

## **RATCHEUGH and SNABLEAZES WILD BIRD SURVEY.**

### **REPORT FOR YEAR 2023,**

**These surveys have been carried out by members of the Alnwick Wildlife Group over the last 24 years.**

#### **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 intended 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-four 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. The number of game plots has increased considerably with very varied contents. Arable crops have also varied and moved with the rotation. This survey is an attempt to record any long term trends in population changes. 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. a process which has continued throughout the period of the survey. 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 are 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. The vagaries of weather and the many other changing conditions 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. bbs population trend graphs) These have become useful in helping to make more accurate assessments of the value of these surveys. But please note, the BTO trend maps (Also available for the North East Counties) record both winter and breeding period counts on one graph. Unlike AWG which produce separate graphs for each. BTO graphs began in 1994 whereas AWG for Ratcheugh and Snableazes started in 2000.

## Target species graphs for the breeding periods to 2022.

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. It is depressing to note how many species are being added to the Amber and Red lists. The one bright spot this year is that Song Thrush has been lifted from Red to Amber.

**Green** 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.

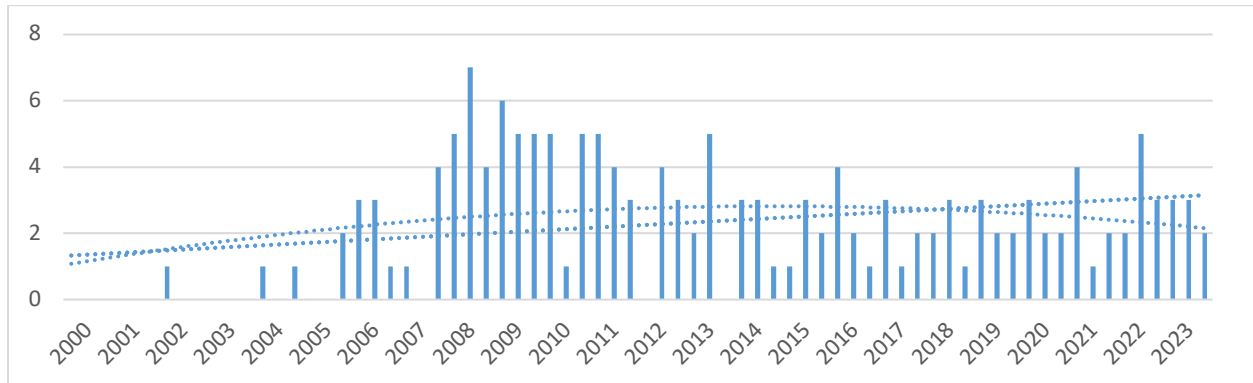
The UK National average changes in population are shown below each graph as an increase or decrease in percentages. These figures are based on the BTO Breeding Bird Survey. (Last updated in 2022)

**A** The percentage change between 1995 – 2021

**B** The estimated percentage change between 2021 – 2022

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. 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.

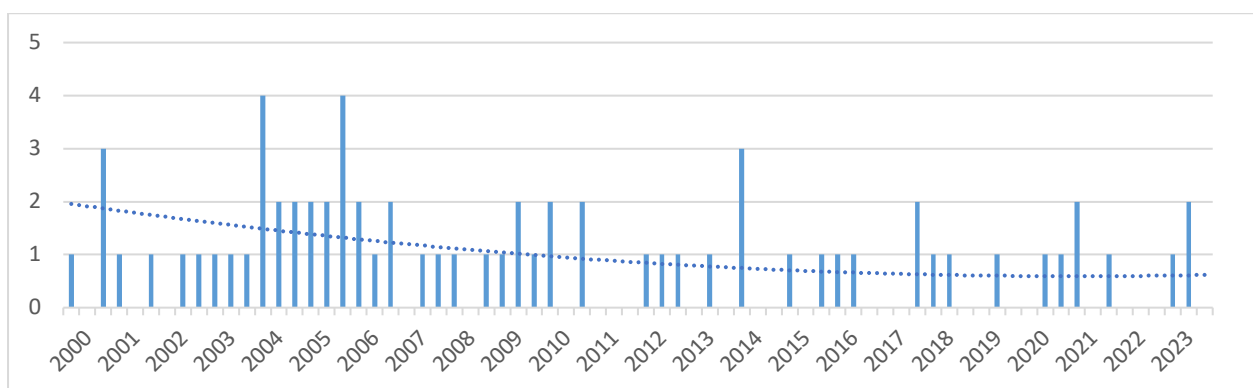
## Buzzard



The Buzzard graph follows very closely to the National trends. During the 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. All suitable territories are probably now occupied and the population is considered to be stable.

Green listed (A) +214% (B) -2%

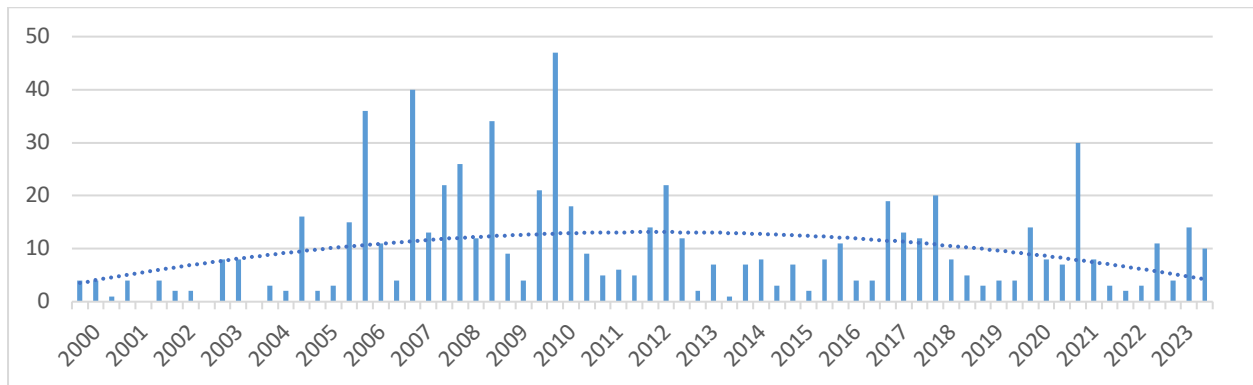
## Kestrel



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 and road kills are also claimed to be a common cause of losses.

Amber listed (A) -29% (B) -8%

## Grey Partridge



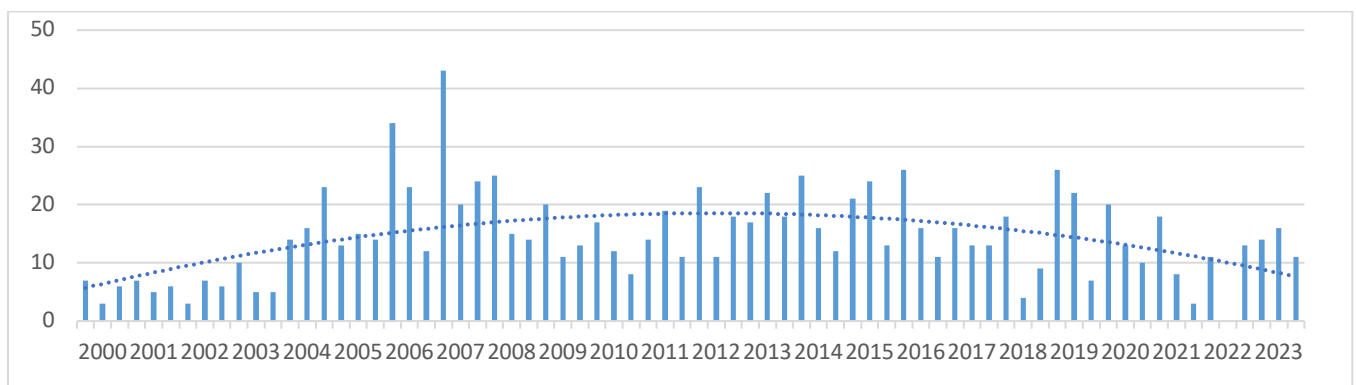
Higher counts in the North East coastal area, reported by NBA, can be attributed to the results of this Grey Partridge scheme. Ratcheugh and Snableazes farms are now seen as being the centre of the scheme, encouraging stock from here to populate the surrounding area. The hatching period this year was in a time of constant warm and dry weather, which should have been ideal. We do not have counts which include the fledgling birds. Nor do we have any results for the number of Partridge shot during the course of this survey.

