ALNWICK WILDLIFE GROUP.

NORTHUMBERLAND ESTATES BIRD SURVEY.

REPORT FOR APRIL2023 – FEBRUARY 2024.

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. The Cuckoo is again included in this report.

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 and includes a Botanical survey which is being added to each year.

Areas of the Survey

The survey is taking place on four areas where Northumberland Estates are attempting to encourage 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 but some Pheasants are released for the shoot.

Kimmer Lough is classed as a Kettle Hole and is included in the Bewick and Beanley Moors SSSI. Google gives e detailed description of the areas. Which makes interesting readiing.

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 similar 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 conditions.

Analysis of Data

The counts of the target species from each area are totaled 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. 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 outdated. 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 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.

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

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 1995-2021

(B)A Breeding Bird Survey trend as an estimated average % rise or fall over the period 2021-2022

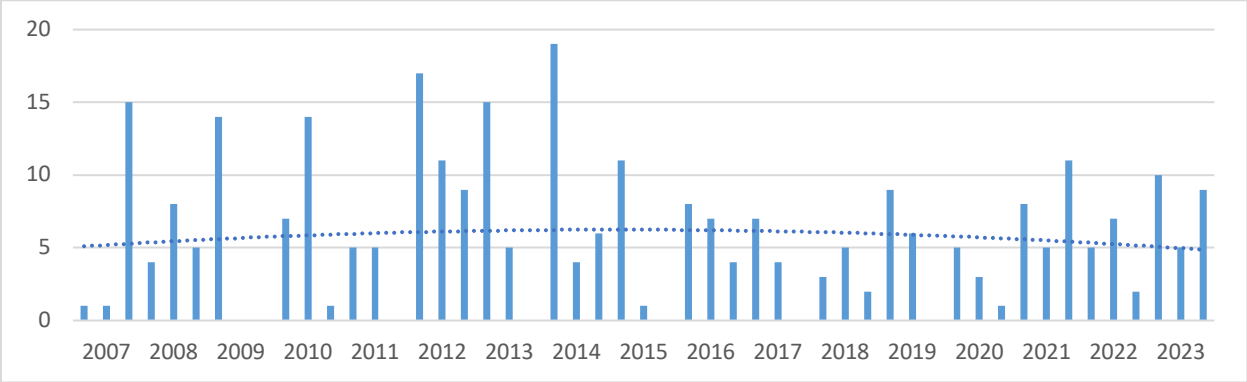
Please note that these are the latest complete figures published by BTO.

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

These surveys cannot include the effects of any bird diseases on populations but recognizes that they can have devastating results. Tick infestation is a carrier of several diseases which can severely affect Red Grouse. It would be interesting to know what effect Ticks may be having on other wild species such as Curlew, Lapwing and Meadow Pipit which frequent the same moorlands.

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

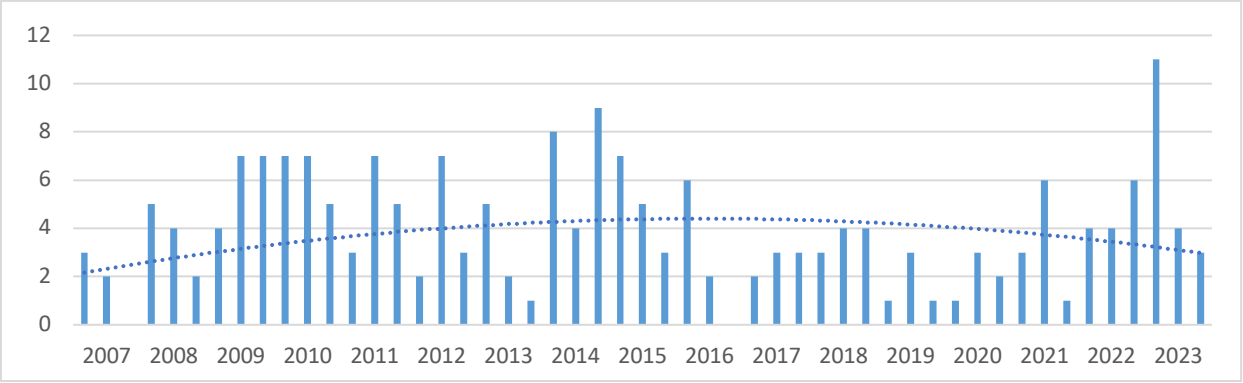
Mallard



Mallard have been recorded in very irregular numbers, which may include young birds at some counts, although very often the June counts are oddly, the lowest of the season and may not give a true picture of their breeding status. The apparent fall in counts between 2016 and 2020 have been followed by an increase in subsequent years. 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 not appear to agree with our survey results.

Amber listed (A) +8% (B) -10%

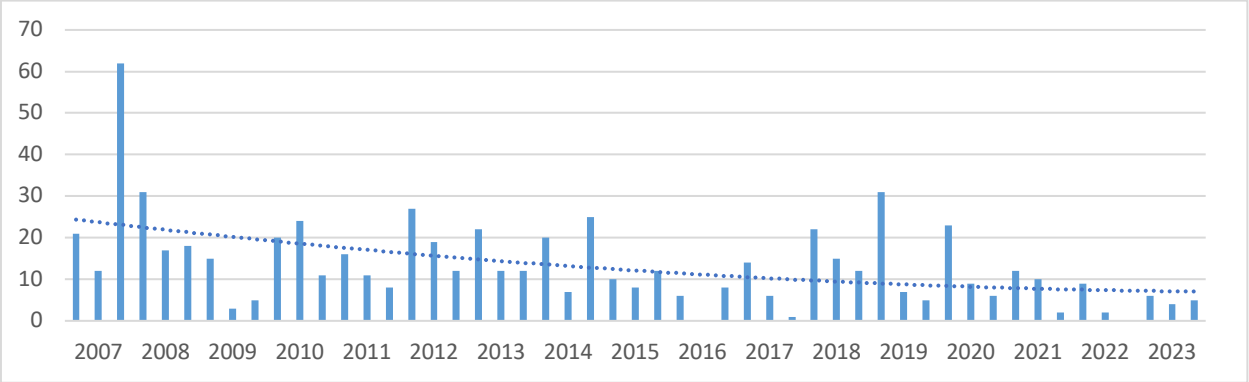
Buzzard



The vast spread of Common Buzzard into the eastern counties in the last 30 years is reflected in the long-term trend figures shown below. A reduction in local counts during 2011/13 was attributed to poor breeding results and a levelling off due to pressure on available breeding territories. Our records for 2016 show a reduction in numbers which may be due to the very late breeding season in the North East and follows the national figures which showed a small drop in numbers. This has been followed by an increase in 2018 and another fall in 2019, which again followed the national figures. Counts have increased again in 2021 to 2023.

Green listed (A) +89% (B) -6%

Red Grouse

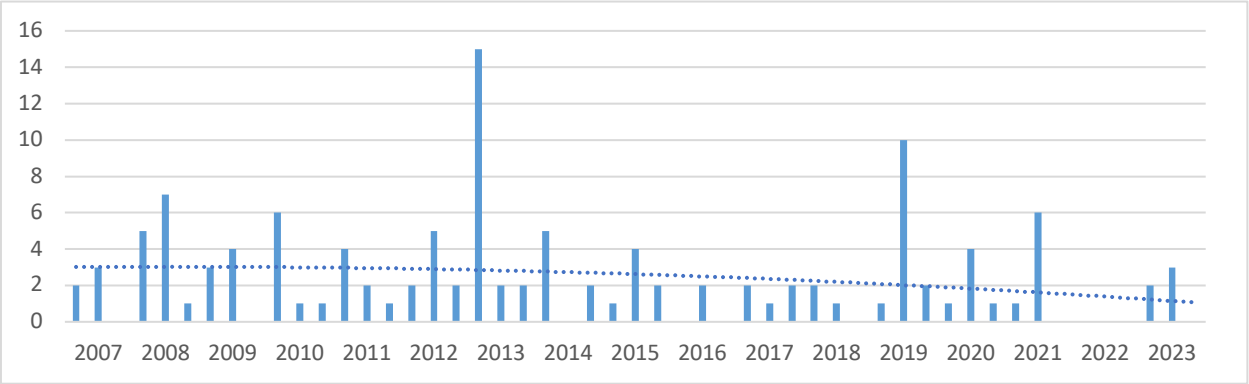


The population of Red Grouse appears to have disappointingly reduced over the last few years. None were shot in the 2016 to 2018 seasons, and very limited shooting in 2019 when approximately twenty birds were shot. Since then, for the last three years there has been very few birds shot. These counts may be very misleading and numbers recorded during the winter are usually much higher (see the winter chart) when birds are less secretive. One or two pairs have bred successfully in recent years at the Black Lough but it is thought that they may have moved to areas of higher population once on the wing. An increasing problem with Tick numbers may account for some loss of Red Grouse.

