

BIRD SURVEY - FIELDHOUSE AND TOWNFOOT

REPORT FOR NOVEMBER 2023 TO JULY 2024

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

The report covers the fifteen 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 population 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 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 20 "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, for instance, that 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.

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 arable areas. An attempt is being made to do this. More useful information is now available from BTO 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.

A graph and details of winter counts for Curlew are included in this report. These have, in the past, been of interest to Natural England.

An interesting exercise is to compare the graphs in this report with those produced by BTO at www.bto.org/bbs-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 national "Breeding Bird Surveys. (BBS)

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: -

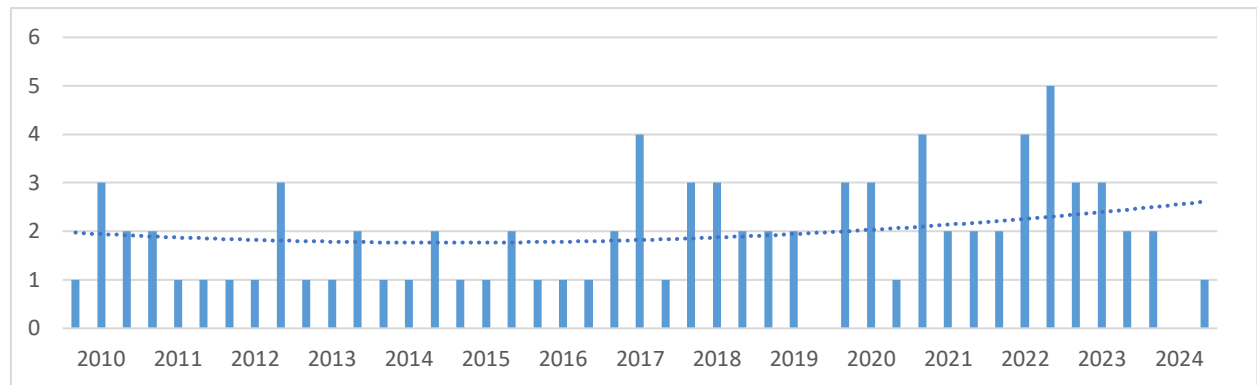
- (A)** an average % rise or fall over the period 1995 - 2022
- (B)** an estimated % rise or fall over the period 2022 - 2023

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

Information previously taken from the various Atlases is considered to have become out dated and now of little value to this report.

The graphs that follow show the breeding period records for each of the target species, except for Sparrowhawk, Kestrel and Mistle Thrush, for which there are only very few records.

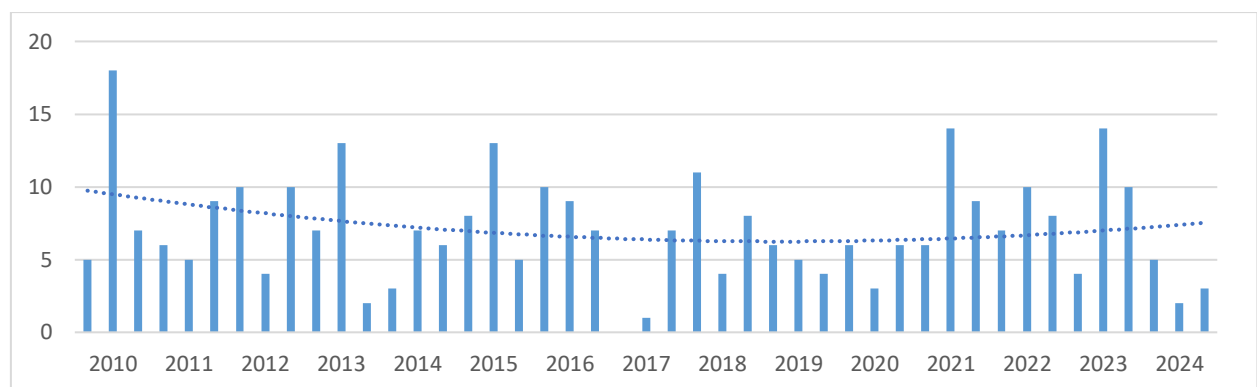
Buzzard



The eastward spread of buzzards is now complete and the population is considered to be stable but it is interesting to note that the final count of each breeding season between 2012 and 2015 have been the highest in each of those years. This may indicate successful breeding results leading to increased numbers of birds of mature breeding age in the following years. There is no established breeding site on this survey route.

Green listed (A) +80% (B) -6%

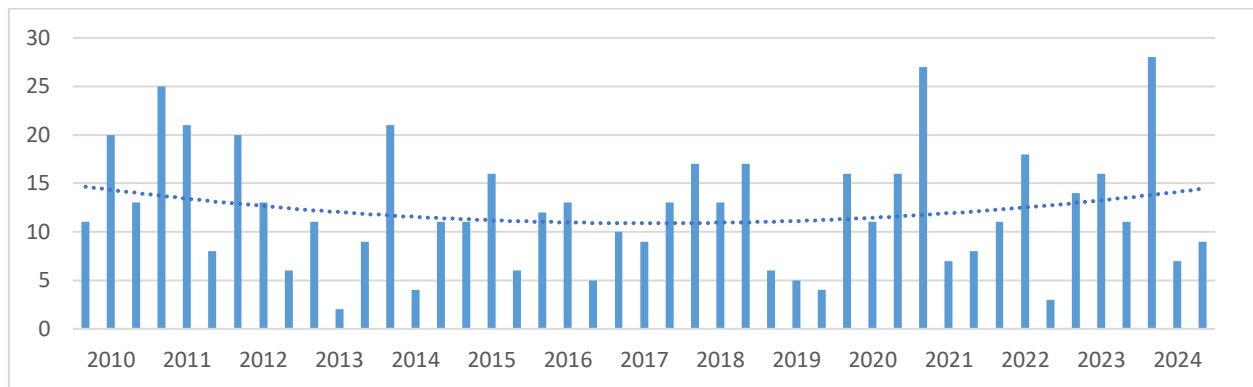
Grey Partridge



Nationally there has been a huge decline in Partridge numbers over the last forty years. In the survey area this trend has been reversed by the extra gamekeeping efforts of the Northumberland Estate staff, but counts are very variable from year to year. Successful breeding is very dependent on weather conditions during the hatching period and predator control. Counts in the survey area remain much higher than the national averages despite the fact that a considerable number are shot in most years.