Red listed

(A) -60%

(B) -2%

## Pheasant



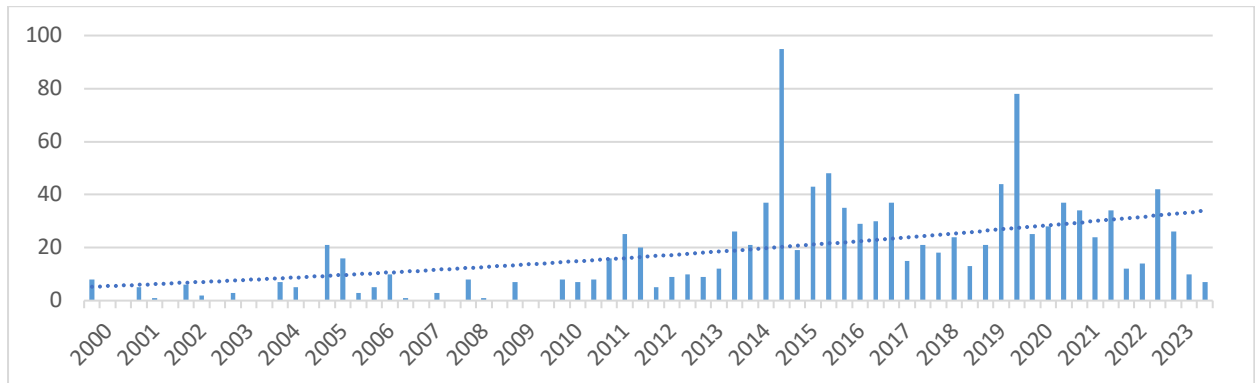
Little change from previous years. Although there are no releases of hand reared Pheasants at Ratcheugh and Snableazes, numbers have again been maintained, despite some shooting. Counts can be very misleading due to massive releases of hand reared Pheasants for shooting in the surrounding area. There is a regular breeding population at R & S, which is sufficient to maintain the breeding population.

Green listed

(A) +38%

(B) -15%

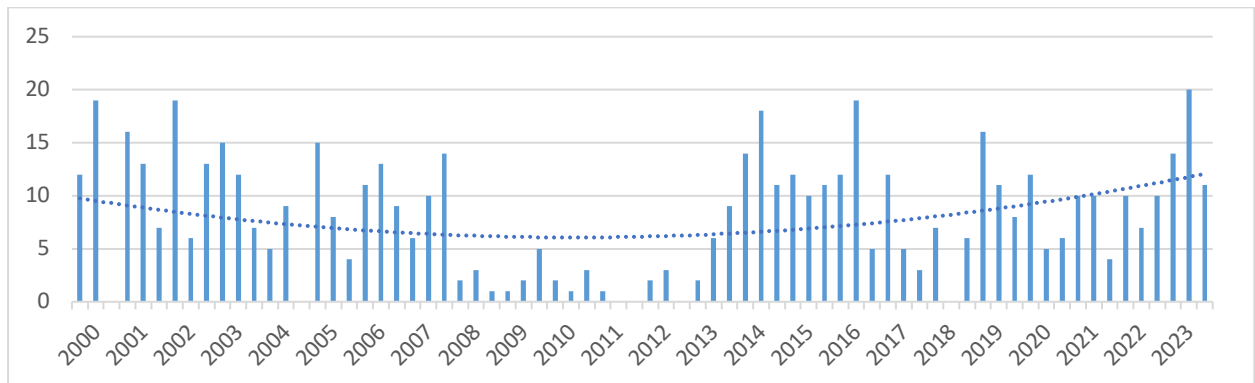
## Lapwing



Changes in the annual rotation of crops which include areas of winter stubble or fallow ground 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 one part of the farms to another wherever the rotation provides the most suitable breeding habitat. 2023 is a good example but the late spring sowing time resulting in the destruction of the early Lapwing nests.

Red listed (A) -36% (B) +1%

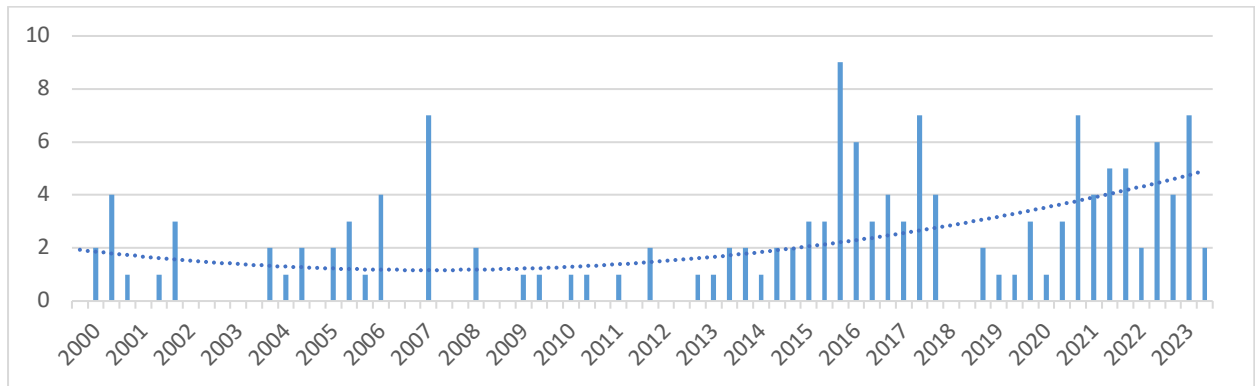
## Skylark



Conditions which suit Lapwings also favour Skylarks. The population is healthy and compares very well with the national averages. The period between 2008 and 2012 proved to be lacking in good habitat for breeding, when most crops were autumn sown. Since then the changes made in the crop rotation and the return to some over wintered stubble have improved Skylark numbers.

Red listed (A) -16% (B) +2%

## Wren



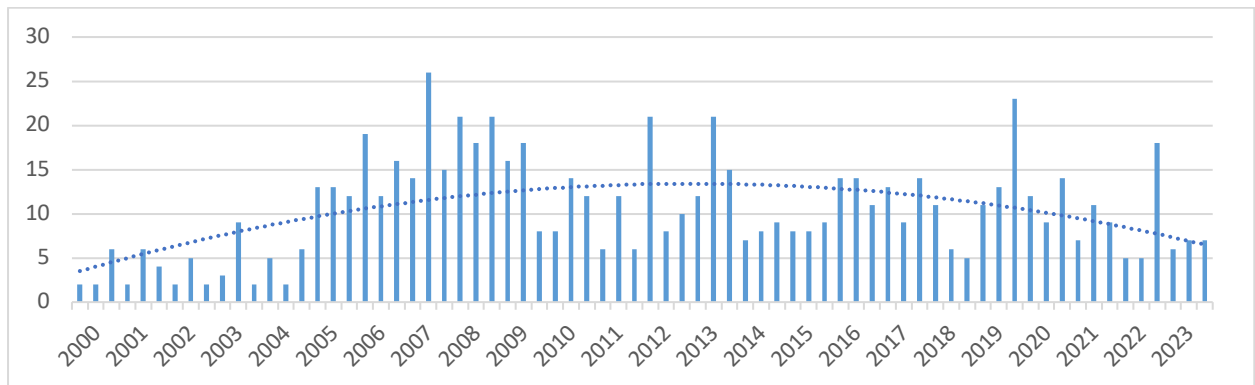
Wren numbers had slowly risen to their highest average in 2016/17 but a cold spell with some snow in the spring of 2018 appears to have reduced counts again. Since then, counts have increased again. Numbers can fluctuate so quickly that the atlases do not keep pace with the changes.

Amber listed

(A) +22%

(B) +9%

## Dunnock



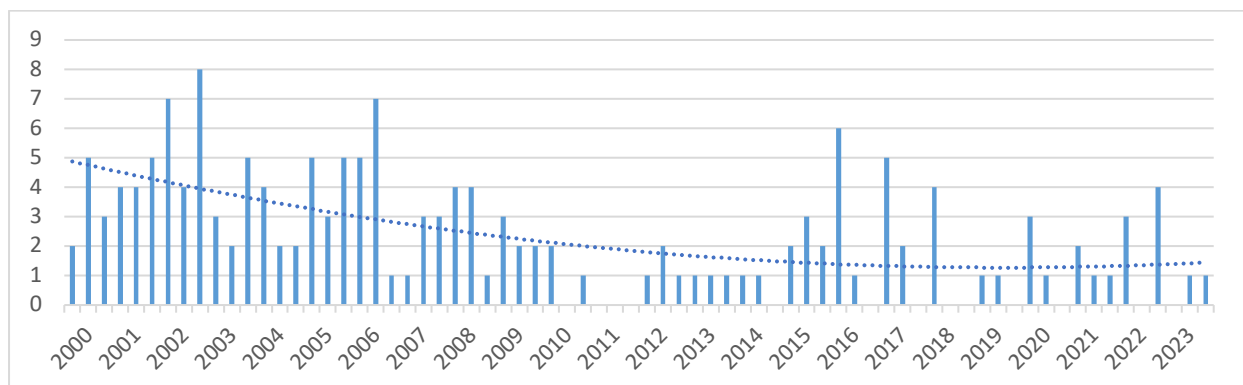
The increase in population nationally is due to the spread of this species into new areas in the west. Here in the survey areas, Dunnock numbers have tended to level off but are very similar to the national average.