(NBA) shows major gains in the area of the Cheviots. Our records show a decline in numbers which would agree with the national figures.

Amber listed (A) -10% (B) -19

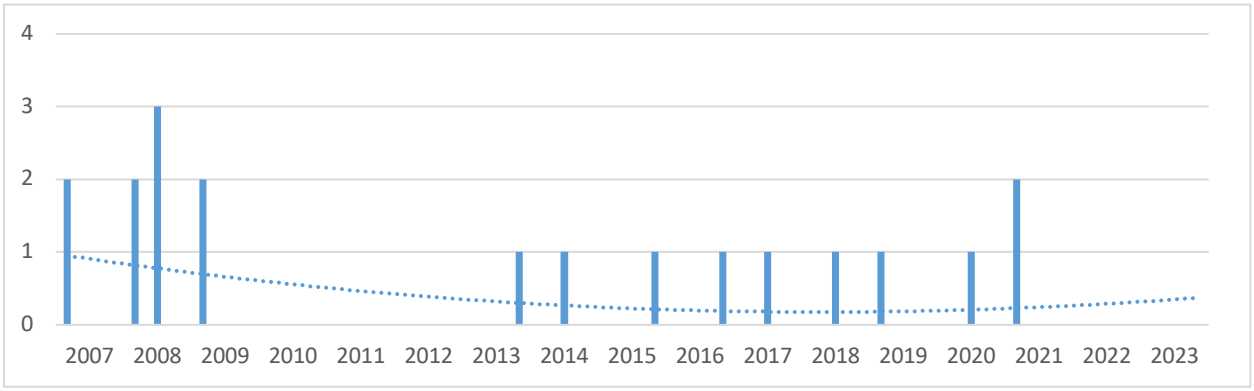
Red Legged Partridge.



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. None were recorded in the 2022 breeding season and only one or two in 2023. Records here agree with the National average.

Green listed (A) +26% (B) -26%

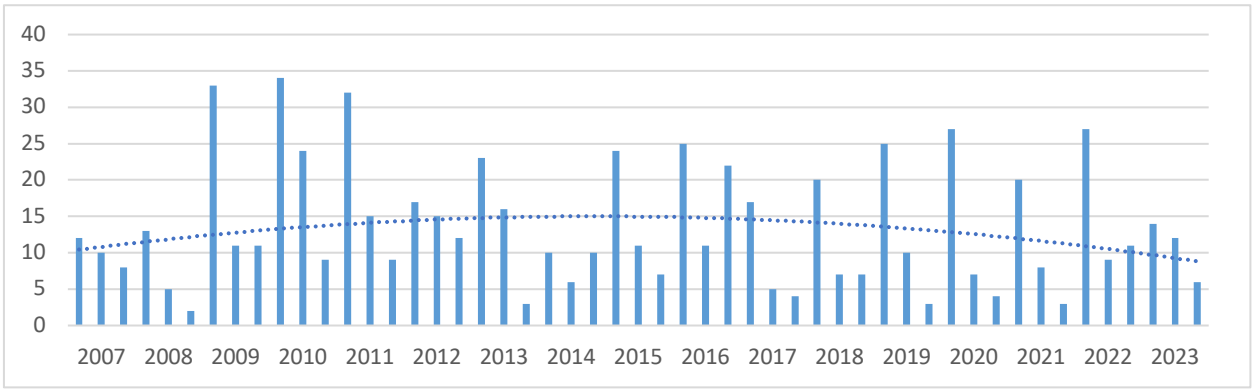
Grey Partridge



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 the Alnwick Moors due to their proximity to the Estates Grey Partridge scheme on the coastal farms.

Red listed (A) -63% (B) -5%

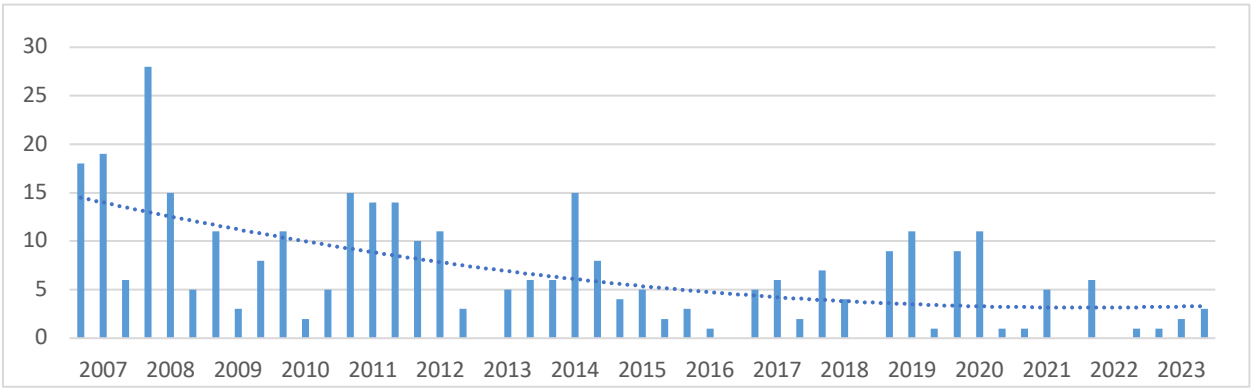
Pheasant.



Counts of Pheasant will always vary where they have been released for shooting. There is one release pen affecting the survey which is on the border of Hulne Moor. At the Kimmer Lough some birds have been released and the area is shot over on a very regular basis throughout the season. This graph shows that the highest counts are almost always made at the April visit and the lowest counts are made at the last visit in June. Can anyone explain this? Is it the result of predation of juvenile birds?

Green listed (A) +34% (B) -14%

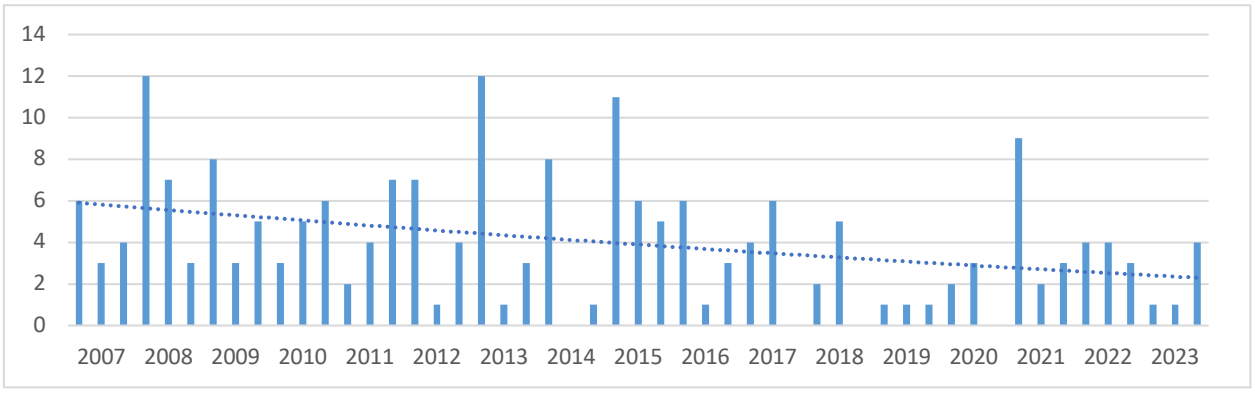
Lapwing



Another poor year for Lapwing. The decline shown in this graph would seem to be following the general trend both nationally and locally. Lapwing are early breeders and will start to flock and move before the last visits in June, which is clearly indicated. (BA) shows the highest losses are from the western side of the country. (NBA) indicates a rise in population in our area which is more likely to be on marginal grassland more suited to their requirements or on over-wintered stubble. An excellent example of this is at Ratcheugh where some stubble fields were left in the past and Lapwing numbers did increase.