Red listed (A) -63% (B) -8%

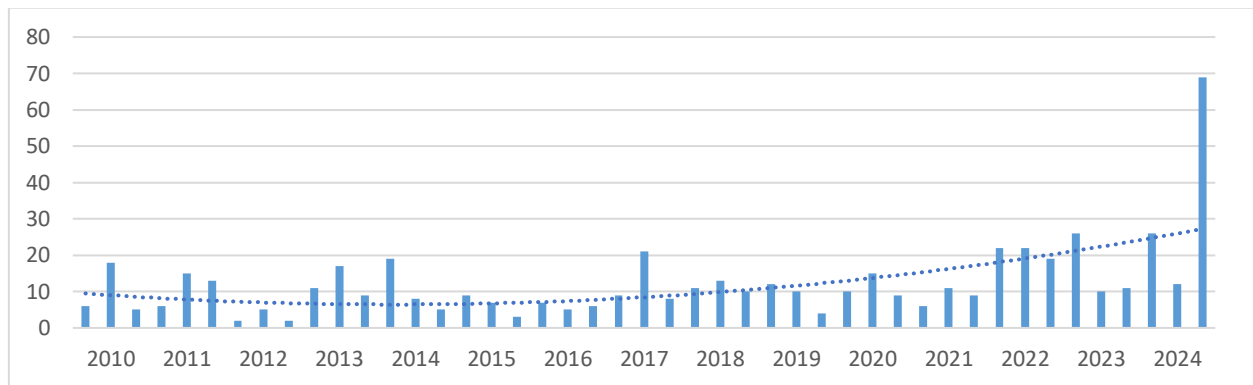
Pheasant



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 with the same protection, feed and shelter provided for the Grey Partridge.

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

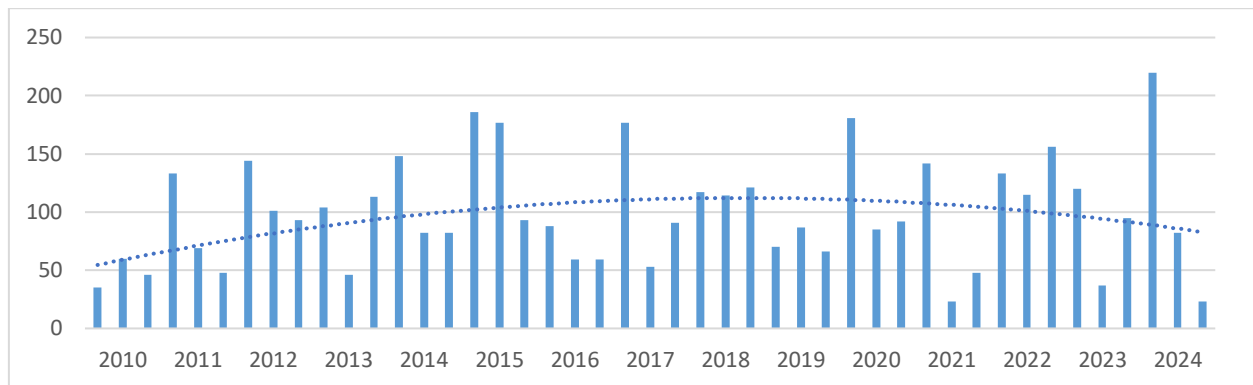
Lapwing



Lapwing numbers have become more stable over the last few years. The crop rotation has been providing a regular source of suitable breeding areas. The change in management and rotation of crops may not always follow the same pattern but here they are performing far better than the national average. It is hoped that this rotation will continue, providing suitable breeding habitat for several ground nesting species including Lapwing. The later survey in 2024 would include some flocking of birds including young of this year.

Red listed (A) -63% (B) -8%

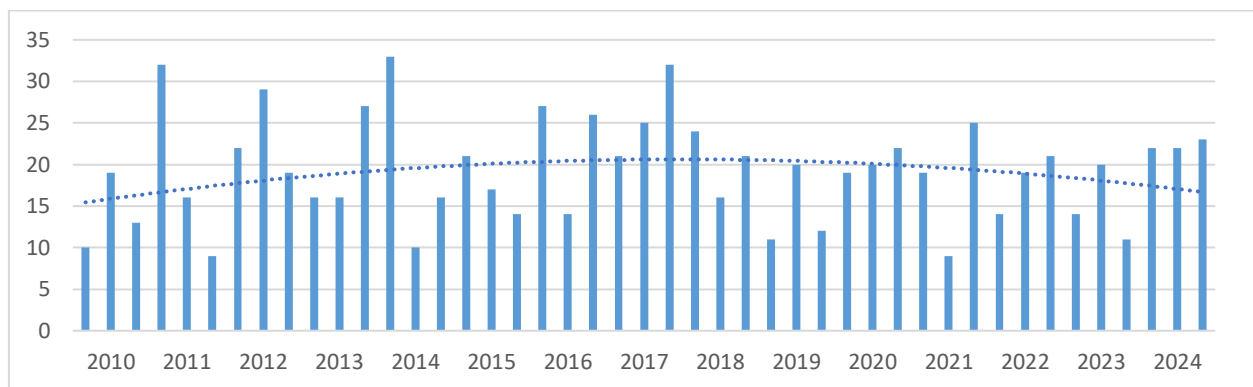
Woodpigeon



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. It seems very surprising that they have been moved from being Green Listed to Amber.