Amber listed

(A) +7%

(B) -4%

## Robin



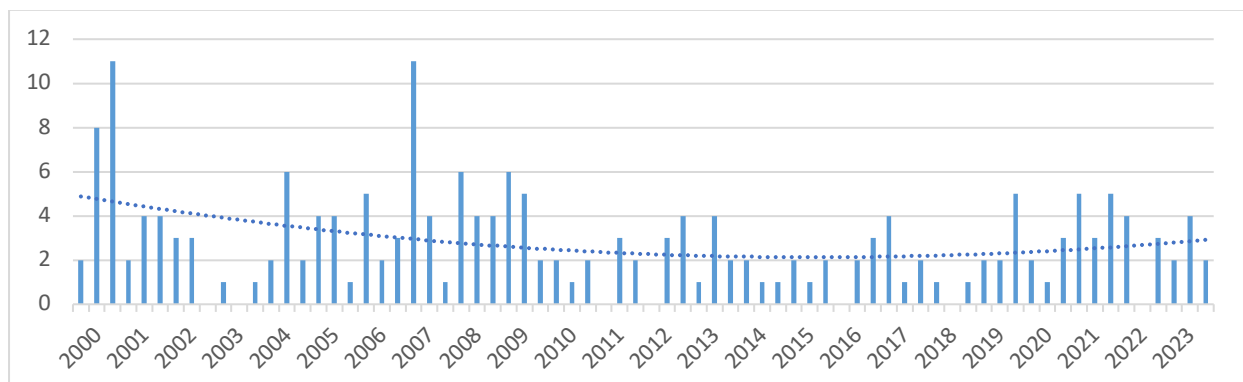
Numbers have not returned to the pre 2010 level but have been maintained at irregular lower counts. Both Robin and Dunnock are not easy to count accurately when the improved hedges are in full leaf due to their mouse-like behaviour and it is likely that they are being under reported.

Green listed

(A) +30%

(B) -4%

## Song Thrush



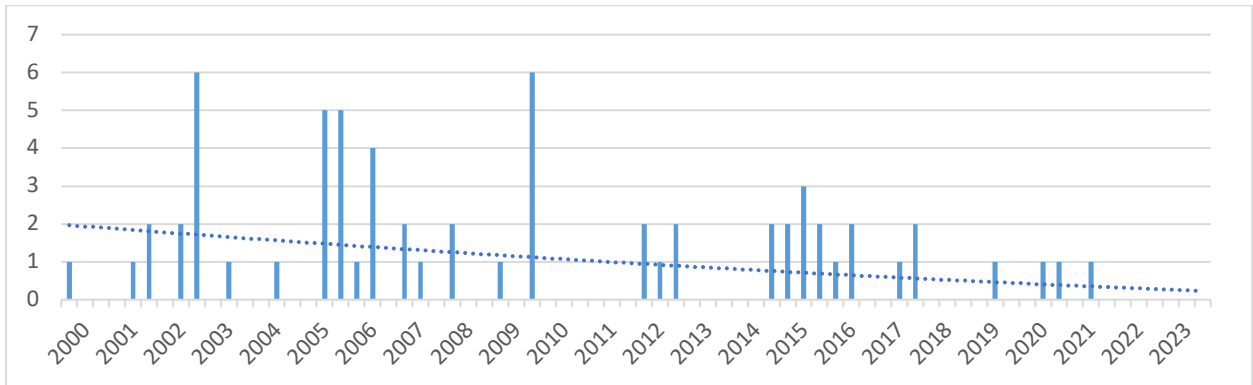
Following the national decline in population, which has happened over a long period, numbers now appear to be stabilizing or even on the increase. Numbers of Song Thrushes in arable parts have always been lower than in urban or more wooded areas. In the survey area there have been some higher counts in 2019 to 2022. Numbers here are similar to national averages.

Amber listed

(A) +23%

(B) -1%

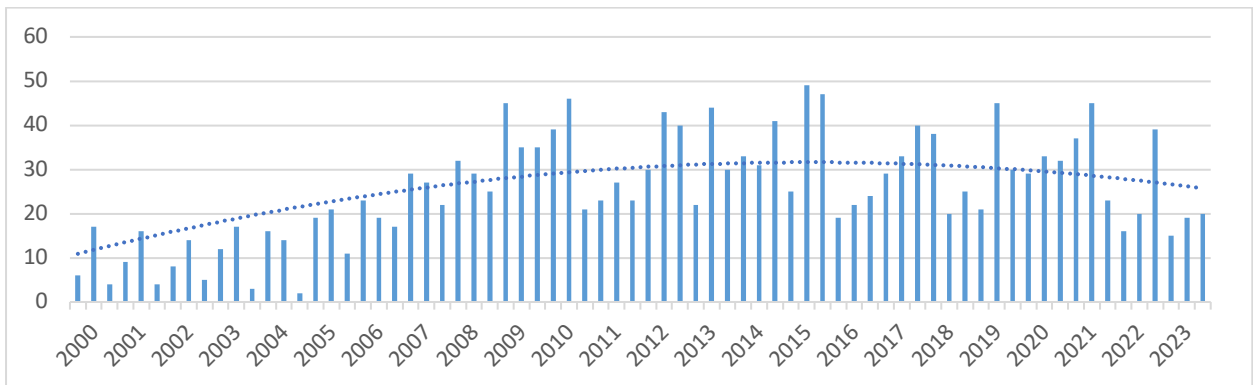
Mistle Thrush



Little change. Only one pair of Mistle Thrush have been recorded here with occasional family groups and could easily be overlooked on some visits. Again, small numbers can result in misleading graphs. Nationally there has been a gradual decline in numbers over a period of years but the last two years have shown signs of a recovery. This is not evident in our counts.

Red listed (A) -48% (B) -9%

Blackbird

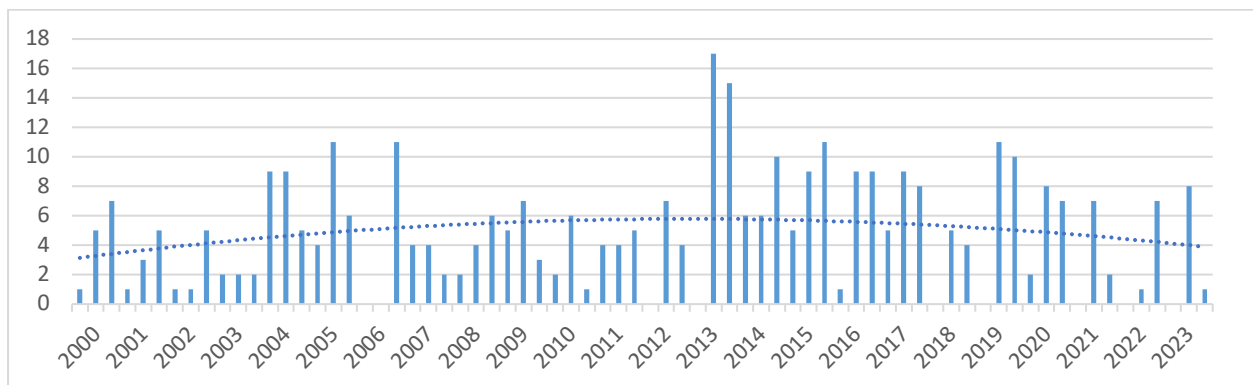


National figures show that there has been a steadily growing Blackbird population for a number of years. In the survey area there has been an increase of much larger proportions during the last fifteen years. More than many other species they have probably benefited from the provision of food and predator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

Green listed (A) +12% (B) -4%



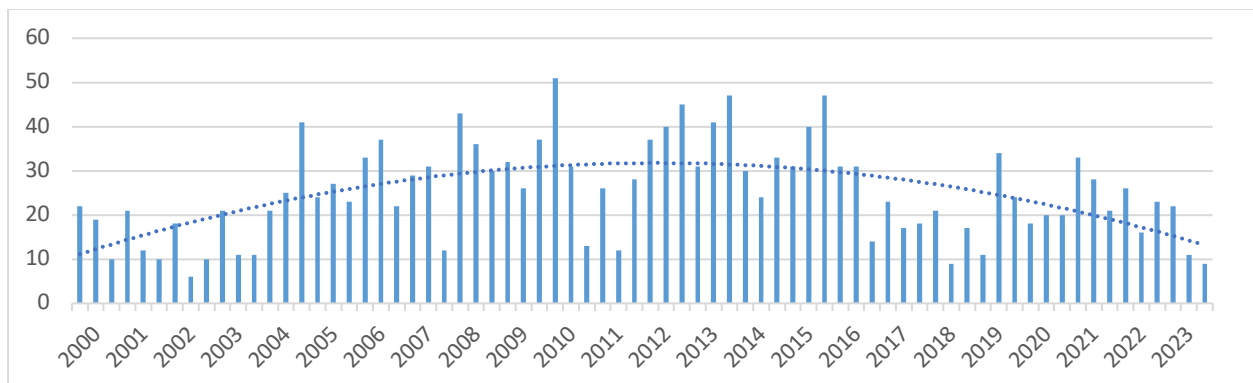
## Whitethroat



Whitethroats made a late arrival this spring with none being recorded at the April survey. The graph shows that this is not unusual. As 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.

