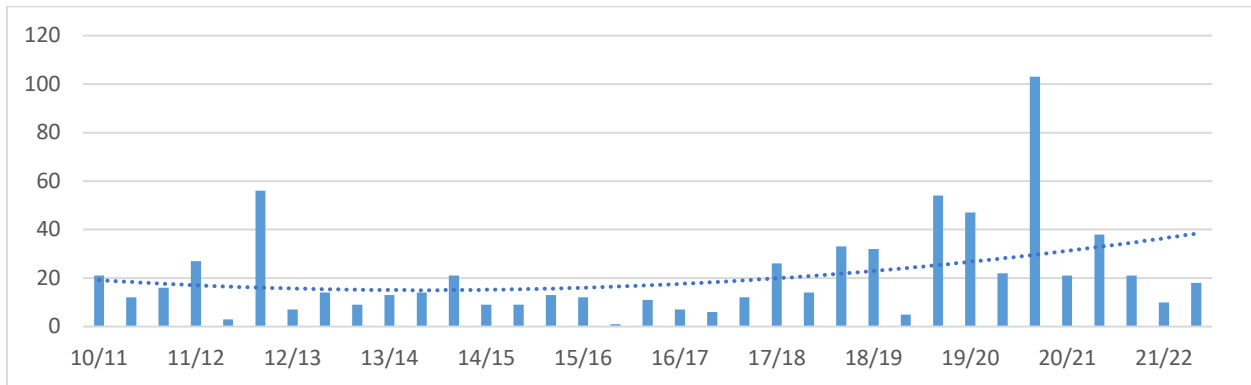
Similar to the breeding period, the Buzzard population appears to be stable or even growing slightly.

Grey Partridge



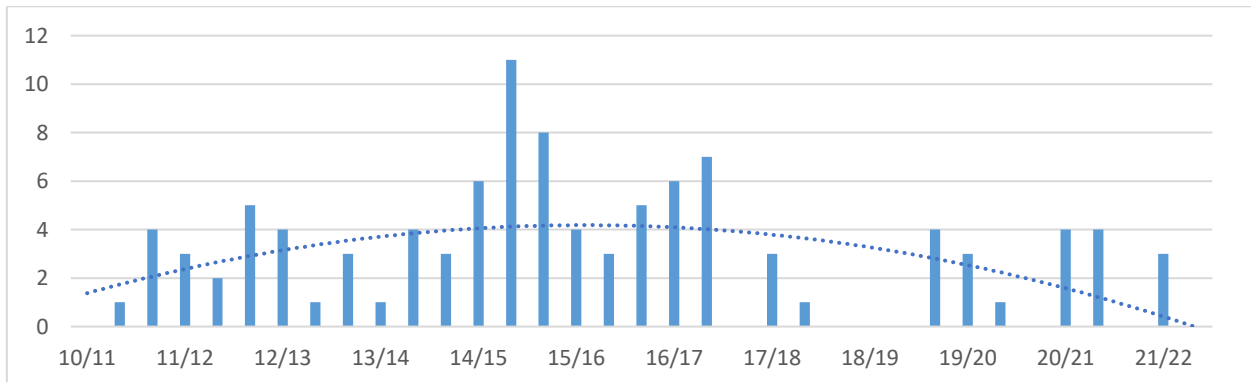
Grey Partridge numbers in winter have declined, probably due to the results of shooting until the outbreak of Covid when shooting was curtailed in 2020 and 2021.

Pheasant



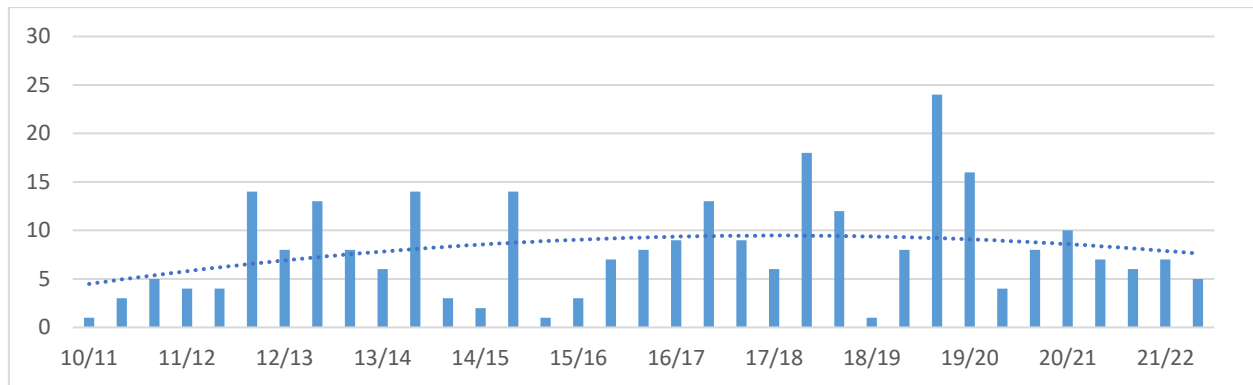
Pheasants will always be affected by the numbers shot during the season. The possible effects of Covid on shooting also show on this graph.