Amber listed (A) +33% (B) +6%

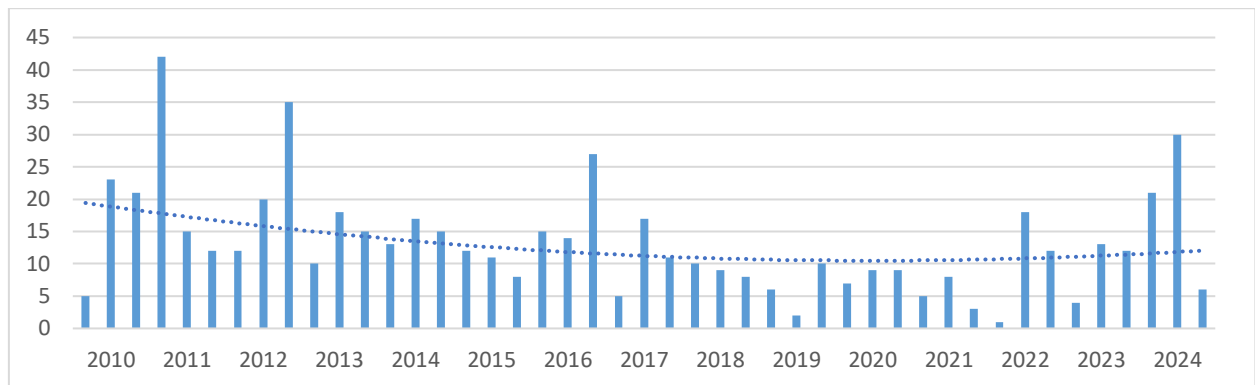
Skylark



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) -11% (B) +6%

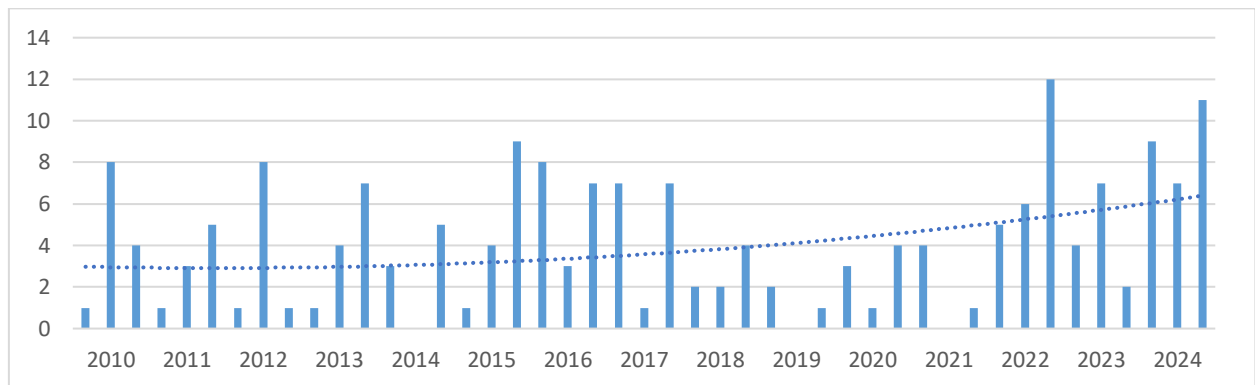
Meadow Pipit



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 probably be caused by the changes in cropping at Fieldhouse, resulting in a loss of habitat. National figures show a fall in recent years.

Amber listed (A) -13% (B) +2%

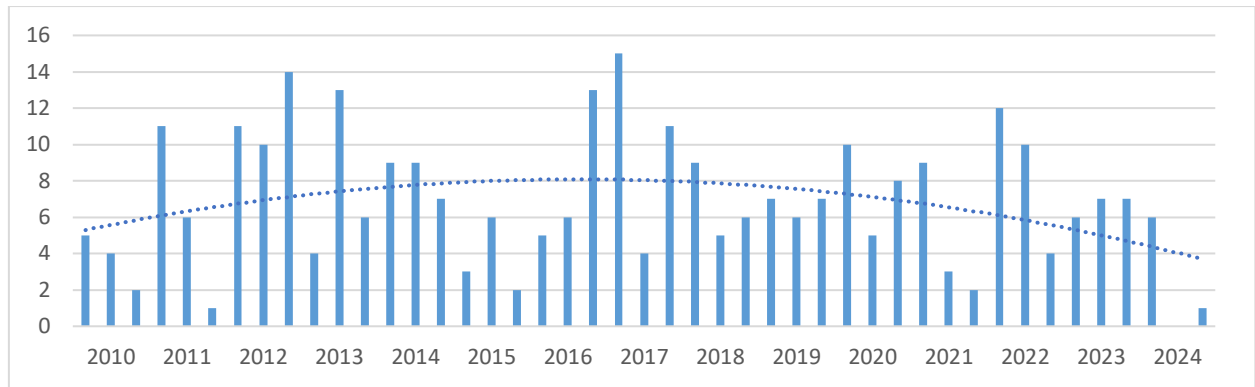
Wren



This chart continues to illustrate how numbers of Wrens vary throughout the years, with the higher numbers at the end of most breeding periods. These 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 2020 and 2021 with very late and cold period in the spring, but conditions in 2022 have provided better breeding conditions. 2023 has proved to be another long, dry period. The 2024 winter and breeding period was mild but very wet but even so breeding has been very successful.

Amber listed (A) +29% (B) +2%

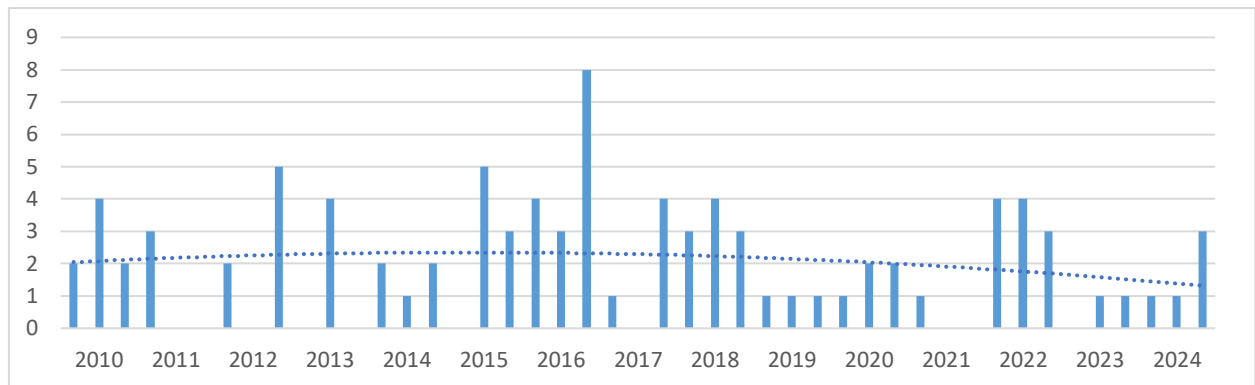
Dunnock



The national increase in previous years is due to their spread into areas in the west. Dunnocks have been recorded in consistent numbers in the survey area during the last few years, except for this year when counts have been very low. Dunnock are not always easy to observe when hedges are in full leaf and they may be under reported.

Amber listed (A) +10% (B) -4%

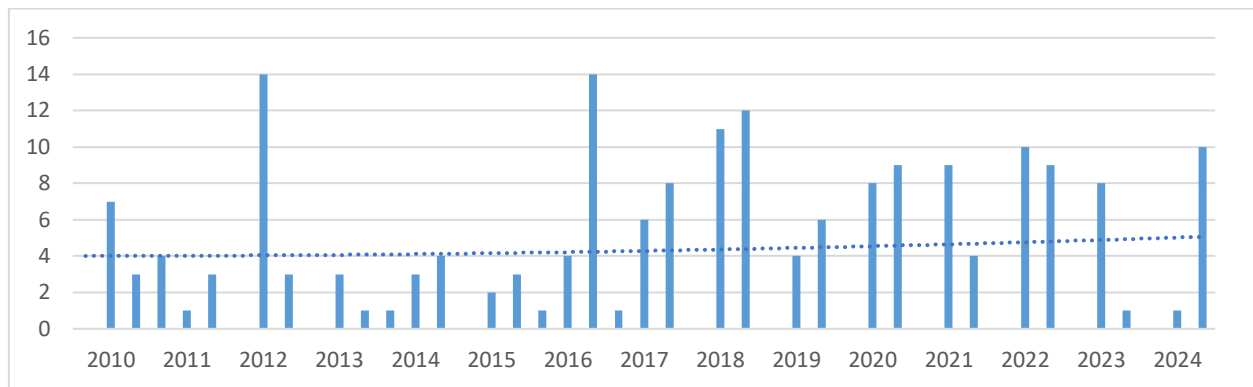
Robin



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. Much higher counts are made in the winter surveys. See the winter graph.