Amber listed (A) +17% (B) -1%

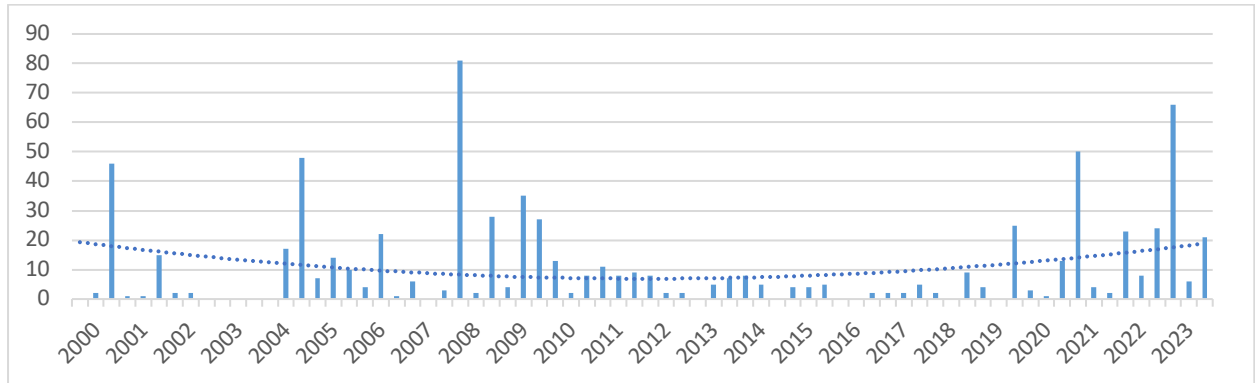
## Chaffinch



Chaffinches have shown a healthy increase since the start of the survey, but counts in the last few years have fallen slightly, which is reflected in the national figures but the population here still compares well with the national average. Improved and new hedges will have increased the habitat available for breeding Blackbirds.

Green listed (A) -38% (B) -8%

## Linnet



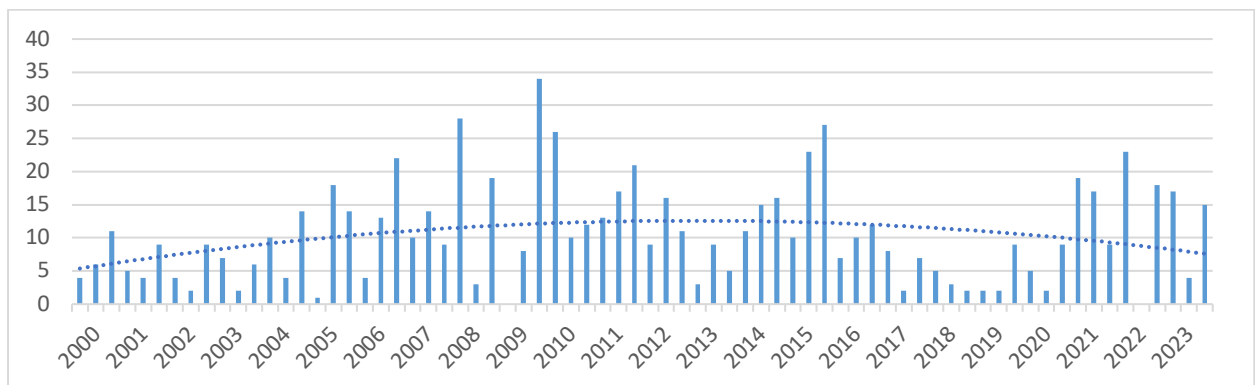
There are very few suitable breeding sites for Linnets in this survey area. They prefer areas of denser bush, the most popular being Gorse thickets. Nationally they are in decline which would agree with the survey trend. Linnets are sometimes seen during the surveys still in flocks before breeding in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

Red listed

(A) -27%

(B) +10%

## Goldfinch



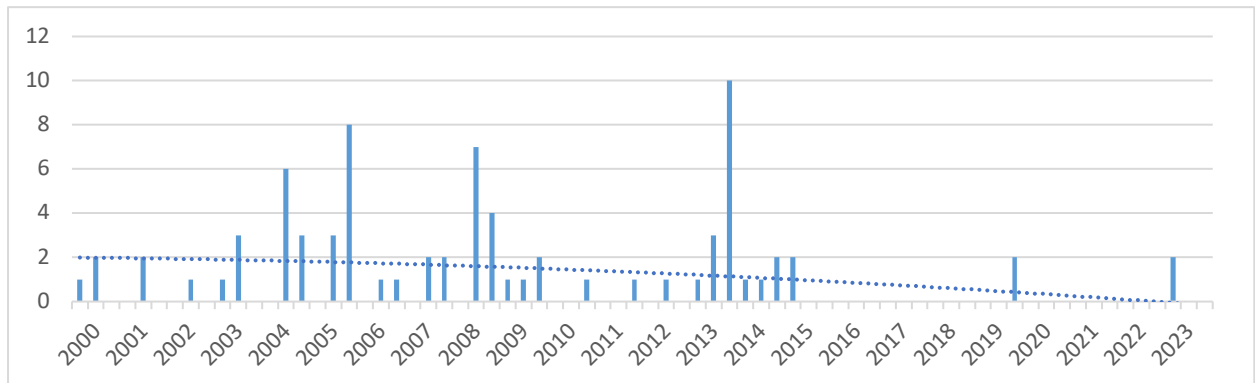
Smaller counts in 2018 to 2020 have been followed by a healthy rise in 2021 and 2022. In the north east, there has been a higher increase in numbers than most other parts of the country, a result which is not mirrored by these survey counts. They continue to extend their breeding range to the north of Scotland.

Green listed

(A) +143%

(B) +2%

## Greenfinch



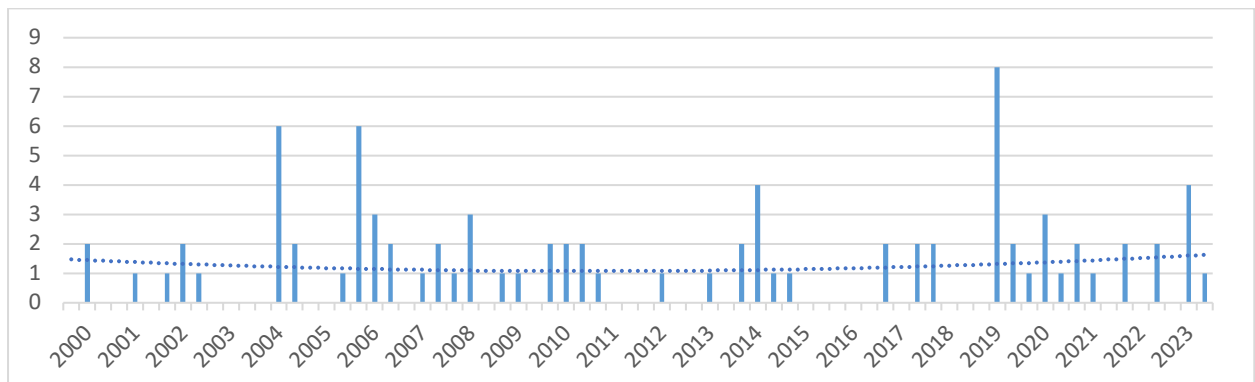
Only one record of Greenfinch has been made between 2015 to 2021, which follows the national trend. Losses of birds are partly due to the disease trichomonosis. This is another species increasingly found more in urban gardens. National figures show a continued fall.

Red listed

(A) -66%

(B) +1%

## Reed Bunting



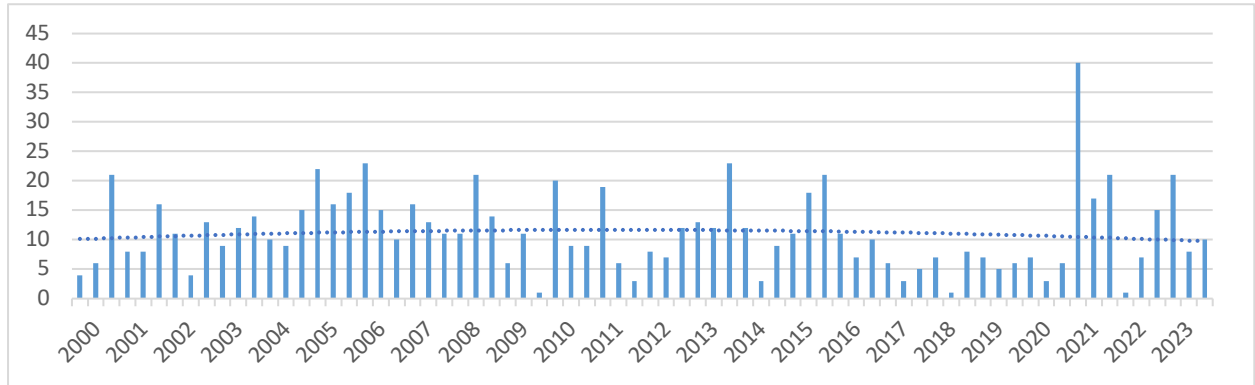
There is very limited scope for Reed Buntings to breed here with practically no suitable habitat for them. More Reed Buntings are being recorded using oil seed rape crops as an alternative breeding site. This move has been reported from this survey area. There are only one or two breeding pairs normally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

Amber listed

(A) +32%

(B) -4%

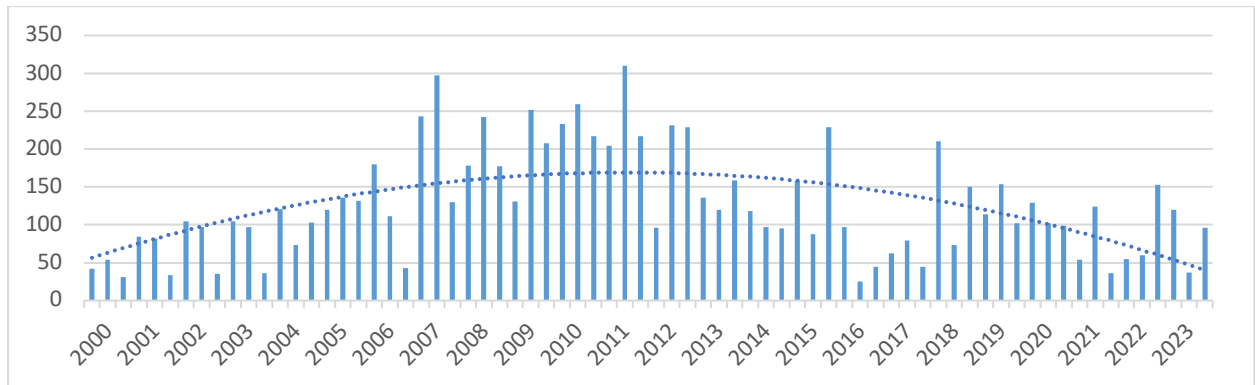
Yellowhammer



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. The high count in April of 2021 was of a small flock before breeding.