Wren



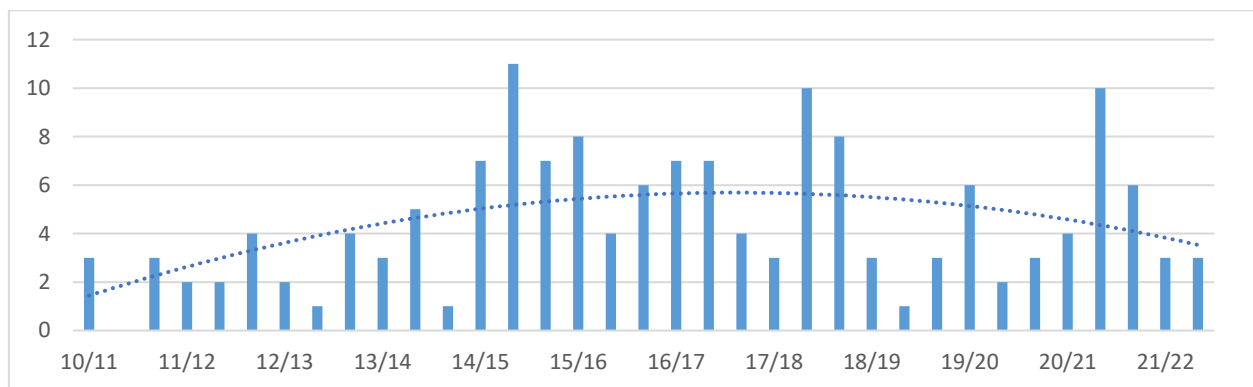
Wren populations always show big variations over relatively short periods. The apparent collapse in numbers in the winter of 2018/19 was probably due to a series of more severe periods of very wet or cold conditions followed by long dry periods with insufficient insect feed.

Duncock



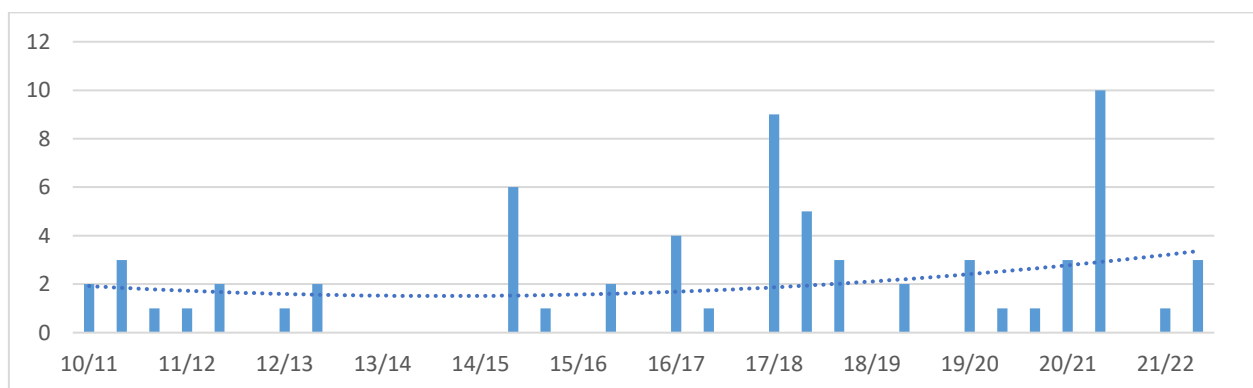
The winter of 2018/19 has shown to have had a poor effect on many of our winter residents and is seen again on this graph.