Green listed (A) +25% (B) +2%

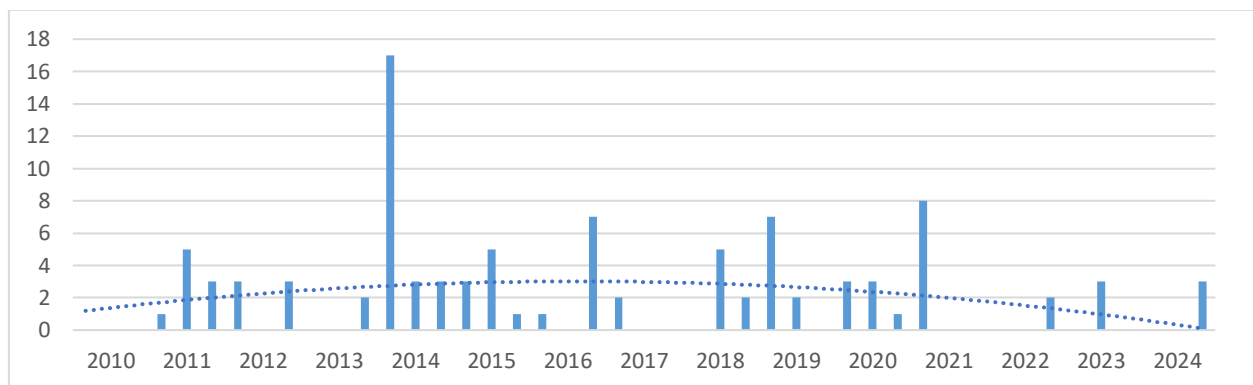
Whitethroat



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 from. 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 have been made before their return from wintering in Africa. The increase here appears to be better than the National Average.

Amber listed (A) +19% (B) -1%

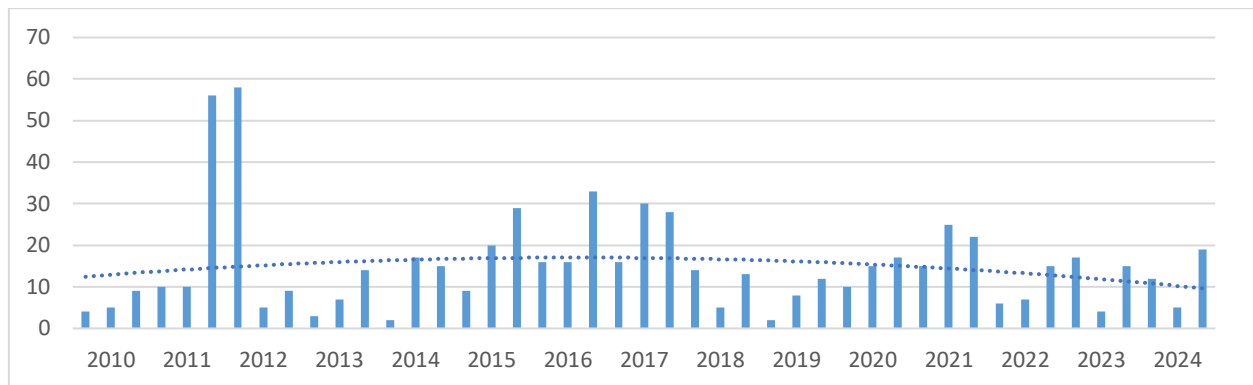
Tree Sparrow



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 one high count in the first visit of 2014 is of flocking birds before their breeding season had started and distorts the graph.

Red listed (A) +62% (B) -11%

Goldfinch



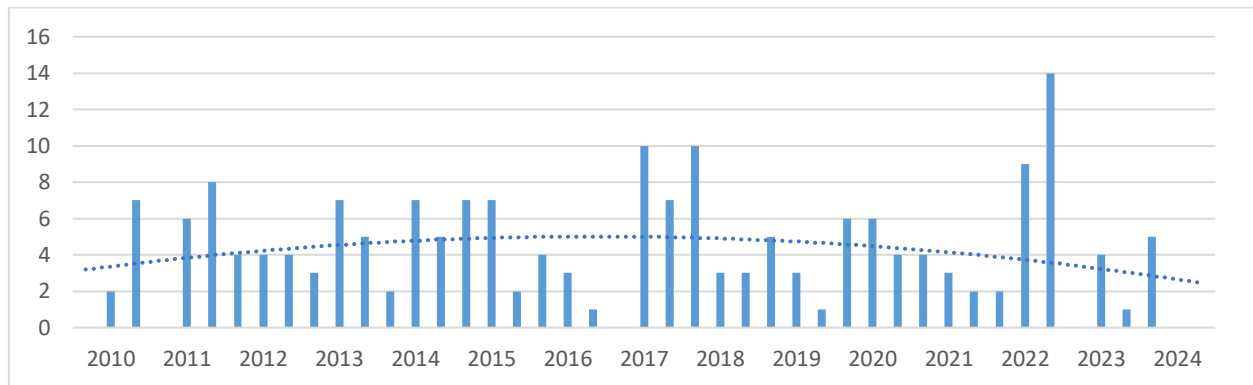
The high numbers of Goldfinches in late 2011 will probably be birds flocking together after breeding and be mainly juveniles. In early 2012 the higher count will be of a similar group but prior to dispersing to their breeding territories. These two high counts distort the true trend which shows a very slight fall in numbers which follows the national average. Before the 1960's Goldfinch were hardly ever seen in the north but quite quickly increased to be one of the commonest finches in the area.

Green listed

(A) +151%

(B) +1%

Reed Bunting



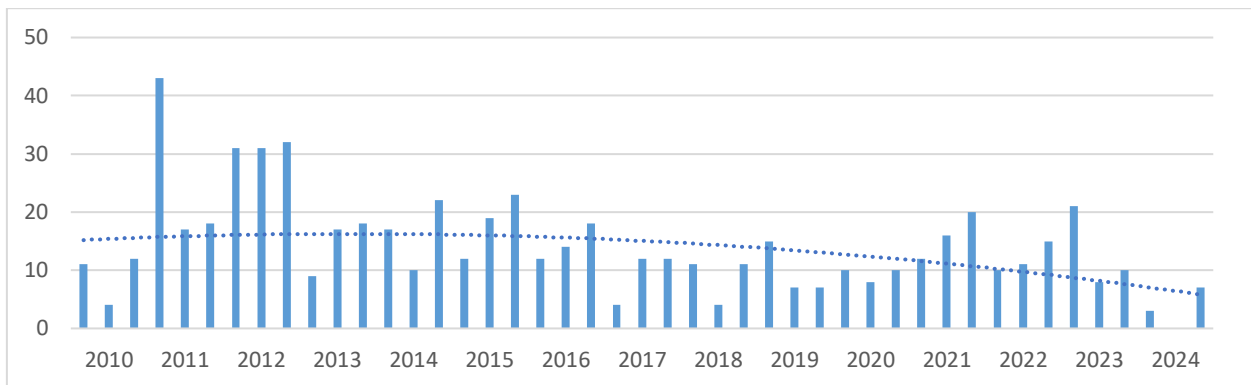
This shows a regular small population of Reed Bunting, mainly along the river Aln at Townfoot which is one of the few suitable habitats on these survey routes. In the North East there has been a small increase during the last twenty years. Improved counts were made at the later visits in 2017 but much lower in 2018/19, in line with national averages. More sightings are being made of Reed Buntings moving away from habitats near water to make use of Oil Seed Rape crops for breeding.