Red listed (A) -34% (B) -6%

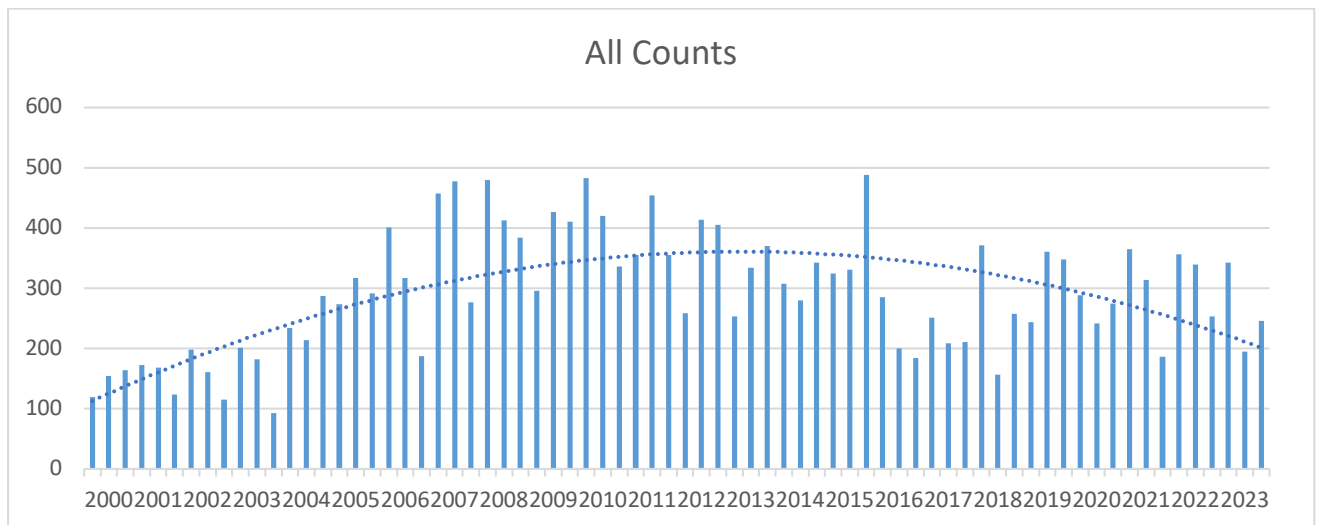
Woodpigeon



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.

Amber listed (A) +35% (B) -3%

## 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 surveys.

### Peacocks.

A small flock of Peacocks have been residents of the Estate for some time. Lately they were moved from Brizzlie to somewhere near the observatory at Ratcheugh where they have settled. Although not officially on our records, they have been noted by our surveyors. There have been several sightings of a group of juveniles (3-5) mainly on Snableazes. On one occasion this year a Peahen was spotted brooding young a few days old. They were very lively, running over her back. They were left undisturbed.

If Peacocks were recognised as a native species in this country, I am sure they would be Red Listed!

## Conclusions from the breeding period counts for 2022.

There are considerable changes to the following tables. Comparisons made to the BTO population graphs have been very helpful in making the following selections but are still based on estimates.

The results of this survey over the last few years compared with national averages shows that eight species have performed well: -

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

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

- Buzzard
- Kestrel (Amber listed)
- Pheasant.
- Reed Bunting (Amber listed)
- Dunnock (Amber listed)

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

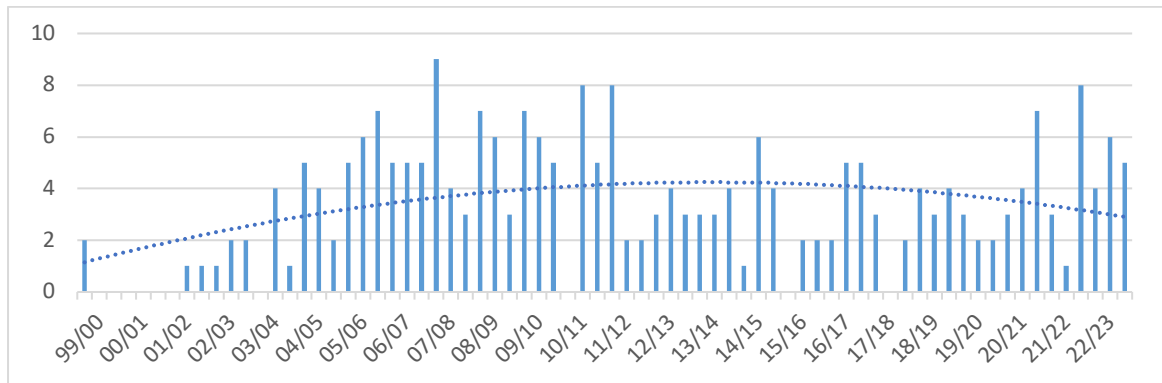
- Greenfinch (Red listed)
- Robin
- Woodpigeon (Amber listed)
- Mistle Thrush. ( Red listed)
- Goldfinch.

It is good to note that six of the Red listed species included in the Target list are performing better than national averages.

## 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.

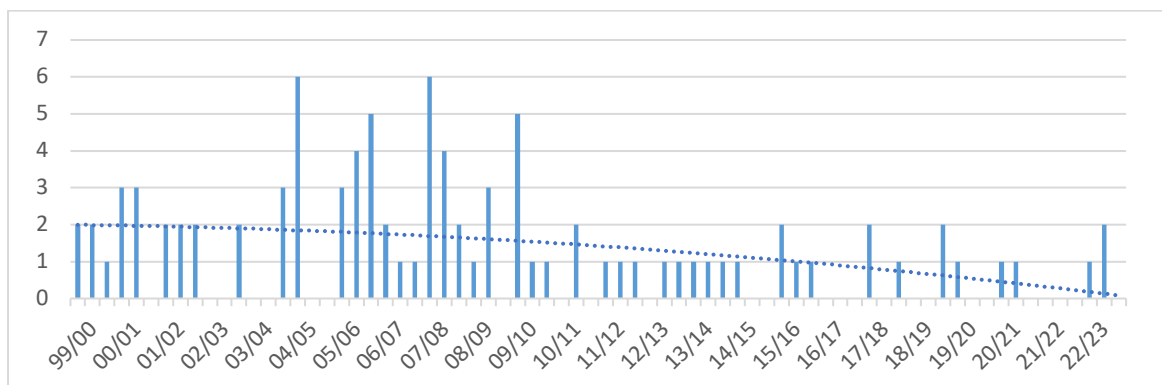
### Buzzard



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 feeding very often on “road kill”.

Green listed.

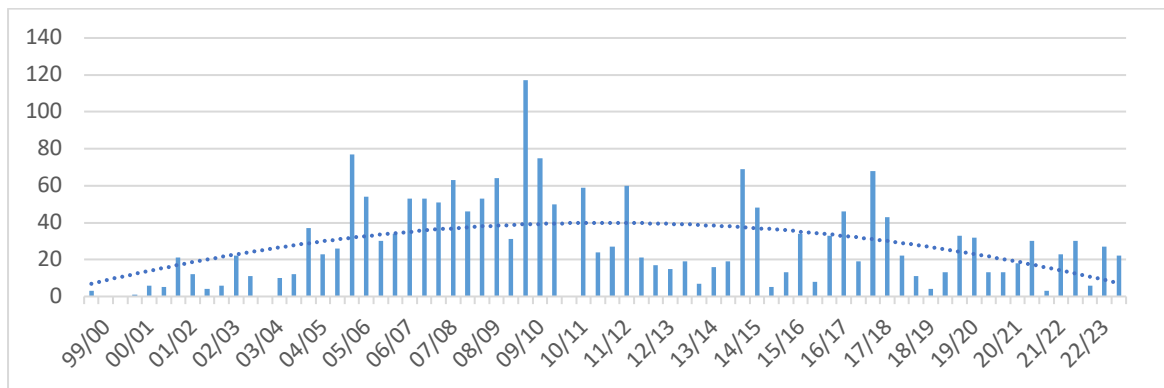
### Kestrel



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.

Amber listed.