Robin



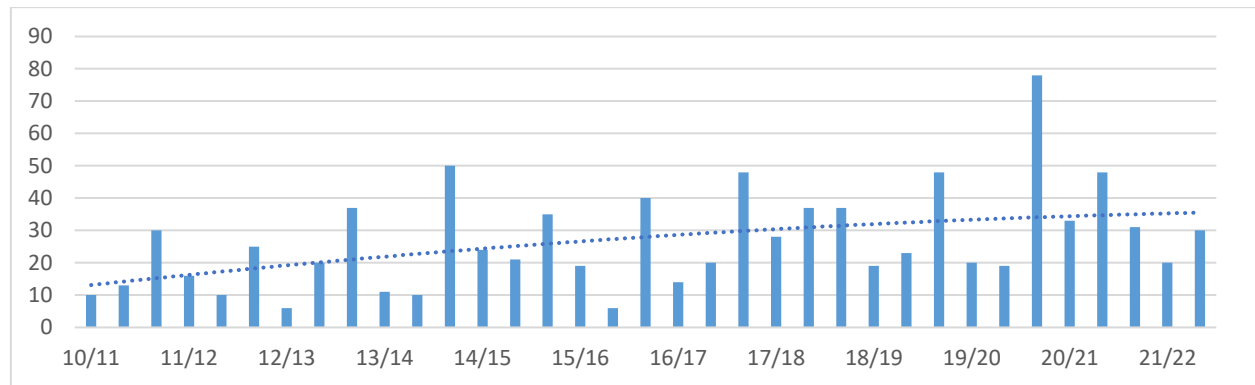
Robins are being recorded in gradually increasing numbers. Winter numbers will be affected by immigrants from the continent, in some years more than in others. Counts in winter are normally higher than in the breeding season since they are more vocal at this time.

Song Thrush



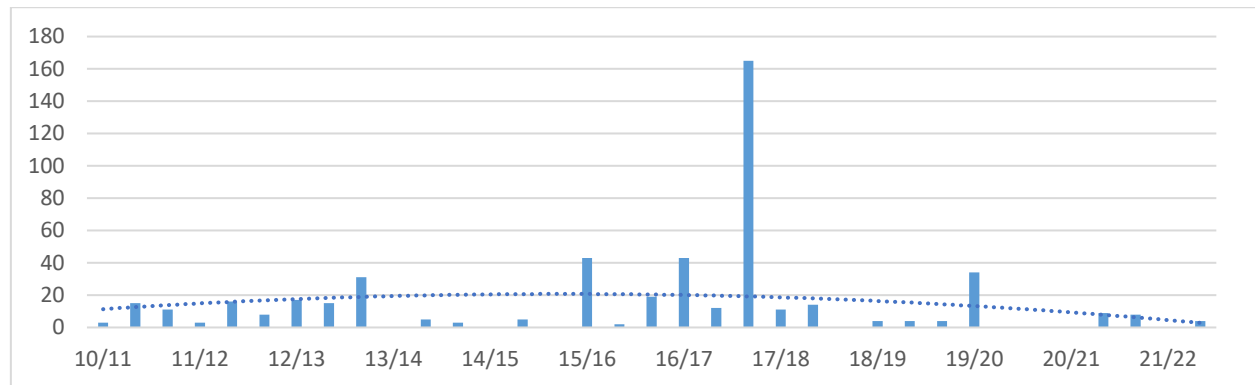
Very irregular counts during the winter period, they tend to be seen in more sheltered habitat such as in game plots and woodland and urban areas rather than open arable land.

Blackbird



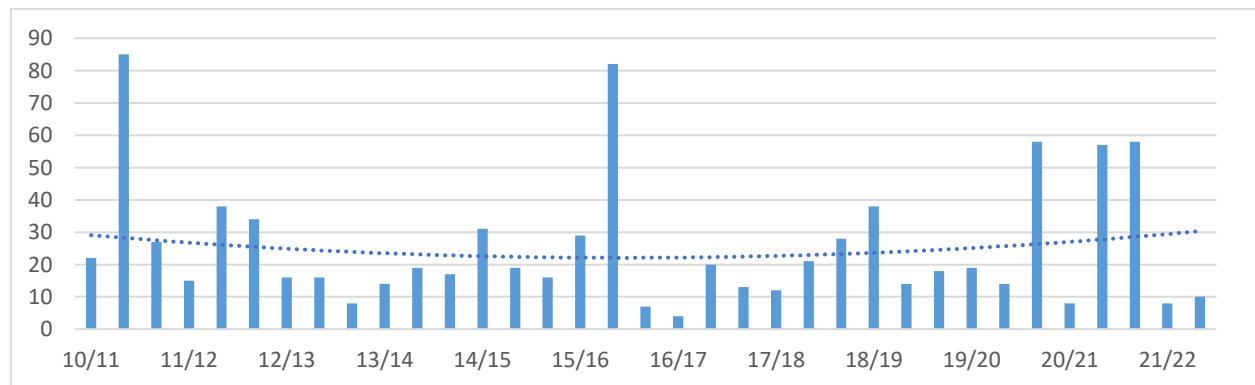
After a few years of gradual increase, the Blackbird population appears to have levelled off.