Amber listed

(A) +28%

(B) +5%

Yellowhammer



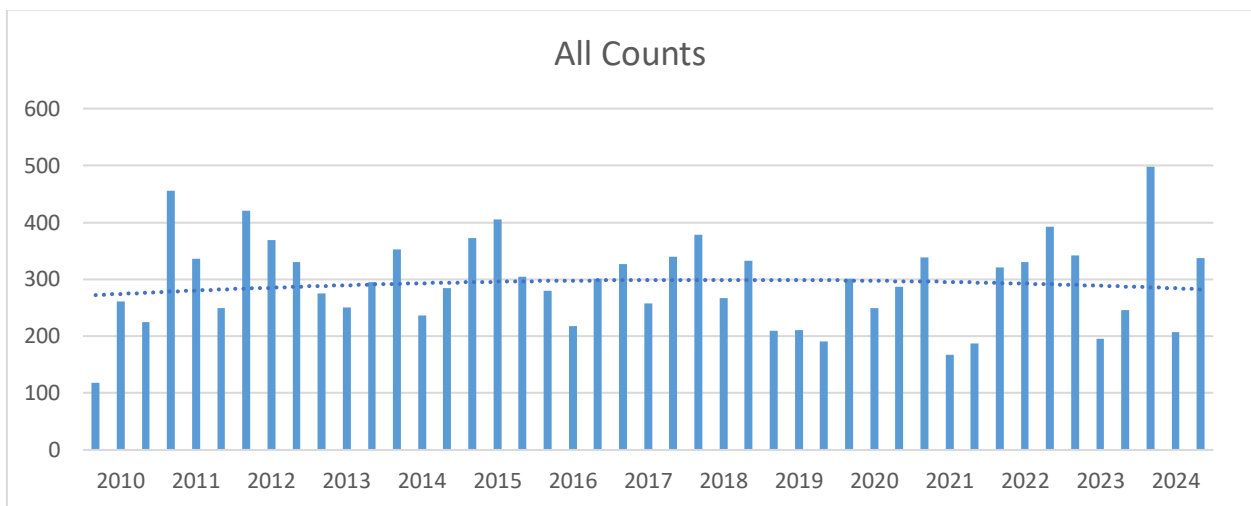
There have been irregular counts of Yellowhammers but on average the population here is performing better than the national trend which is falling. They are closely associated with cereal growing areas and the highest populations are on the east of the country.

Red listed

(A) -31%

(B) -4%

Total of All Breeding Period Counts (Target Species)



Total counts are showing a reasonably level average count.

Conclusions.

These results suggest that during the last few years of the survey seven of the target species are performing better than the National Averages.

Grey Partridge (Red listed)
Lapwing (Red listed)
Buzzard
Song Thrush (Amber listed)
Pheasant.
Wren (Amber listed)
Whitethroat (Amber listed)

Seven species have maintained similar counts to the National Averages.

Dunnock (Amber listed)
Woodpigeon (Amber listed)
Reed Bunting (Amber Listed)
Skylark (Red listed)
Meadow pipit (Amber listed)
Blackbird.
Robin.
Chaffinch.

Two species have Lower counts than the National Averages.

Tree Sparrow (Red listed)
Goldfinch.
Linnet (Amber listed)
Yellowhammer (Red listed)

Others of the Target Species with very few sightings.

Kestrel (Amber listed)
Mistle Thrush (red listed)
Greenfinch (Red listed)

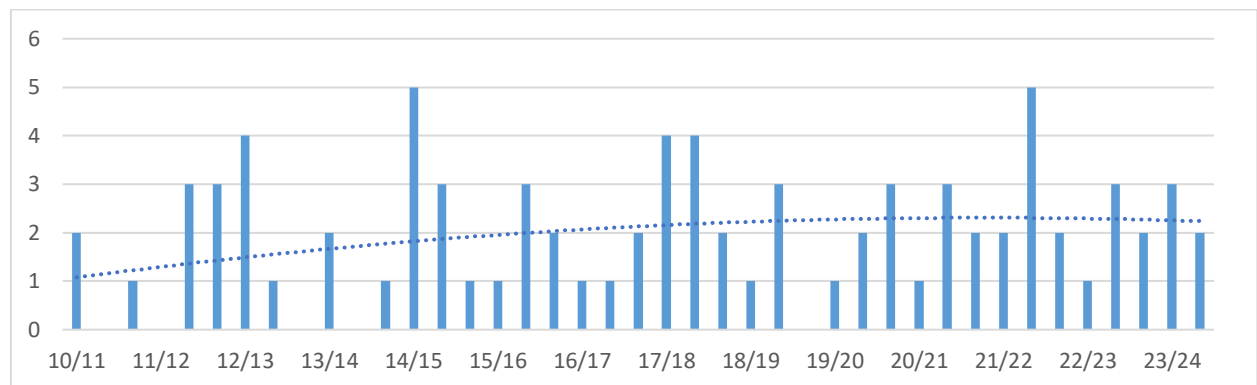
Winter Period Records

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 in winter 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.

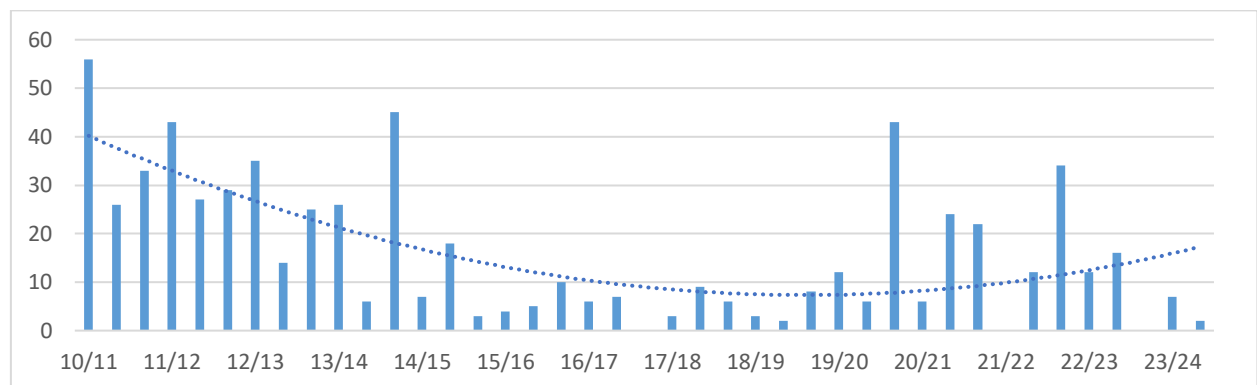
Buzzard



Similar to the breeding period, the Buzzard population appears to be stable or even growing slightly. Relying on “Road kill”, Young rabbits and other carrion for food. A nest site near the survey area has not been recorded but must be close by. More records of Buzzards have come from the Townfoot survey area.