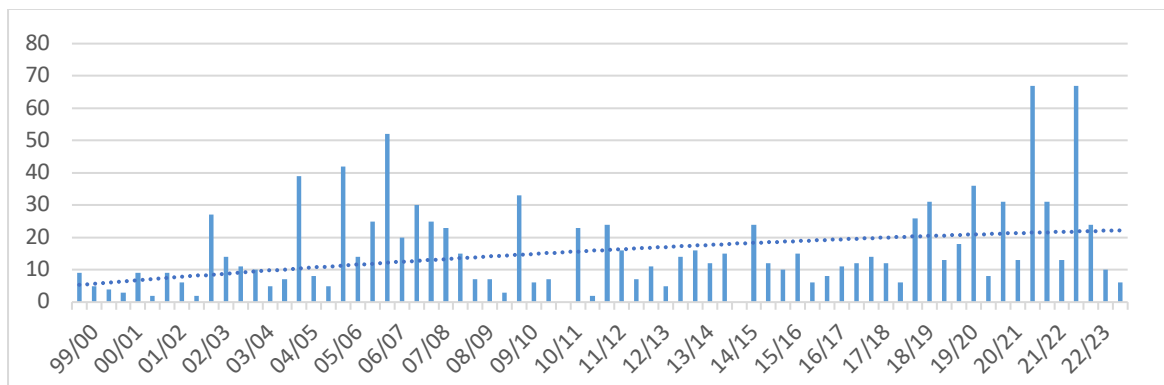
## Grey Partridge



No shooting was carried out in the 2020/21 season due to 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. We have no records of numbers of Grey Partridge shot each year.

Red listed.

## Pheasant

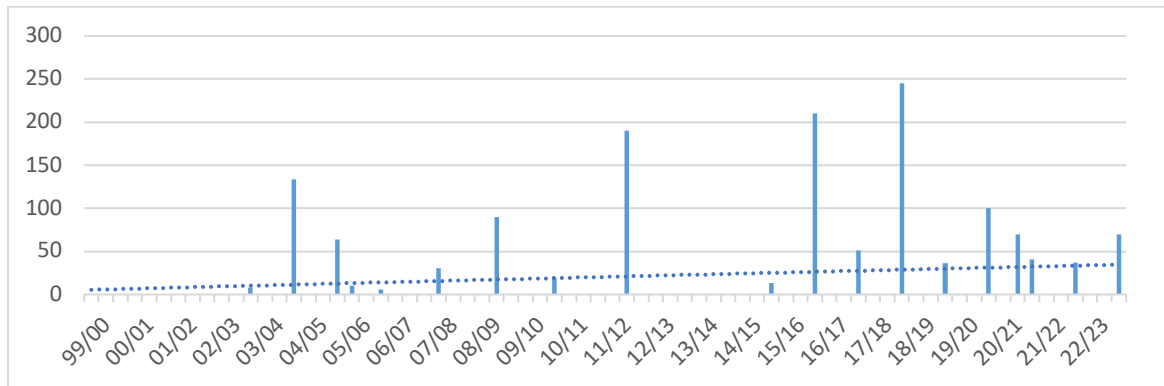


Little or no shooting in 2020/21 appears to have allowed the numbers of pheasants to have increased dramatically. It will be interesting to see what effect this has on numbers after the current breeding season.

Green listed.



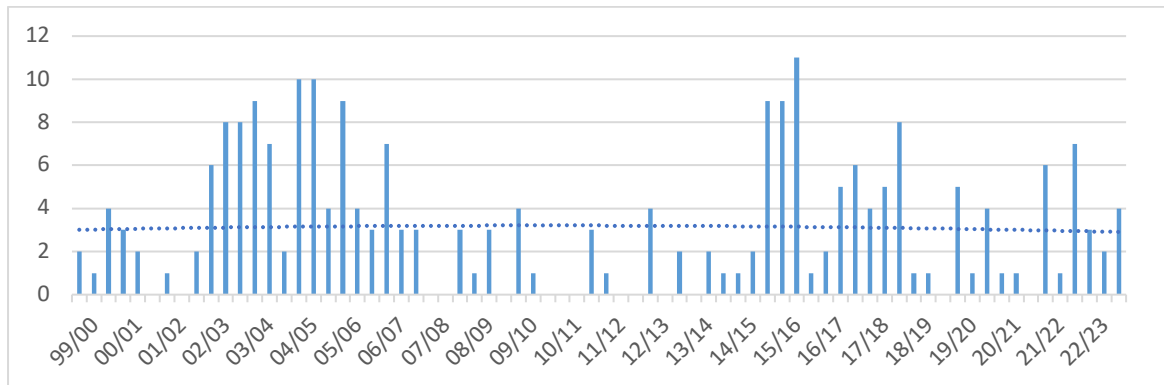
## Lapwing



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 recorded at Ratcheugh.

Red listed.

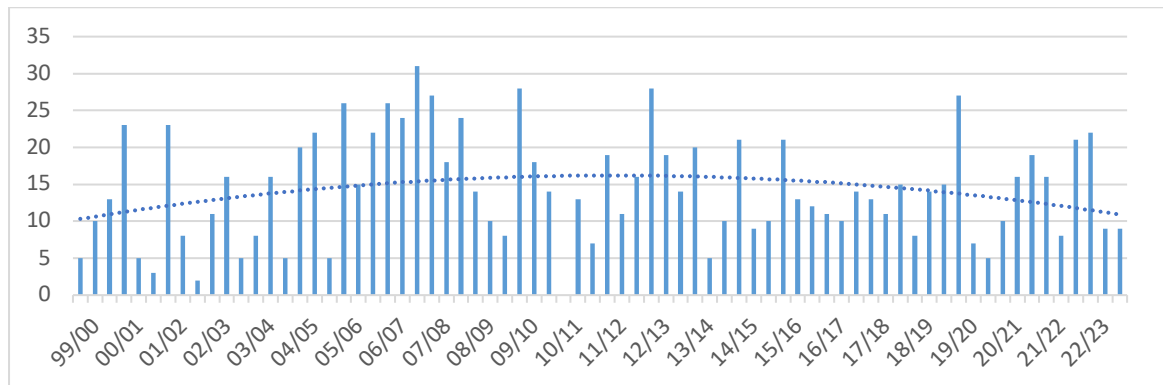
## Wren



This graph shows the continual rise and fall of the population. They are classed as the most numerous species in Britain, this may be true some of the time but not always. Increased counts of Wrens in 2016 to 2018 would indicate that the population was again building up but 2019 produced very low numbers. Followed by an increase in 2022/23. Only one or none were recorded at each visit during winter of 2020/21.

Amber listed.

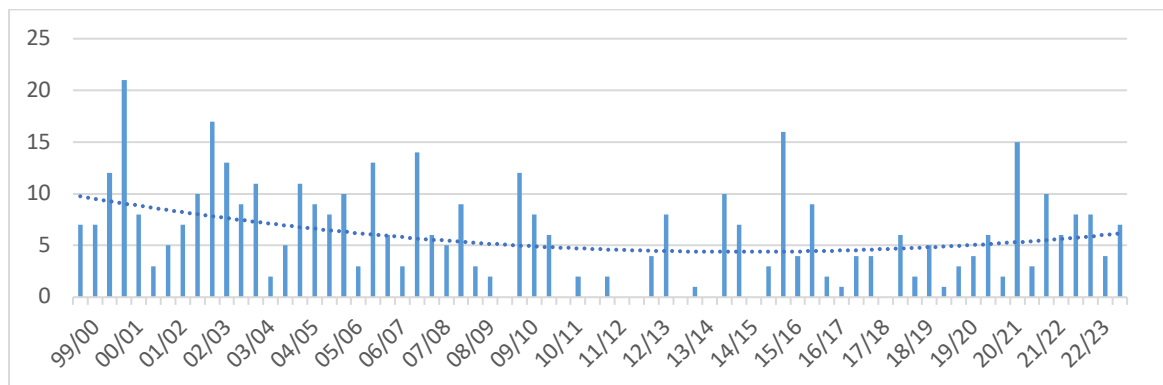
## Dunnock



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 their more usual counts in the following years.

Amber listed.

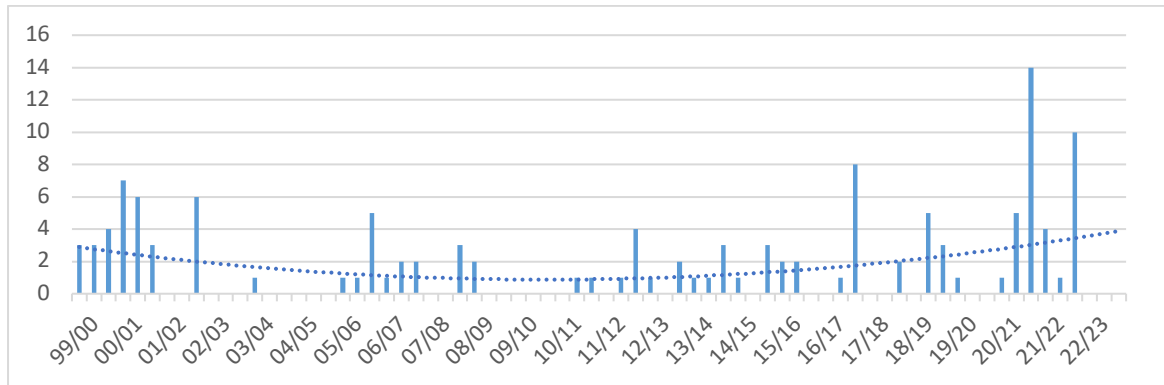
## Robin



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 shown, with only a slow increase in counts in the following years. This situation seems to agree with the Breeding period chart. Total counts of both Dunnocks and Robins are higher in the winter period than in the breeding season. They are more likely to be spotted when hedges are bare and their more secretive nature is exposed.