Tree Sparrow



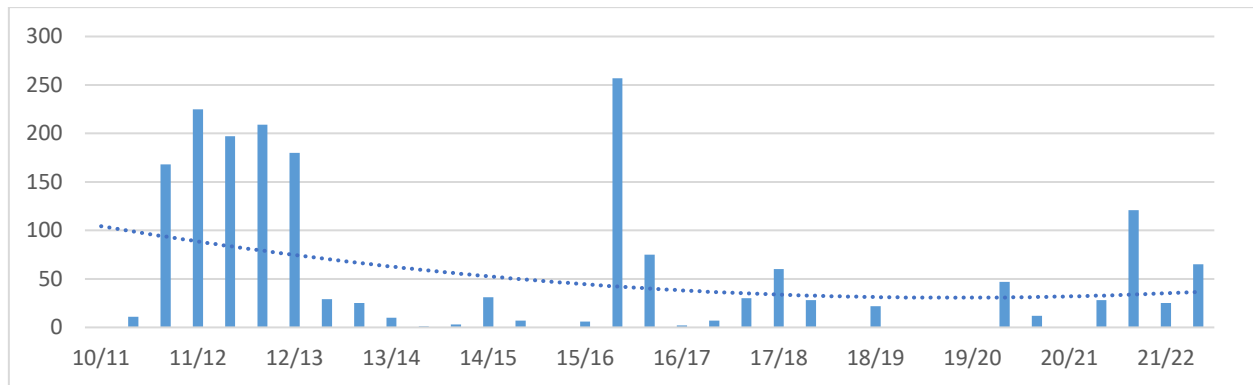
Winter counts are increased by immigrants from the Continent and Scandinavia, occasionally being recorded in large flocks.

Chaffinch

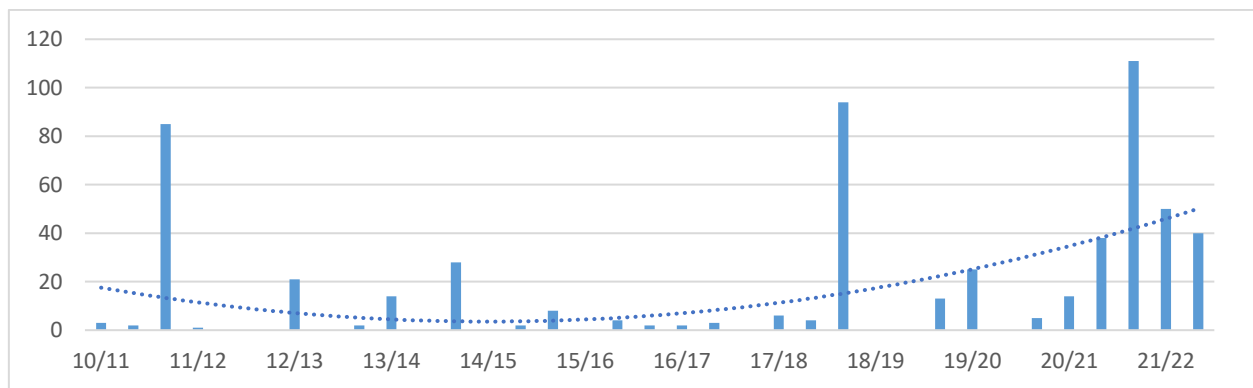


Flocking in winter, usually with other finches in variable numbers. This also applies to all the following Finches.