Red listed (A) -49% (B) -2%

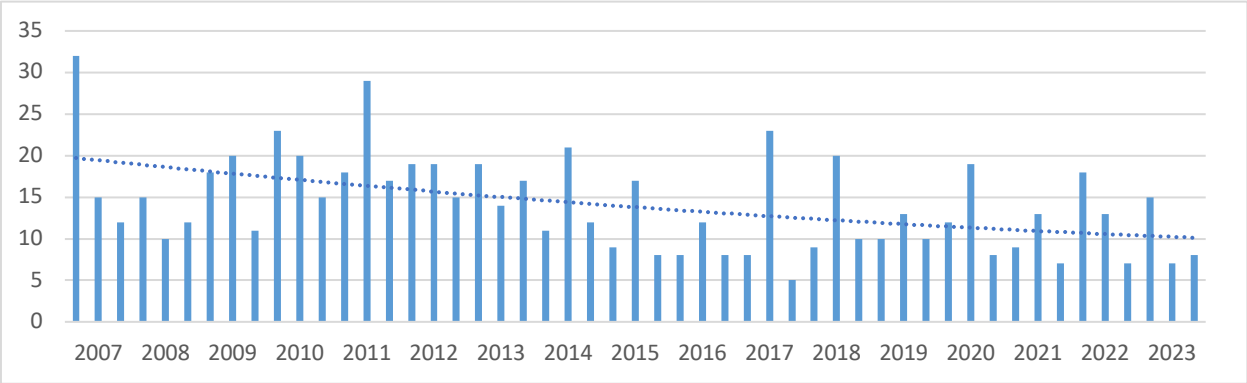
Snipe.



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) +20% (B) -9%

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 food for their survival or some other reason. Curlew may be affected by Tick infestation, it would be interesting to Know more.

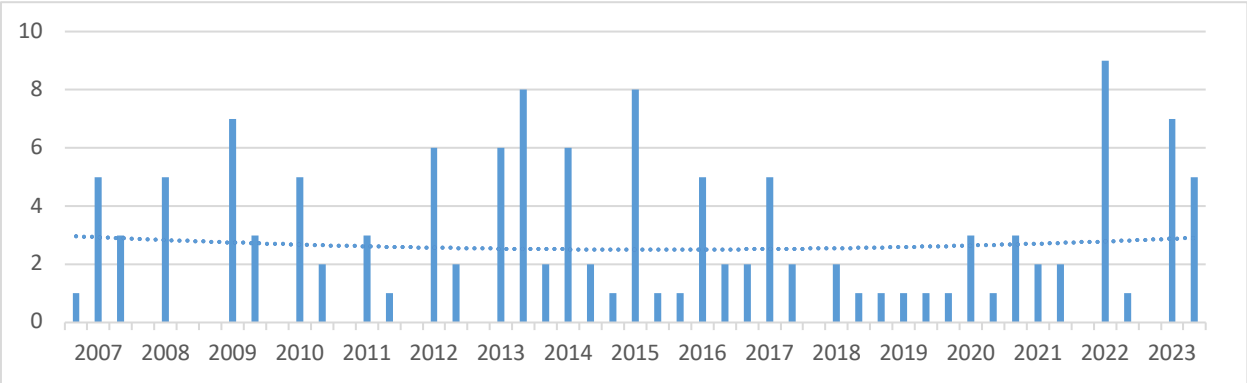
Trials have started by removing eggs produced in areas where they are not welcome, such as airfields which often have large areas of grassland very suitable for breeding Curlew. These are being hand reared and released at two years of age into more Curlew friendly areas.

In this country these trials are being monitored by BTO with the cooperation of the MOD.

There will not be any results from these trials for some time.

Red listed (A) -49% (B) +0%

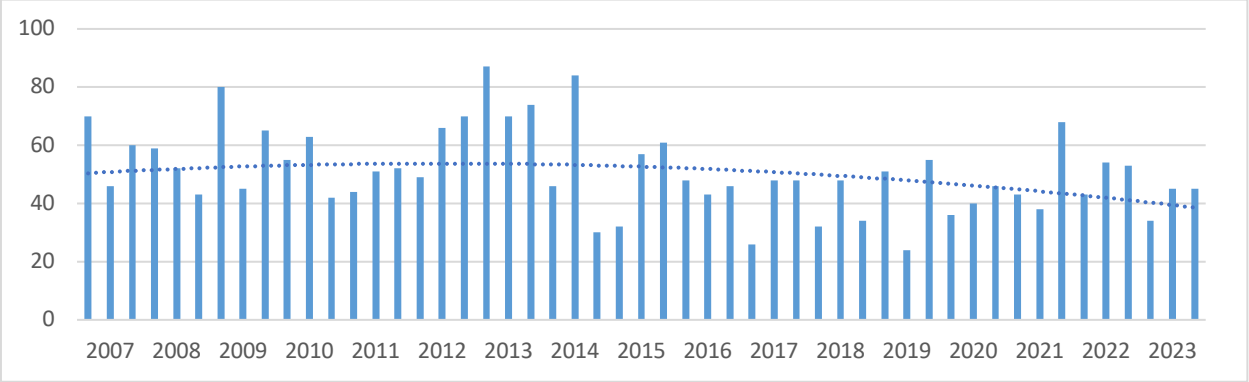
Cuckoo.



This graph is of Cuckoos recorded on the NEBS areas of Moorland only. More of these birds are normally heard on the higher ground than on lowland and arable areas. The graph would agree with the feeling that they are in decline but the May records in 2022 and 2023 are very welcome. In several years they have not arrived in time for the first survey in April. It is interesting to note that Cuckoos have been recorded on only two occasions at the four lowland arable farms being surveyed over the same period of time.

Red listed (A) - 36% (B)-13%

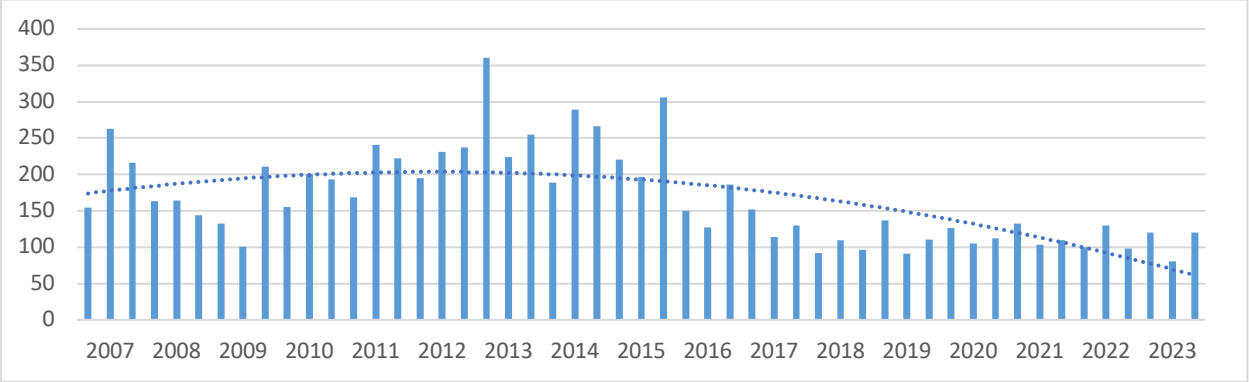
Skylark



Skylarks in our area appear to have been holding their own, a better result than the national average. As one of the commoner species in the survey area, they are more likely to show the results of local management. The biggest losses have been in Ireland (BA). Losses in England are mainly associated with more intensification in arable farming areas and with the change from spring-sown to winter-sown crops. Population in the North East appears to be stable (NBA).