Green listed.

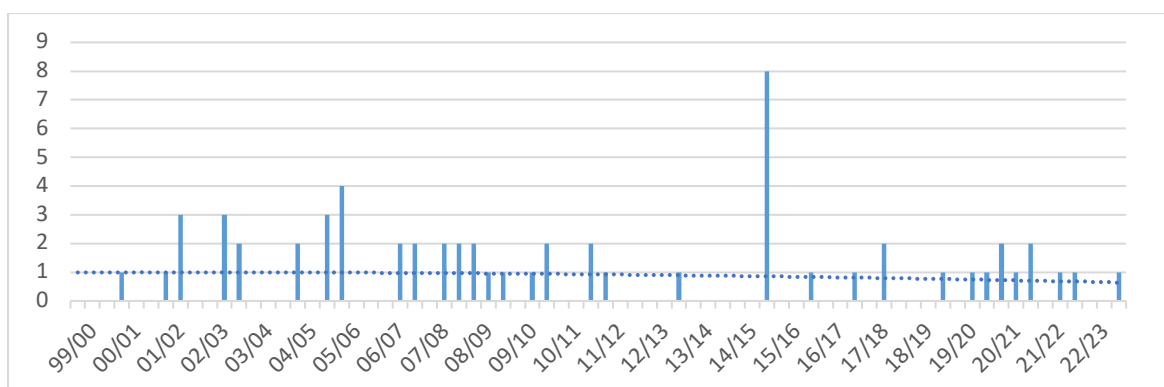
## Song Thrush



Winter numbers may have been increased by an influx of migrants from northern Europe. Counts have been very erratic during the winter period but definite increases in the last two years. They appear to prefer more sheltered areas of woodland or game plots, or urban gardens than the open arable fields. Nationally they are gradually on the increase.

Amber listed.

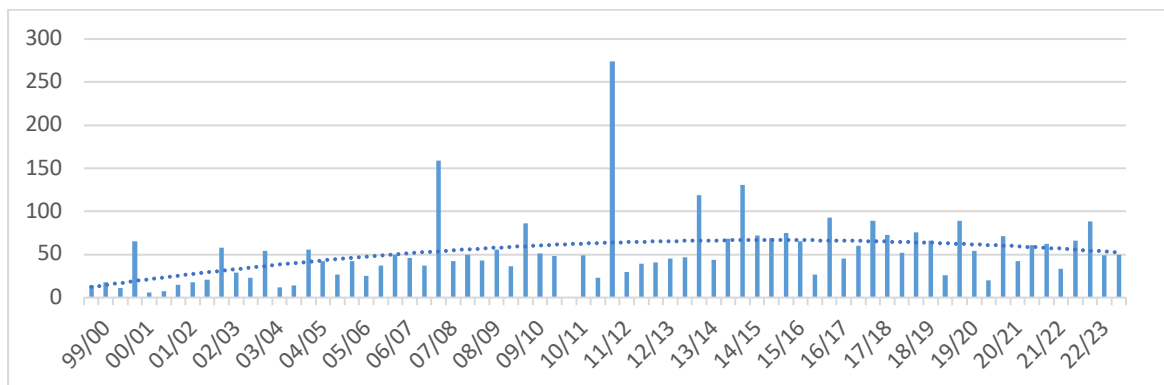
## Mistle Thrush



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, wintering together.

Red listed.

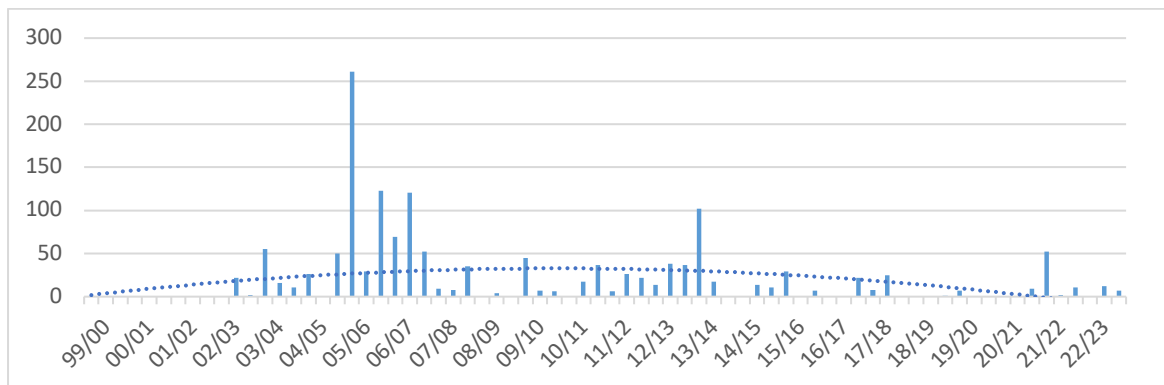
## Blackbird



A continuing increase in Blackbird numbers arriving here in the winter. The first count of most late Novembers, clearly shows a much higher number of birds arriving from Europe and being recorded here, 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.

Green listed.

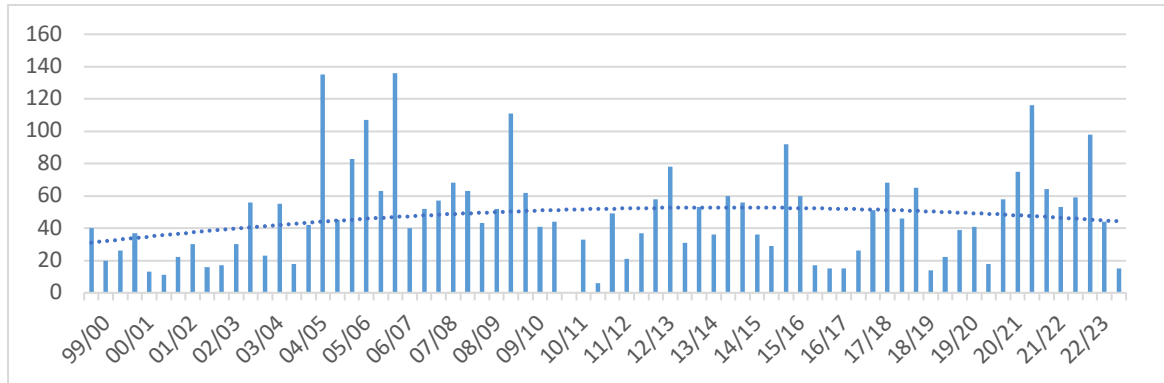
## Tree Sparrow



Similar to to 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 this more feed areas were provided and finch flocks became more fragmented, 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 few years when weather conditions in most of Europe have been milder and did not encourage birds to migrate. Tree Sparrows in winter are commonly reported from garden feeding stations.

Red listed.

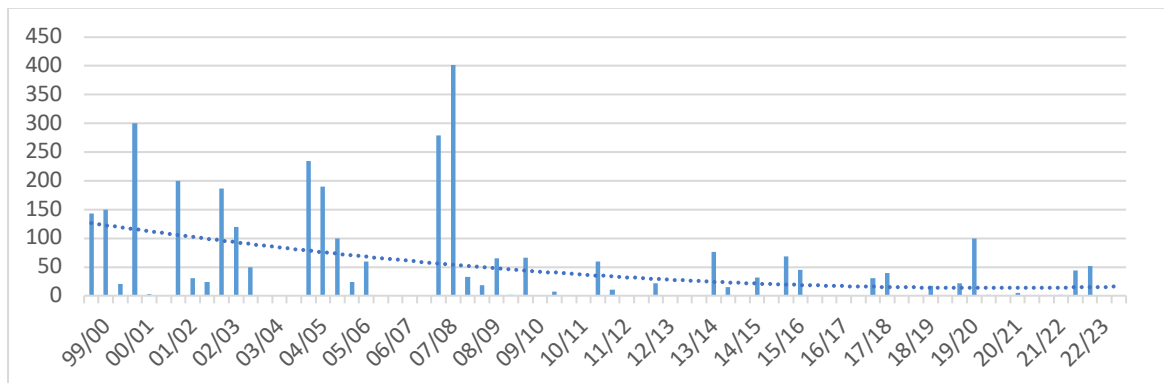
## Chaffinch



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

Green listed.