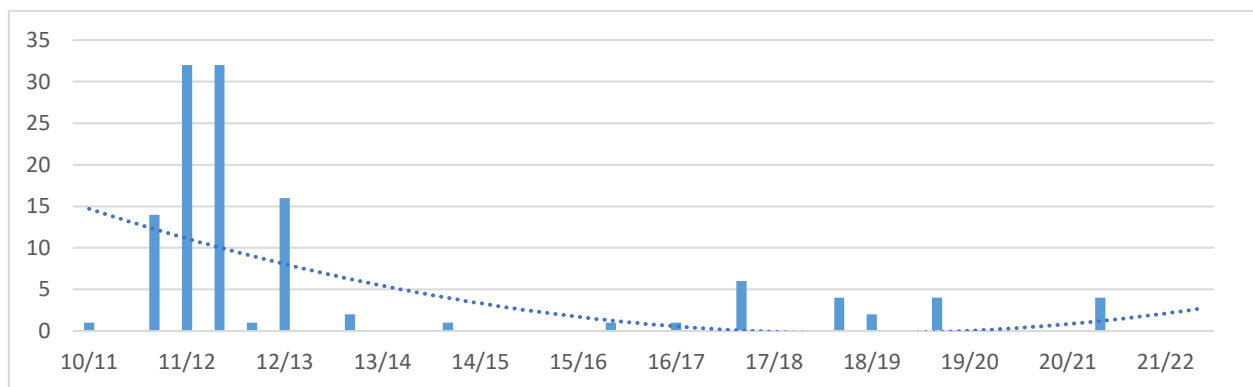
Linnet



Goldfinch

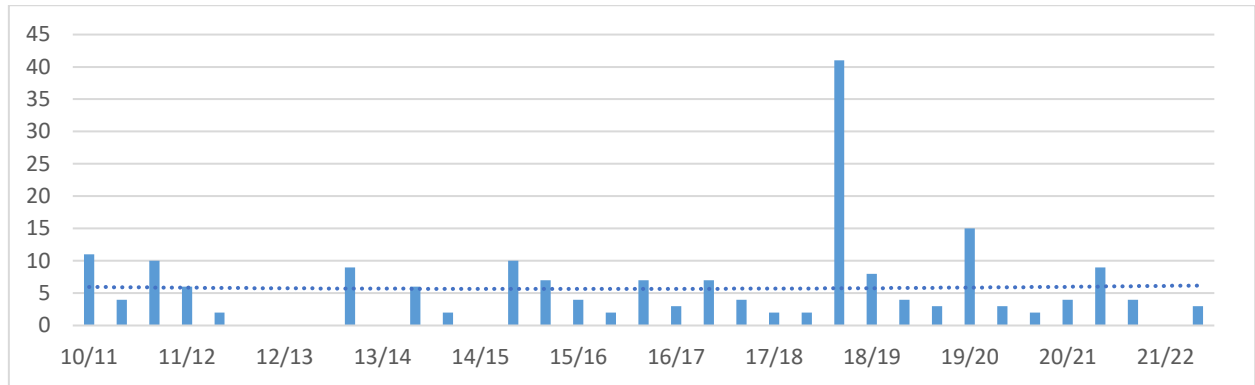


Greenfinch



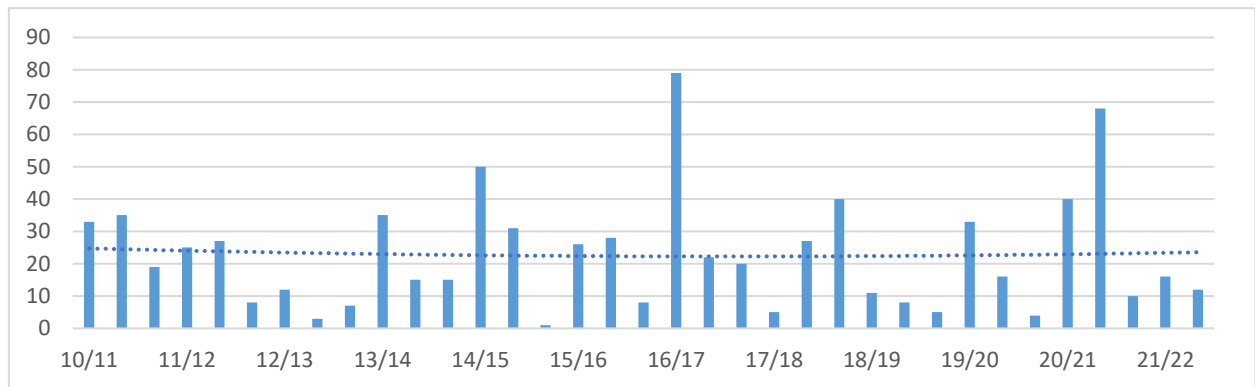
Greenfinch numbers have been reduced by disease. Counts seem to be higher in urban areas.