Red listed (A) -14% (B) +0%

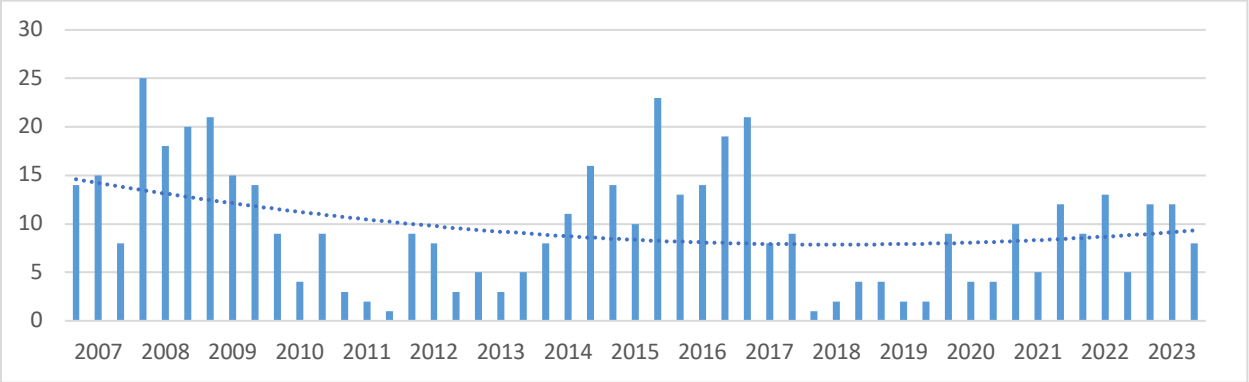
Meadow Pipit.



Meadow Pipits are the commonest species in the survey area and are therefore most likely to indicate any change in population trends. In this area they would appear to have followed the national trend with a fall in the early years of the survey but a better than average rise until 2015 since when counts have fallen. This loss appears to be continuing over all the survey sites. In the British Isles there has been a loss of numbers mainly in Ireland and the west coast of the UK (BA).

Amber listed (A) -15% (B) +0%

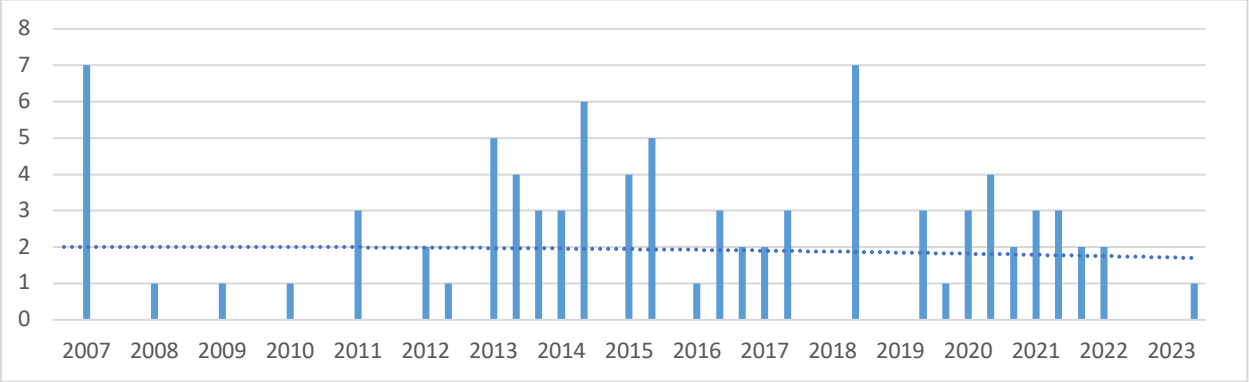
Wren



After the catastrophic fall in Wren numbers due to weather conditions in 2010 to 2012, counts then showed a dramatic improvement only to be hammered again in the 2017/18 winter when a short period of snow cover and low temperatures was followed by a late, cold and dry spring. This graph compares closely with that for the winter period. It is hoped that better conditions will now allow them to bounce back again as it would appear that they are doing. This would be typical of their ability to produce large numbers of young when conditions allow. Repopulation of the higher heather moorland, where in the past numbers have been healthy, has been very slow compared to more favourable areas of more sheltered woodland or coastal habitats.

Green listed (A) +24% (B) +11%

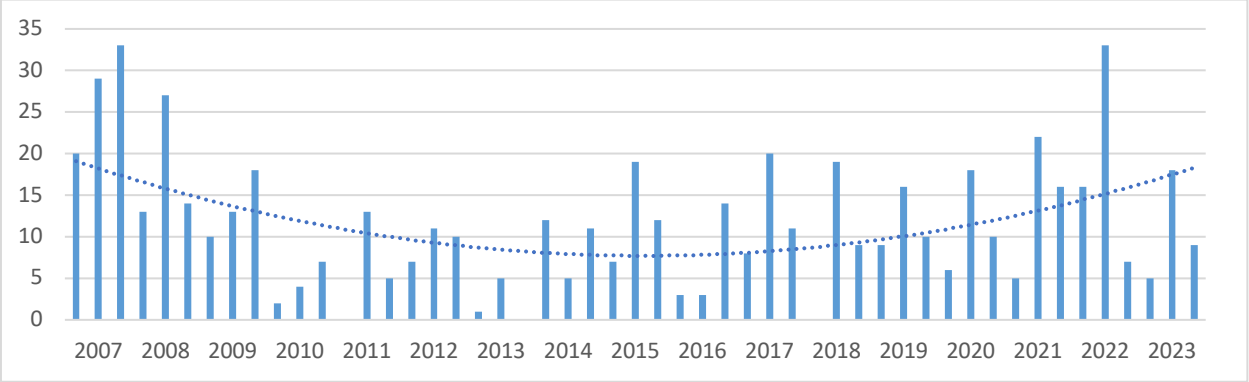
Whinchat.



Whinchat numbers have increased during the survey years with sightings of successful family groups on several occasions but in the last season only one was recorded. 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) -57% (B) -8%

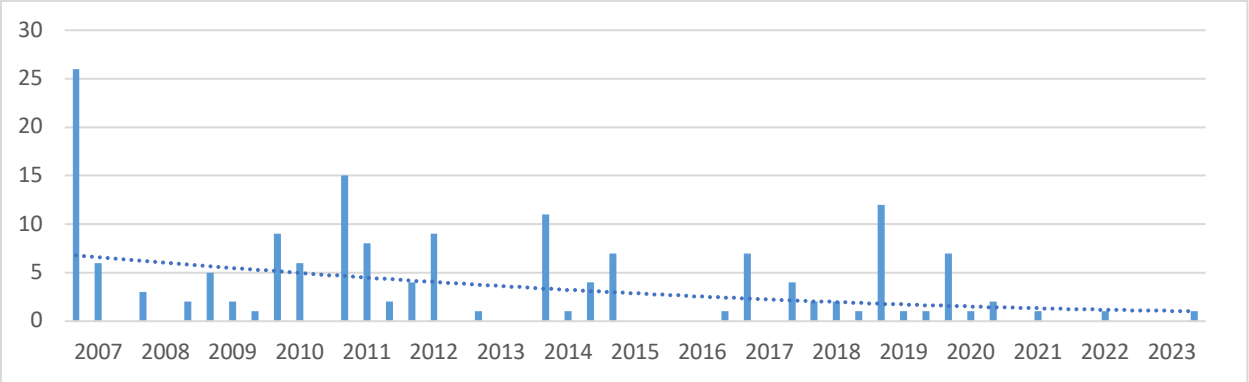
Stonechat



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) +195% (B) +48%

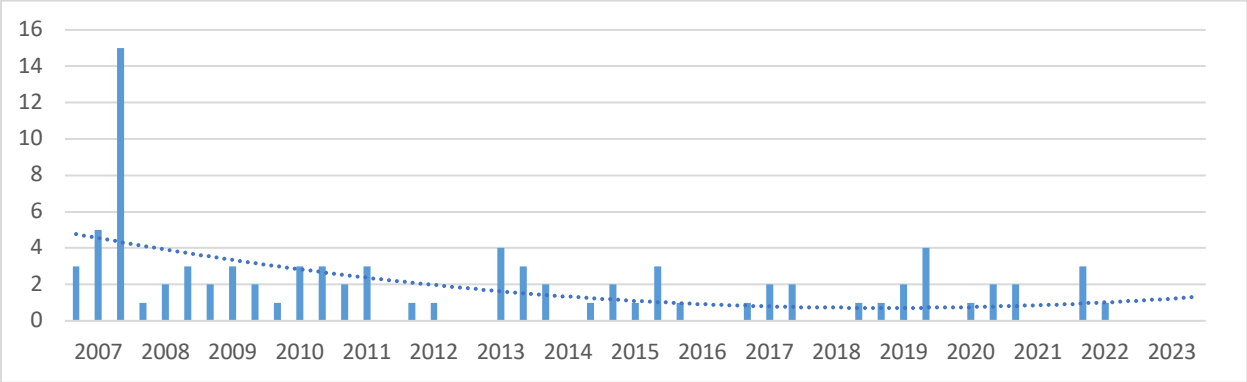
Wheatear.