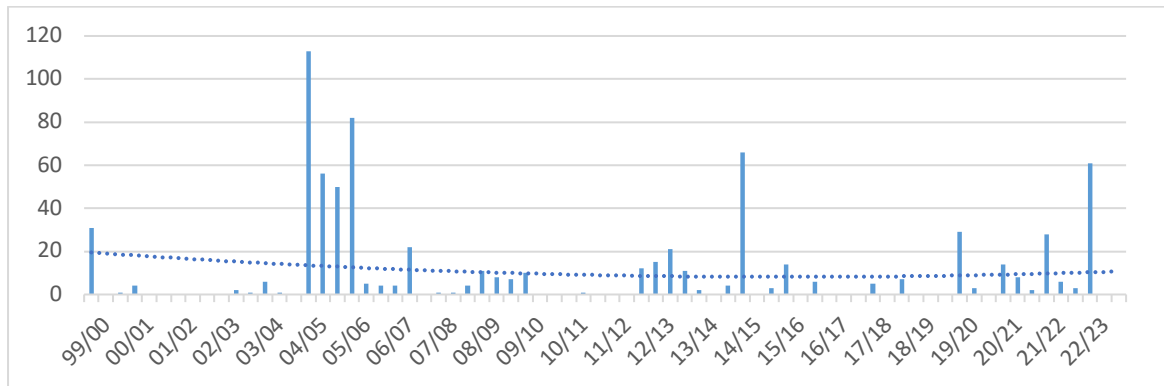
## Linnet



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.

Red listed.

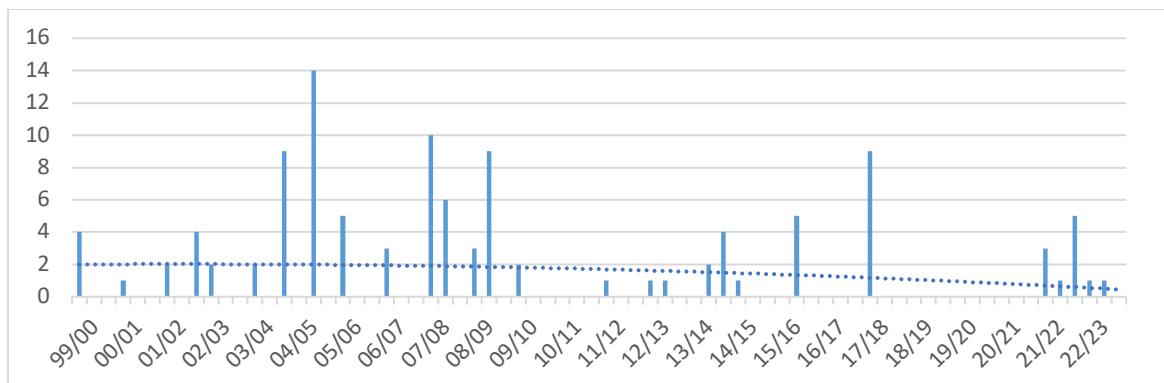
## Goldfinch



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

Amber listed.

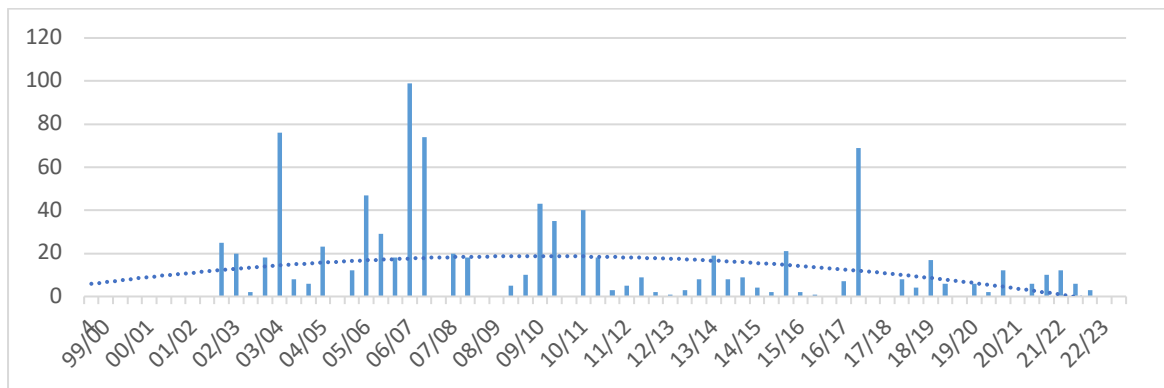
## Greenfinch



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.

Red listed.

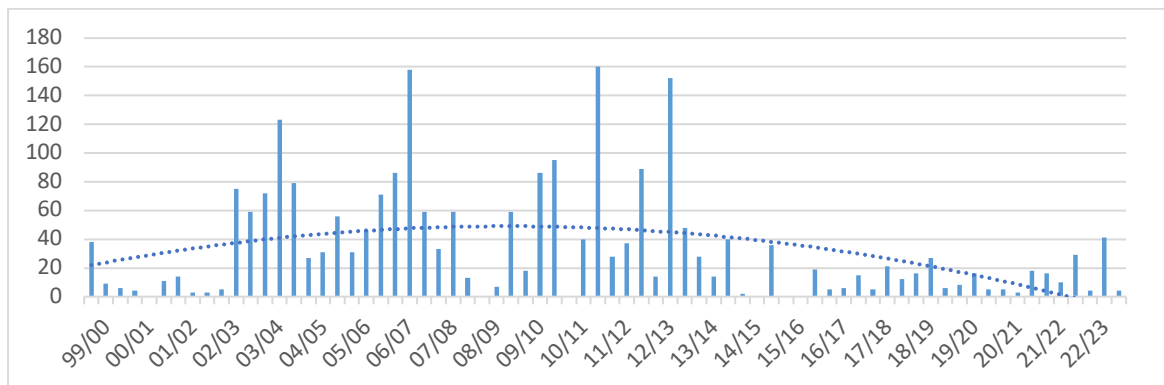
## Reed Bunting



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.

Amber listed.

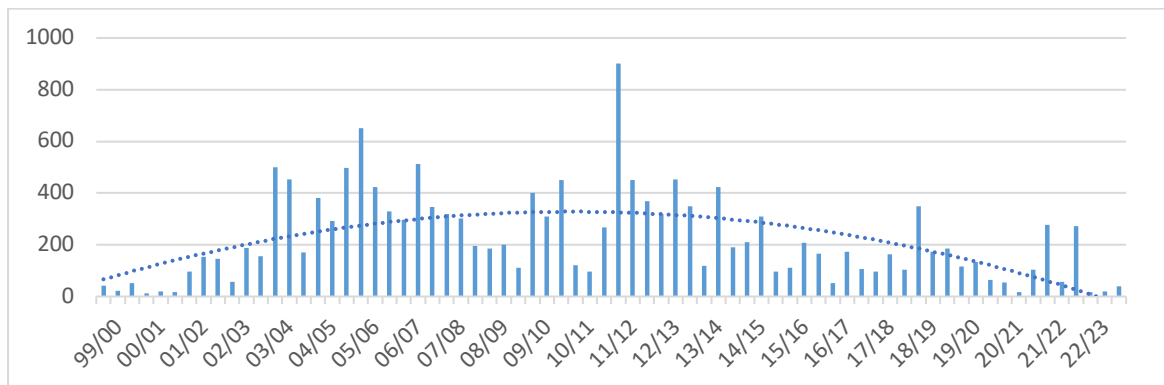
## Yellowhammer



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

Red listed.

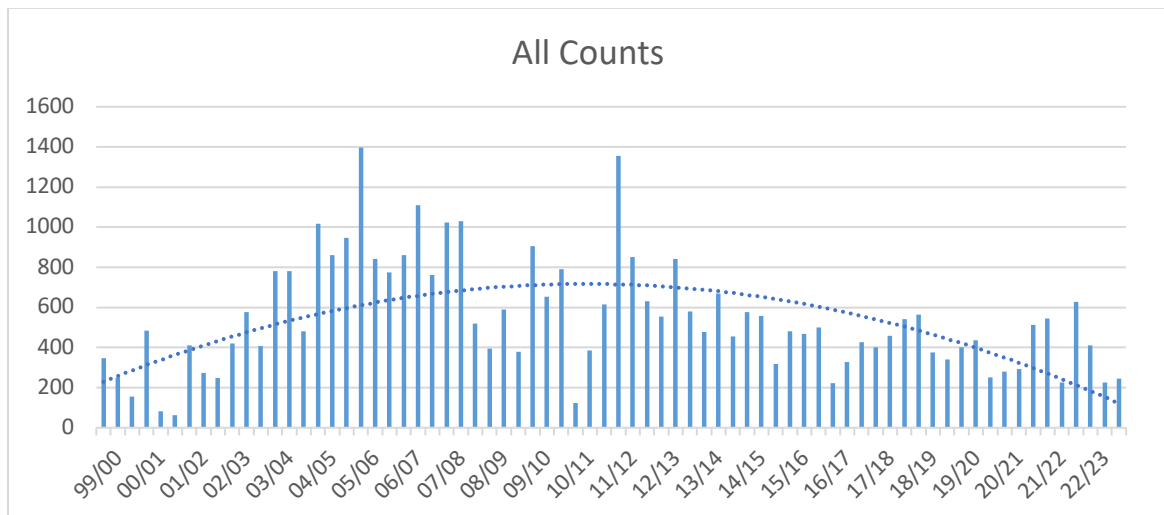
## Woodpigeon



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 which has been 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.

Amber listed.

## 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 increased areas of game crops planted both here and on neighbouring farms have given these species more widespread winter habitats, many of which have 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 at Ratcheugh and Snableazes have not had any weed control.

Jim Clark. (July 2023)