Green listed.

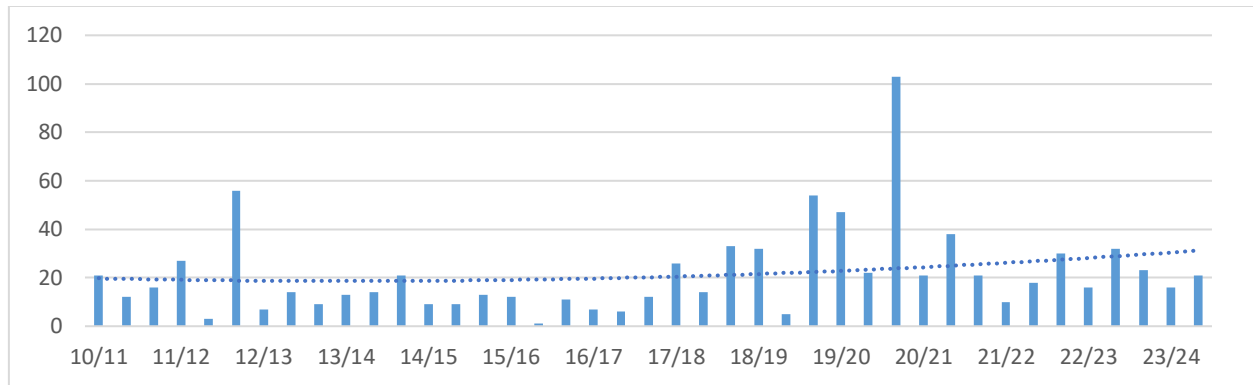
Grey Partridge



Grey Partridge numbers in winter declined from the start of the survey to low counts in the period between 2015 to 2020, probably due to the results of shooting until the outbreak of Covid when shooting was curtailed in 2020 and 2021. A healthy number remain to form the breeding birds for the following season, although the present counts are very erratic. These surveys only include the birds which are disturbed in the process.

Red listed.

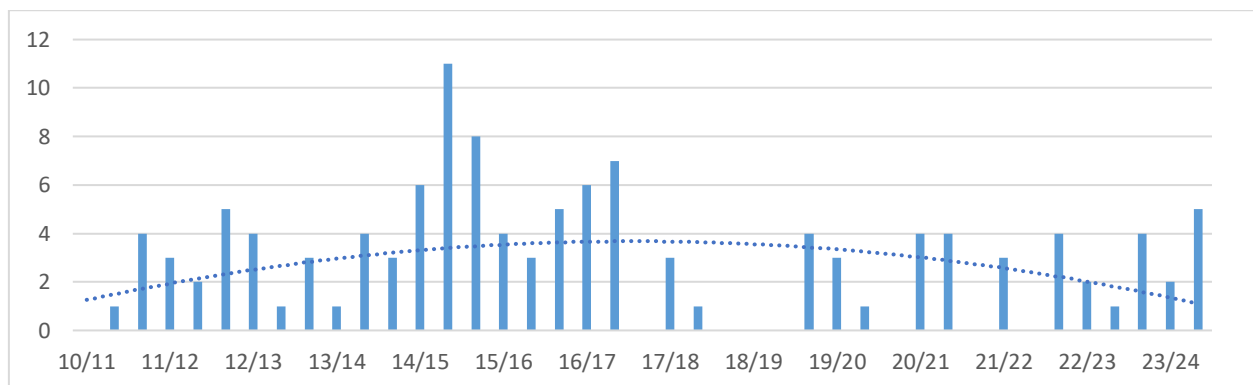
Pheasant



Pheasants will always be affected by the numbers shot during the season. The possible effects of Covid on shooting also show on this graph. Although there are no released birds here the wild birds present are sufficient to maintain a sustainable population.

Green listed.

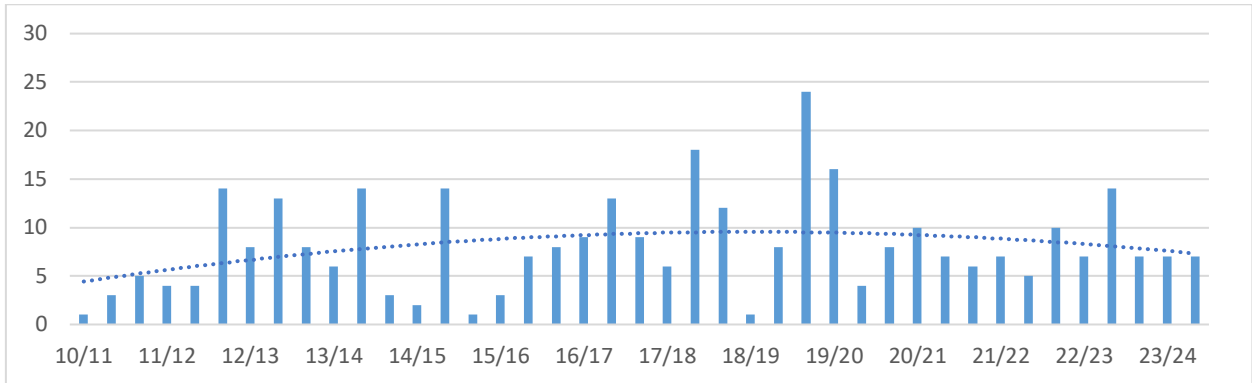
Wren



Wren populations always show big variations over relatively short periods. This survey started in 2010/11 when there had been two long periods of severe cold and complete snow cover. The Wren population had been reduced by an estimated 95%. A slow build up of numbers followed until the next period of bad weather arrived and numbers again collapsed in the winters of 2017 to 2019. Very wet conditions then were followed by a long dry period with little insect development in a late spring. From 2020 onwards the graphs show that there have been reduced numbers recorded during each winter period until 23/24 when wrens seem to have withstood extreme wet and often windy weather.

Amber listed.