There would appear to be only a very small population of Wheatears breeding in the survey area, most records being of birds in passage, early in the season. It is estimated that there are only 700 pairs nesting in the county (NBA). Nationally there has been a very gradual reduction in numbers over a long period (BA). This is another migrant species.

Green listed (A) -30% (B) -9%

Song Thrush

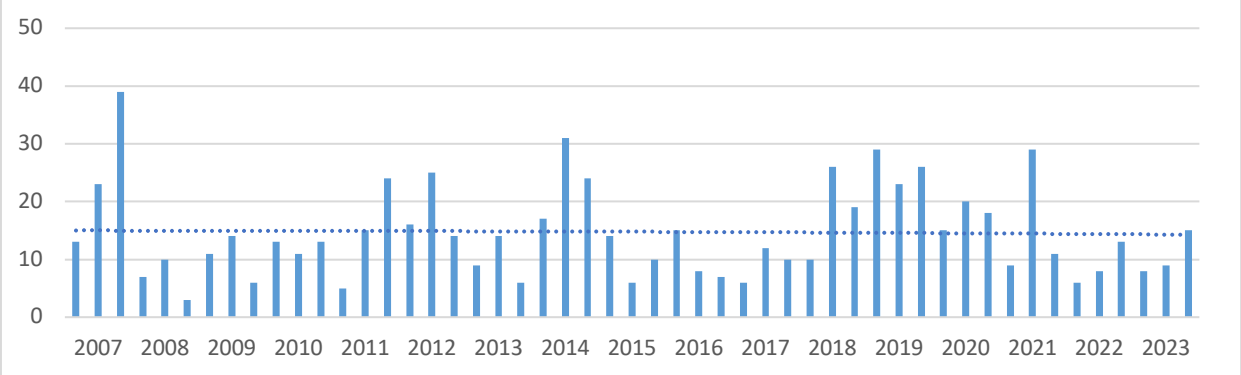


Song Thrush continue to be seen in very small numbers. Most records are made at the edges of the survey areas where forestry plantations form the boundary. More of these trees have now been removed, which will obviously have an effect on numbers recorded and make this graph inaccurate. Nationally there is a small increase in numbers, after a long period of decline (BA).

The use of molluscicides has been blamed in part for the decline.

Red listed (A) +29% (B) +0%

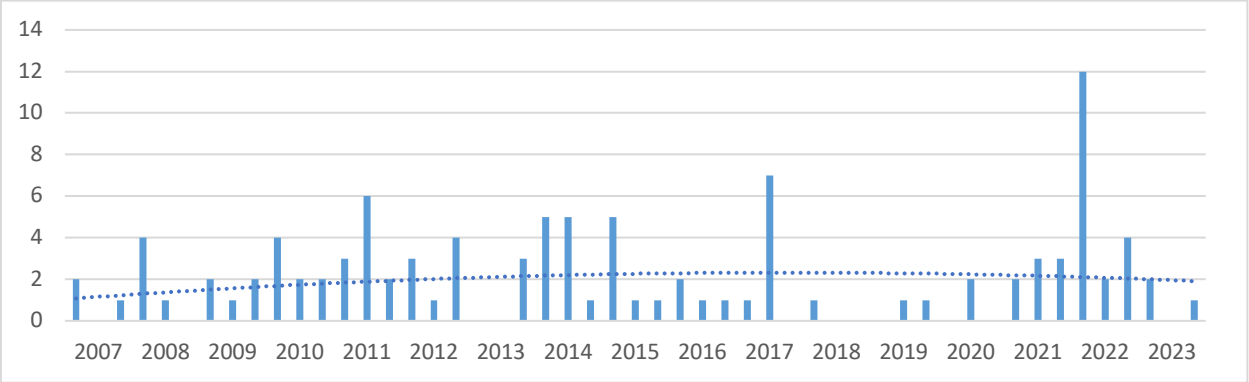
Carrion Crow.



Despite gamekeeper control, numbers remain steady as vacant territories are recolonized from outside the area and higher numbers have been seen in the last few years. The national and local population remains constant. (BA). It is interesting to note that during the two world war periods Carrion Crows increased dramatically since there was practically no gamekeeping and they also were able to increase their breeding range.

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

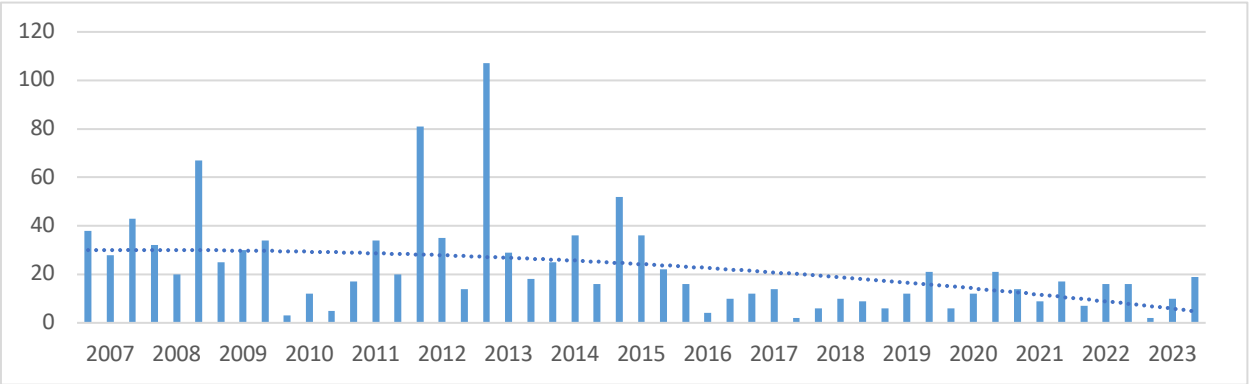
Yellowhammer



In the survey areas Yellowhammers are only recorded in small numbers during the breeding season. Except for a few areas of Gorse there is little suitable habitat for them. Over the British Isles, continued losses seem to have happened on the edges of its recognized breeding areas and also on higher land mainly in the north west and in Ireland (BA). Locally the population is fairly steady (NBA). Historically their decline started in the 1950/60's, possibly due to the use of organochlorine as a seed dressing.

Red listed (A) -28% (B) -9%

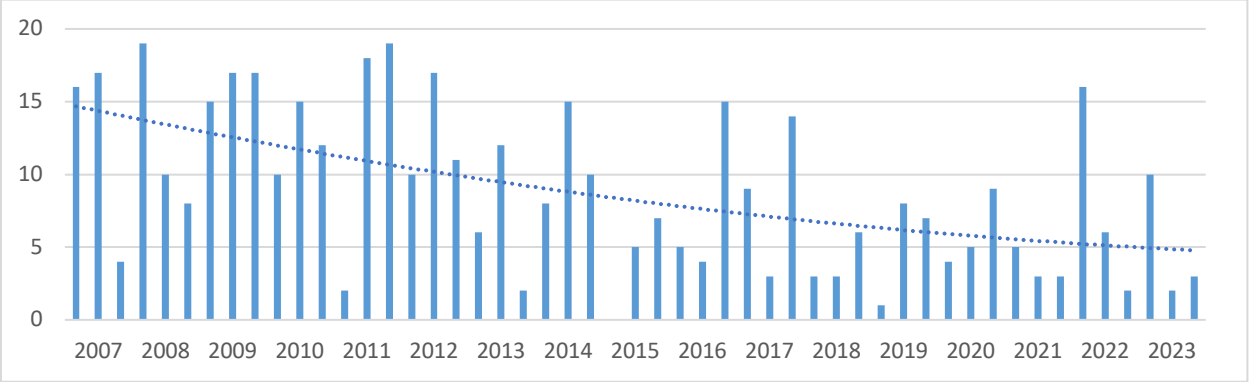
Linnet.