Reed Bunting



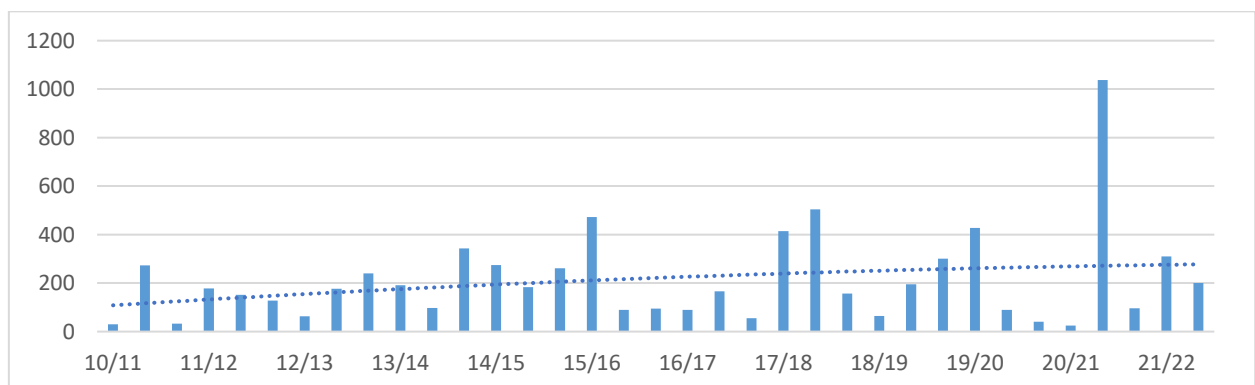
In winter more often seen in small numbers in mixed flocks of Finches.

Yellowhammer



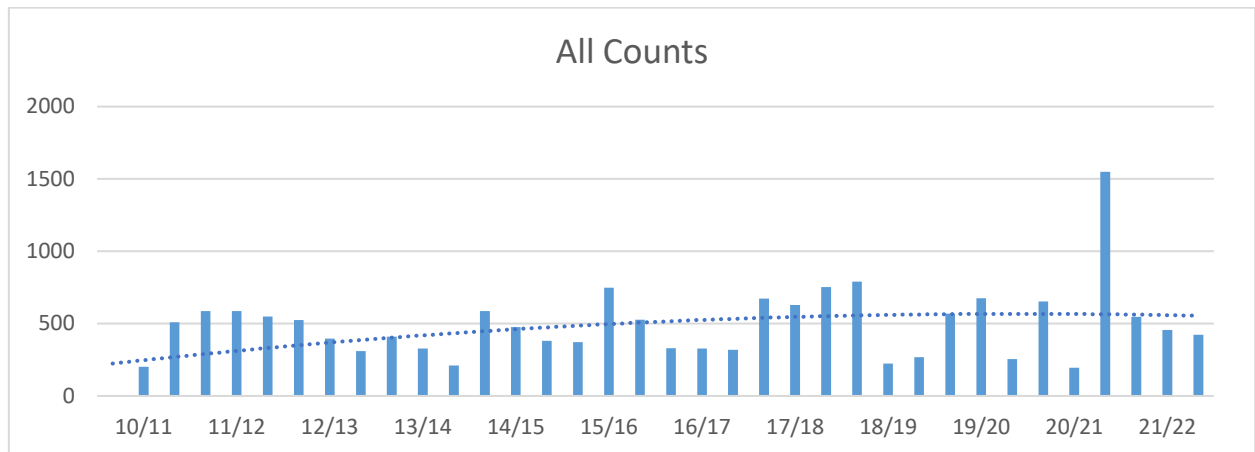
As for most of the finches, they are most commonly seen during the winter in larger flocks of seed feeders.

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 and do considerable damage.

Total of All Winter Period Counts (Target Species)



The results are similar to those of the breeding period, the total counts made in the late winter of 2018/19 have been the lowest for some time.

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 2022)