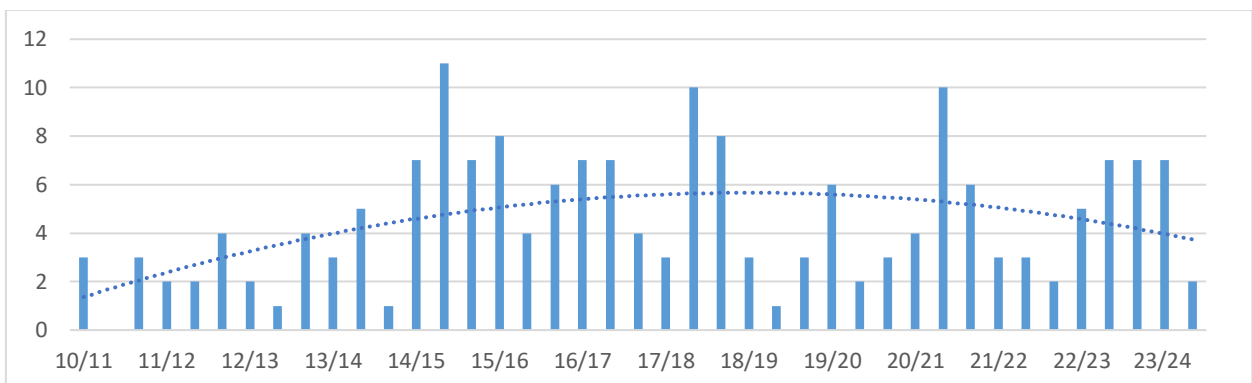
Dunnock



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. Dunnocks feed largely on insects and other invertebrates but also to some extent on seeds in winter. There is some movement of Dunnocks, southwards in the winter months.

Amber listed.

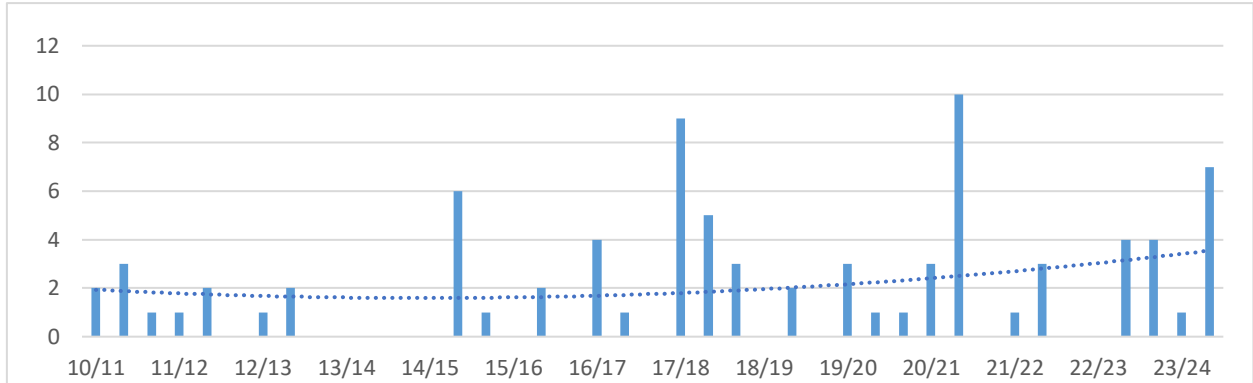
Robin



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 and more easily seen.

Green listed.

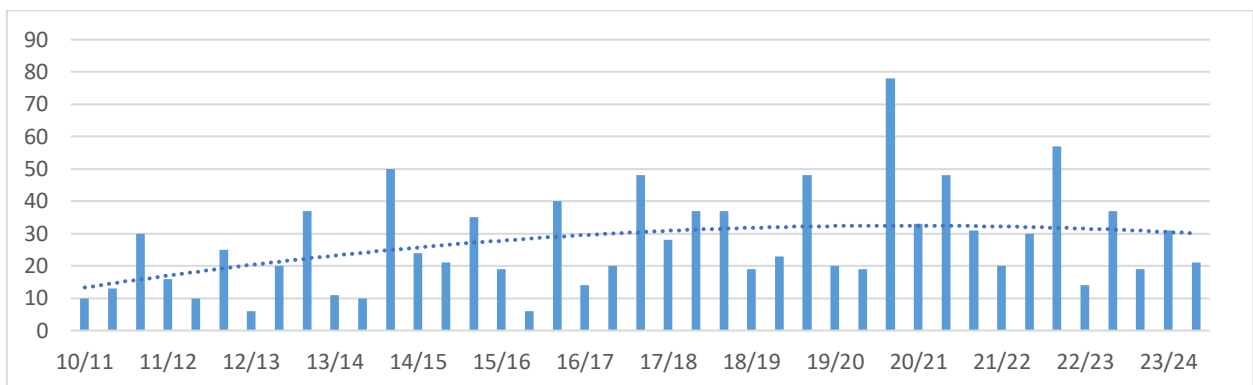
Song Thrush.



Very irregular counts during the winter period, they tend to be seen more in sheltered habitat such as game plots, woodland and urban areas rather than open arable land. A slow increase is indicated, and they are now classed as Amber listed.

Amber listed.

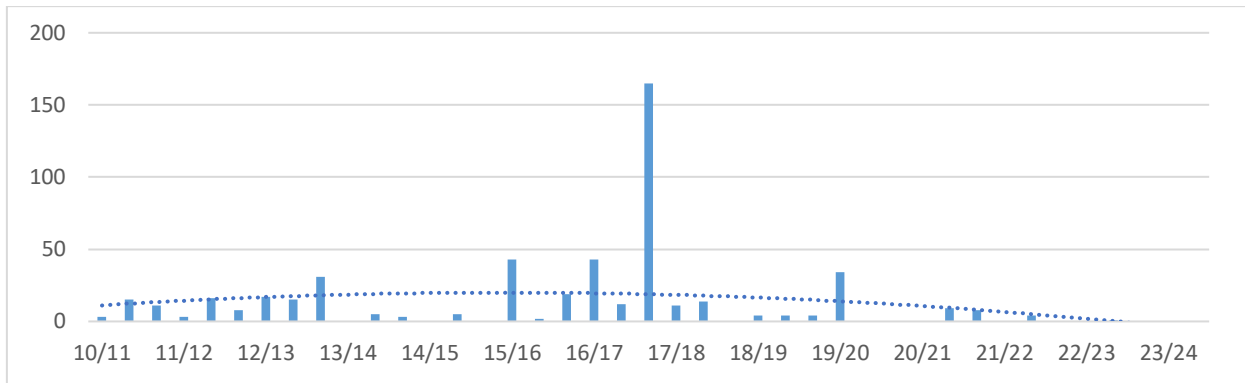
Blackbird



After a few years of gradual increase, the Blackbird population appears to have levelled off, but the increase has been higher than shown in the national figures. Winter counts are affected by large numbers of continental visitors.

Green listed.