Similar to the Yellowhammer. There are very few areas of suitable breeding habitat here for Linnets. The higher counts made in the early or late breeding period when Linnets are either still in flocks prior to breeding or are already beginning to gather together after fledging, should be discounted. The breeding population obviously suffered in the bad conditions of 2010/11, then increased in numbers until the last eight years when they have again fallen. Nationally, Linnets have suffered losses in their northern breeding areas (BA), but appear to have a stable population here in the North East. (NBA). This is not indicated in our survey results.

Red listed (A) -23% (B) -13%

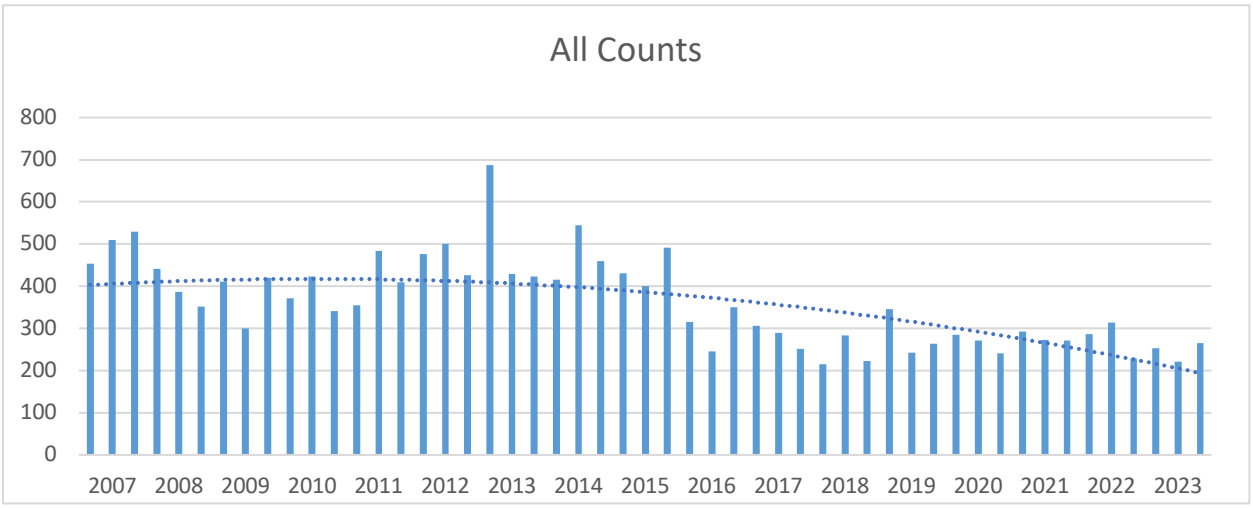
Reed Bunting



Reed Bunting numbers have slowly fallen in the survey areas. Only a relatively small part of the area is suitable breeding habitat. Nationally the population is said to be stable. (BA). This is not indicated by our counts.

Amber listed (A) +27% (B) -1%

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 Species of interest throughout the year.

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

Other sightings of interest are also included here.

Merlin

Recorded occasionally in four areas, not including Kimmer Lough, and seen in April, with no evidence of breeding. Most records are in the winter. The total number of breeding Merlin in Northumberland has been estimated at fifteen pairs. None have been spotted in the 2024 breeding period.

Golden Plover

Alnwick Moor seems to be the favourite area for these as a bird of passage in the spring 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. In Dec. 2023 a flock estimated at 1000 was recorded at Fieldhouse Farm.

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. There is still a small number of breeding territories in our area but these are gradually being reduced. Numbers have been higher than usual in the 2023/24 winter.

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. Best seen at dusk or dawn, none recorded since 2009.

Raven

There have been a number of records from most of the survey areas. They are increasing their range to the east and are recorded in increasing numbers. A pair were recorded in late February at the Hulne Moor area in 2018 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.

Hen Harriers.

Are occasionally seen on the moorland sites, mainly in winter but also on one or two occasions in the summer months. At that time probably juvenile birds on the wander. Other moorland shoots which release Red Legged Partridge are reporting being regularly visited by Hen Harriers shortly after release of game birds in August or September. This must be when Harriers are at greatest risk.

Black Grouse.

In Dec. 2022 a single Blackcock was recorded on Hulne Moor. This is the first record on any of the Alnwick moor sites for many years. Garry Whitfield tells us that in the NE records for the 1800's and early 1900's more Black Grouse than Reds were shot. At that time the Moor was well wooded but a fire during the second world war totally destroyed this habitat and the Moor became more suitable for Red Grouse. Apparently there was a Blackcock Lek on the High Moor into the 70's but sadly no more.

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.

Trend lines on the graphs, which are computer produced, give a very negative reading for the breeding records of most of the target species.

Taking into account the seventeen 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.

Whinchat (based on very small counts) (Amber listed)

Stonechat (Green listed)

Wren (weather related) (Green listed)

Cuckoo (Red Listed)

Mallard (Amber Listed)

Buzzard (Green Listed)

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

Red Grouse. (Green listed)

Red Legged Partridge (Green listed)

Linnet (Red listed)

Reed Bunting (Amber listed}

Grey Partridge (Red listed)

Snipe (Green Listed)

Wheatear (Amber Listed) Based on very small numbers.

Curlew (Red listed)

Lapwing (Red listed)

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

Pheasant (Green Listed) Affected by birds released for shooting.

Song Thrush (Red Listed)

Yellowhammer (Red listed)

Skylark (Red Listed)

Carrion Crow (Green listed)

Meadow Pipit (Amber Listed)

Summary of the five areas.

Kimmer Lough, Breeding Season 2023

The weather this spring in North Northumberland has been largely cool and dry but otherwise has been unremarkable. All three survey visits were carried out in quite good conditions for seeing and hearing birds.

Of the target species, no Red Grouse were seen or heard, but this is unsurprising since none have been recorded in the Kimmer breeding season since 2011. Skylark numbers were poor at all three visits. Reed Bunting records were low, in line with the pattern in recent years. Wheatear, despite being a target bird, has rarely been recorded at Kimmer and once again none were seen in 2023.

Of all the target birds, perhaps the most surprising result was that no Madow Pipits were seen at the June visit despite good counts in April and May.

Willow Warblers, such a reliable breeding visitor throughout the previous fourteen years of the surveys, gave disappointing counts this year, with none at all being recorded at the May visit.

Until 2019 Whinchat had been a regular breeder, although in very low numbers, but none has been recorded since then. More surprising was the absence of any Blackbird records this year despite this being a successful breeding species in our general area.

Kimmer Lough. Winter 2023/24 Summary.

The winter has largely been mild, wet and windy. February was particularly mild for much of the month. The total count in December was just 61 birds the third lowest December count since surveys began in 2007. A Tawny Owl and two Pochard in December where the first to have been recorded at Kimmer in the winter season surveys. The February count was 51 birds. The Song Thrush was the first winter record for Kimmer and both the December and February counts were notable for the presence of Fieldfare which had only once before been seen on site since 2007. Each of the counts included 17 gamebirds – 17 Pheasants in December and 12 Pheasants plus 5 Red Legged Partridge in February. The December count was also swollen by the 26 Mallard on the Lough, although there have been several previous much higher Mallard counts (max. 69) in the December surveys.

Amongst the target species, Linnet, Red Grouse, Snipe and Yellowhammer were not recorded this winter.

Richard Poppleton. (11/3/24)

Black Lough 2023 – breeding season.

The 2023 breeding was an odd season with some migrants arriving late due to weather holding up birds on the continent and then a very warm and dry June. This probably effected a number of the species on the Black Lough site especially breeding waders. Two Mallard were recorded in May and three Tufted ducks were present in June. It is possible that the Tufted ducks were looking for breeding sites as they tend to be late breeders. Two Great crested grebes (new species for the site) were seen in May but were not present in June. One Red grouse was seen in June. Three Lapwing were recorded in June. It is possible that these birds had been displaced from drier breeding grounds and were attempting to breed. A pair of Curlew were present in April with further singles present in both May and June. It is likely that this species bred again at the site. Three drumming Snipe were recorded in April but there were no further mentioned in the latter part of the survey. This species can be notoriously difficult to record. A Wood sandpiper was heard on the May survey. This is another first for the site. This species would have been moving north to either Scottish or Scandinavian breeding grounds. Only 1 male Cuckoo was recorded. 8 – 10 Skylarks were recorded during the season. The main area for this species is the 'grassy' area at the southern end of the site. Meadow pipits were probably under recorded in 2023 with the highest count 46 in April. Good numbers of Stonechats were recorded with the highest count of 7 in May. One Whinchat was found in May. Numbers of Linnets seemed to be low throughout the season. There was a peak in Carrion crow numbers (7) in June.

Black Lough. Winter 2023/2024 report.

The December visit was at a time of cold frosty weather and would account for the low number of birds recorded. February 2024 visit was quite different and there were an exceptional number of birds recorded for this site during winter. The weather put paid to the number of wildfowl recorded in December. Despite this 6 Mallard were recorded. There was a good assortment of wildfowl seen in February with Mallard (14), Wigeon (2), Teal (2), Moorhen (3), and exceptionally Coot (5), 1 Grey Heron was also present in February. A large number of Pheasants (16) were recorded in February, less than a week after the end of the shooting season. No Red Grouse were recorded. Another unusual sighting for February were 10 Black Headed Gulls. Presumably these birds were on their daily sojourn from the coast. Large numbers of Carrion Crows (17) and 3 Jackdaws were recorded in February. Jackdaws are a relatively rare species at the Black Lough. The only Raptors were Common Buzzards on both dates. Song Thrush (1), Blackbird (4) and Fieldfare (5) were a good count for a moorland habitat in winter. Stonechat (6) numbers remained consistent and it is hoped that there will be no snow before the breeding season, ensuring a good breeding population. Two Yellowhammers were recorded which is an unusual species for the Black lough survey site and possibly a result of increased scrub / woodland close to the entrance to the site.

George Dodds.

Alnwick and Hulne Moors. Summary of 2023 breeding period.

The ponds at Freemans Gap and the Gull Ponds, are always of interest although only Mallard are included in the list of target species. They are recorded at both in small numbers. Little Grebe have been seen at both, a single bird at the Gull Ponds but a pair of juveniles at Freemans which can be taken as evidence of breeding. At Freemans Gap Pool, there have been the usual Tufted Ducks, Greylag Geese and Moorhens, At the Gull Ponds a pair of Mute Swans, and Coot have also visited. No Black Headed Gulls have been recorded there since the start of these surveys.

Sightings of Wheatear are now uncommon, with again only one record this year, a big drop from four years ago when they were more often seen. Stonechat continue to increase very slowly but counts of Whinchat are once more falling.

Alnwick Moor is the only one of the upland survey areas where Lapwing breed in gradually reducing numbers. Curlew are continuing to breed in their usual small numbers with probably four pairs on Alnwick Moor but as usual none on the Hulne side.

Buzzard are very regularly seen in the area and it is encouraging to see that no action is taken against them, similarly with Hen Harriers.

A single Ring Ousel was recorded on passage in April on Alnwick Moor.

Cuckoos have performed well this year with four being seen or heard in the Hulne Moor area at the same visit.

Red Grouse continue to be recorded in smaller numbers. No details are available at the moment about the results of any shooting.

Due to the very strong growth of the Heather, Birch and Gorse in the lower and wetter part of the two moors, make walking very difficult. The survey routes have been slightly changed for the comfort and safety of our surveyors. I don't think that this will affect the counts for any of our Target species. I realise that it is a very interesting and completely different habitat from the open moorland for both birds and plant life. Visit it at your own risk.

Alnwick Moor and Hulne Moor Winter Summary 2023/24.

This winter Red Grouse were recorded in better numbers, with 13 in Dec. and 12 in Feb. These two sites continue to carry the main population of Red Grouse, very few being recorded on other areas. No Grey Partridge have spread to this area yet but it will probably happen in time. A number of Red Legged Partridge (30) appeared on Alnwick Moor in Dec. These may have been released else were in Hulne Park. Pheasant numbers were high totaling 64 in Dec. and 69 in Feb. Probably survivors from the Hulne Park shoots. Common Buzzard are regularly seen at each visit but 7 recorded in Feb. over Alnwick Moor may have been double counted, which can happen. e know that they do join forces from other territories at times and socialize. A count of 6 Woodcock was interestingly high but it has been a good winter for them generally. Kestrels are regulars here, having been seen at every visit to both areas. The first of the returning Skylarks were seen at both sites at the Feb. visits. Wrens have followed their usual pattern with more being counted in Dec. but very few in Feb. Woodpigeons were counted in unusually large numbers. They are often not seen at the moorland sites but this winter the counts were 140 in Dec. and 35 in Feb. The Freemans Pool at Hulne Moor had plenty of Mallard and three Tufted Duck in Feb. and a single Coot was seen on the Alnwick Moor Gull ponds.

Jim Clark. (Mar.2024)

Post Office Pylon. Summary of breeding period 2023.

POP has had a very quiet breeding season. For the first time no Red Grouse were recorded. Two pairs of Curlew have been seen regularly during their nesting season. The Wren population is continuing to increase, which has taken time but is so subject to the effects of more severe weather or even average winter temperatures that they may well be challenged again this winter. Stonechat are still a regular breeder here, although they have also suffered with weather conditions in the past. Skylark numbers are slightly down this year but Meadow Pipits remain on an even keel.

Post Office Pylon. Summary of the winter period 2023/24.

There have been only very small counts during the winter. Of interest at the POP at the December visit were 12 Graylag Geese, only three Red Grouse and a few Pheasants, although 4 Wrens were recorded. At the February survey, no Red Grouse or Pheasants were seen but 80 Golden Plover were just over the fence, one Woodcock but no wrens.

Jim Clark. (Mar.2024)

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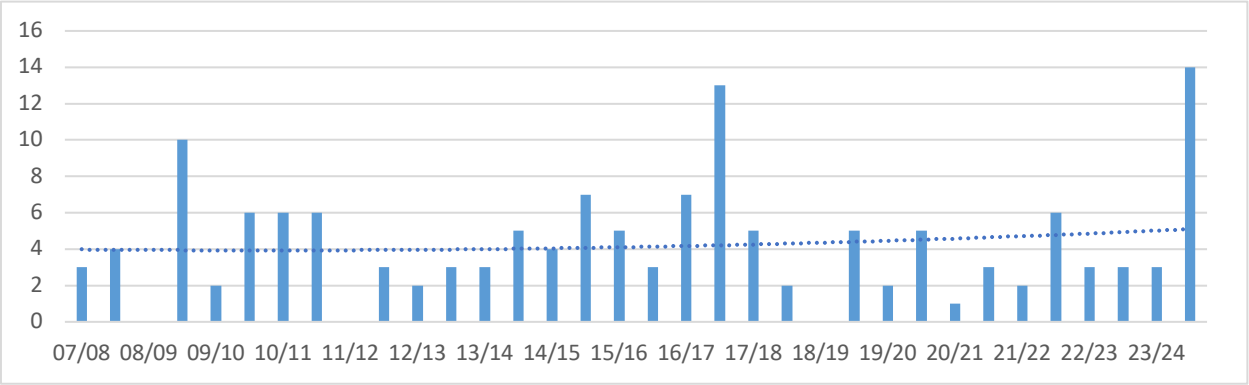
<u>Winter 2023/24.</u>

The hoped for winter sun has this year been replaced by spells of strong to gale force winds and wet, wet, and more wet weather. At least the Alnwick area has not been quite as badly affected as some parts of the UK. This constant supply of rain is now continuing into the early breeding season. At the same time we have had the warmest February on record.

Bird life on the local moorlands has been subdued with very few exciting moments. The most interesting sightings have been made on the loughs and ponds in our survey areas. There was one short period of snow which affected the higher moorlands for a day or two. Wrens appear to have weathered the winter well.

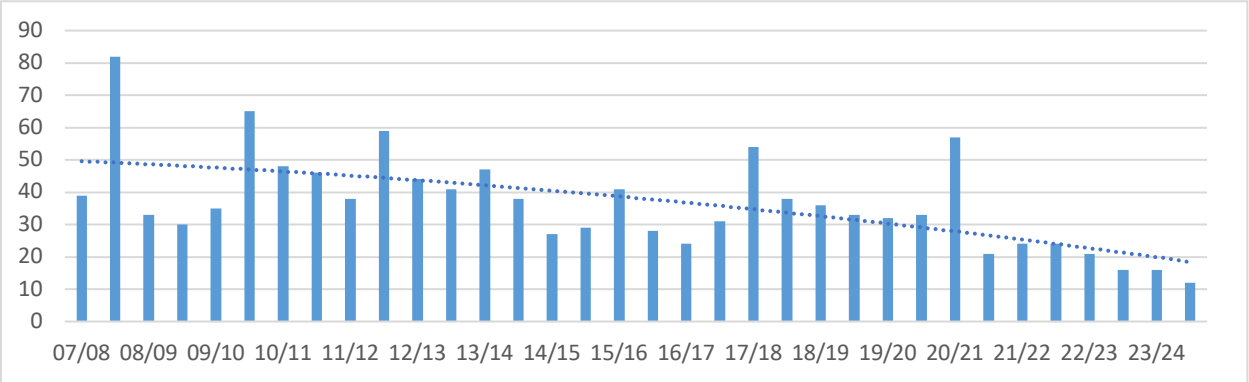
All species are recorded through the winter period, but sightings can be very irregular. Most species which breed on our moorlands are semi-migratory, often not leaving this country but moving to coastal areas or to places where food and shelter are more readily available. The areas of moorland covered 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.



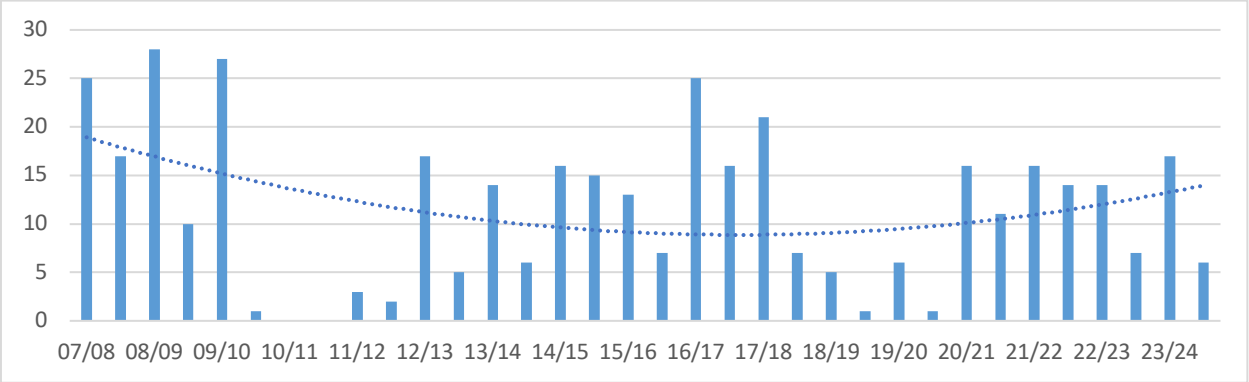
Buzzard numbers continue to maintain a more or less level population remaining in their chosen territories. In this part of Northumberland a regular source of food is available from “road kill” .

Red Grouse.



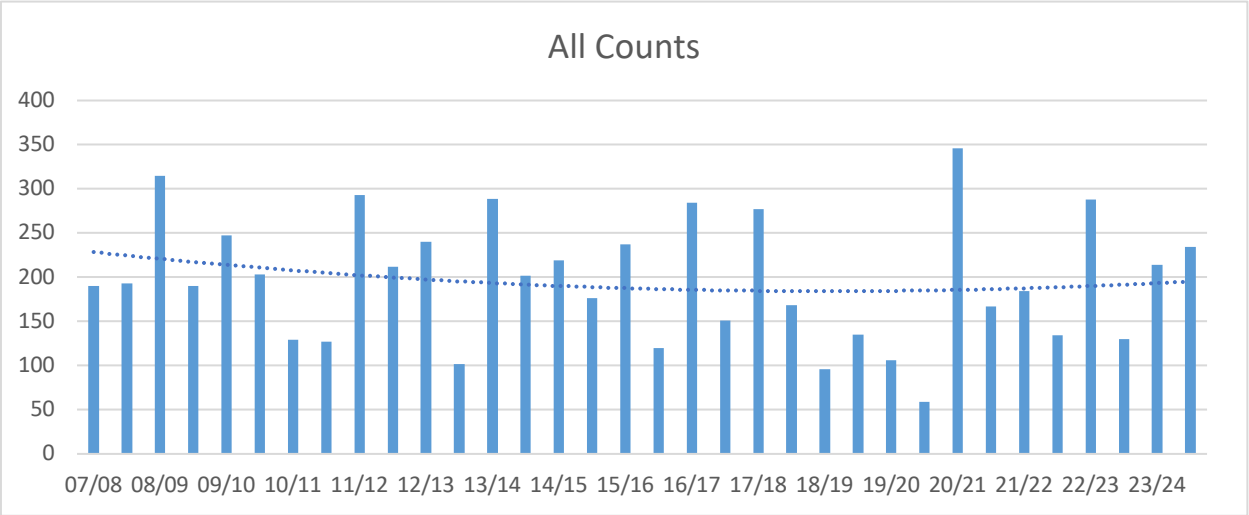
Counts of Red Grouse in the winter have always been higher than in the breeding season when they appear to be much more secretive. After several years without any shooting the proportion of birds that are now mature enough to breed should have formed a sound basis for a healthy increase in the population but this has not developed and numbers are still falling. There has been no increase in the populations at either of the outlying areas of Post Office Pylon or Black Lough. As a ground nesting species they are always more subject to predation.

Wren.



This graph illustrates the effects of winter on the Wren population. In severe winters such as 2010/11 and 211/12 losses were very high indeed. Even in average winters with less snow and comparatively mild temperatures there are always lower count in Feb. than in Dec. Supporting the claim that on average they loose 50% of their numbers every year.

Total of all Winter Counts (Target Species)



Winter populations of the reduced number of species on the moorland in winter are maintaining a fairly level average total count. It would seem that an average total count during the winter is about 200, compared to the breeding season when an average count is approx. 350 birds.

Others Species of interest 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. Counts in February are showing an earlier return to our Moorland survey sites than usual.

Skylark.

Few remain in the survey area but move south and east, often being seen in large flocks on the East coastal dunes with some crossing the Channel to winter. Skylarks are also returning to these areas earlier than usual.

Lapwing.

Flock together and move to coastal areas or to inland lakes and rivers to feed. These are Occasionally seen in large numbers during surveys nearer the coast or at Branton and Hedgley 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. Drought conditions in central Africa have continued for another year.

Stonechat

Some remain in the area, others move into southern UK or France, Spain and Ireland. There has been a gradual increase in the numbers of Stonechat wintering in our area over the past few years.

Reed Bunting

Mainly sedentary but leave 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.

Black Grouse.

A record of a single Black Cock was made on Hulne Moor at the December visit. This is the first record during the surveys on any of the Moorland sites.

Jim Clark. (28/3/2024)