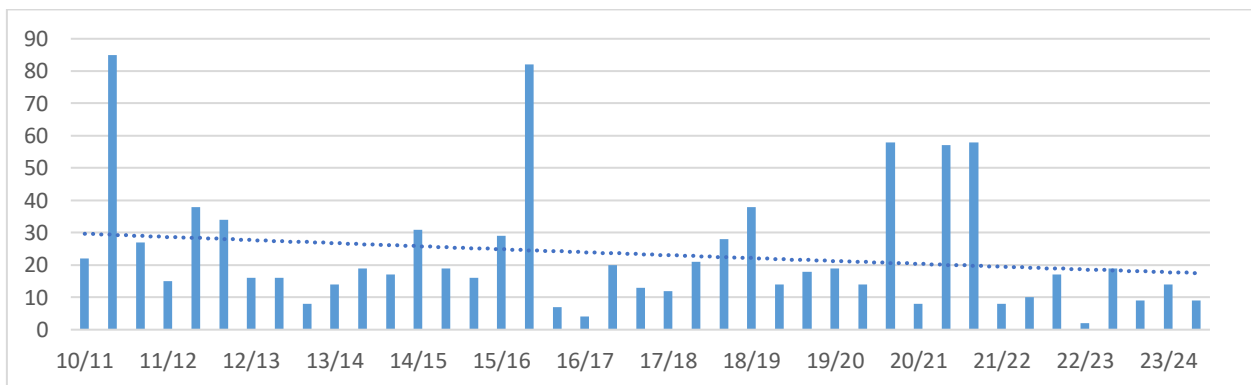
Tree Sparrow.



Winter counts are increased by immigrants from the continent and Scandinavia. Occasionally being recorded in large flocks but the numbers wintering in the survey area are reducing, leaving fewer birds which may possibly breed in this country.

Red listed.

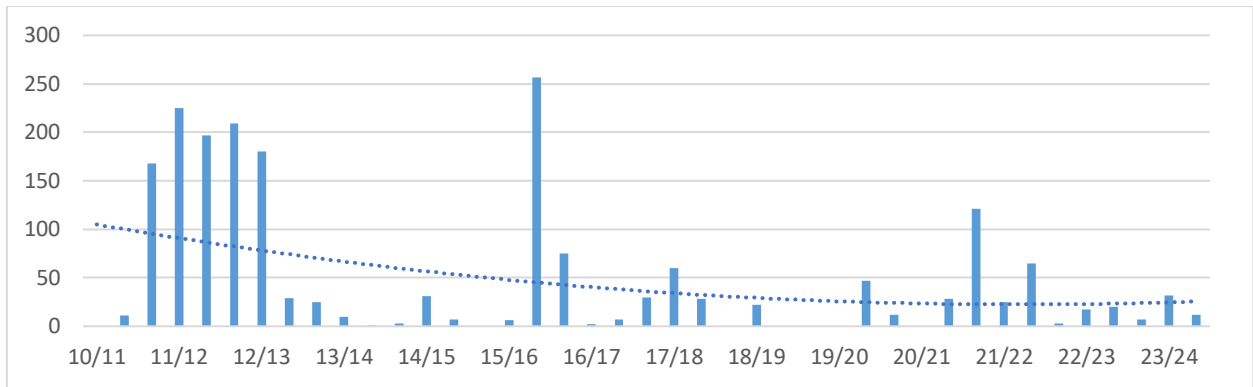
Chaffinch



Flocking in winter, usually with other finches in variable numbers. This also applies to all the following Finches. Chaffinch probably have an advantage over the smaller Finches as they are better able to feed on cereal grains made available here for Game Birds.

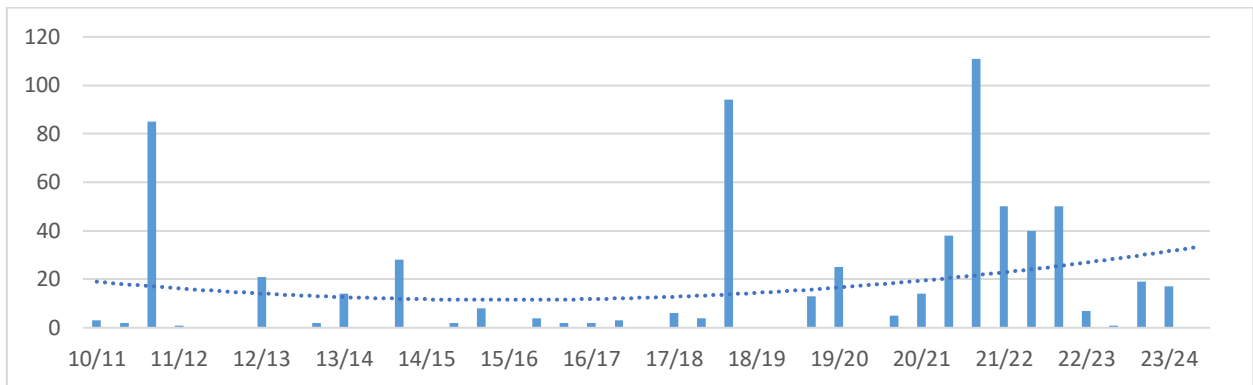
Green listed.

Linnet



Red listed.

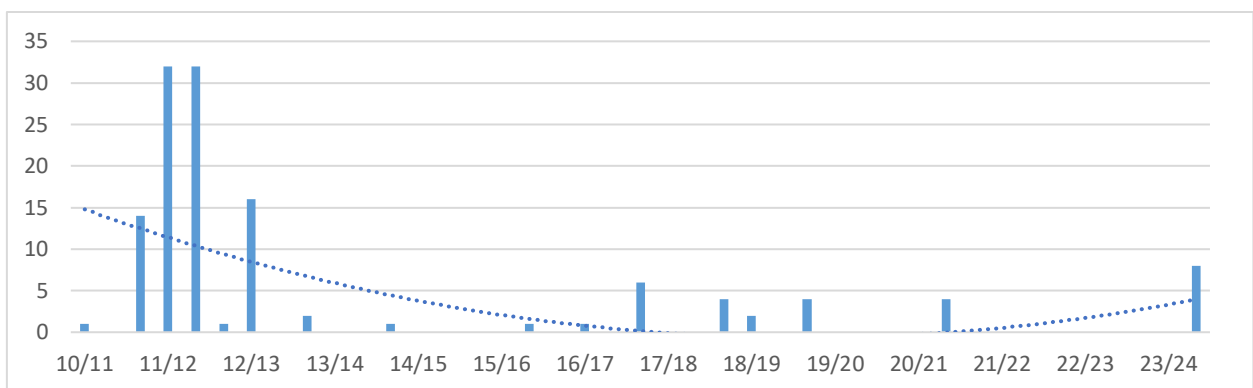
Goldfinch



Along with Linnets these are more reliant on smaller seeds of weeds such as thistle or trees such as Birch and Alder.

Green listed.

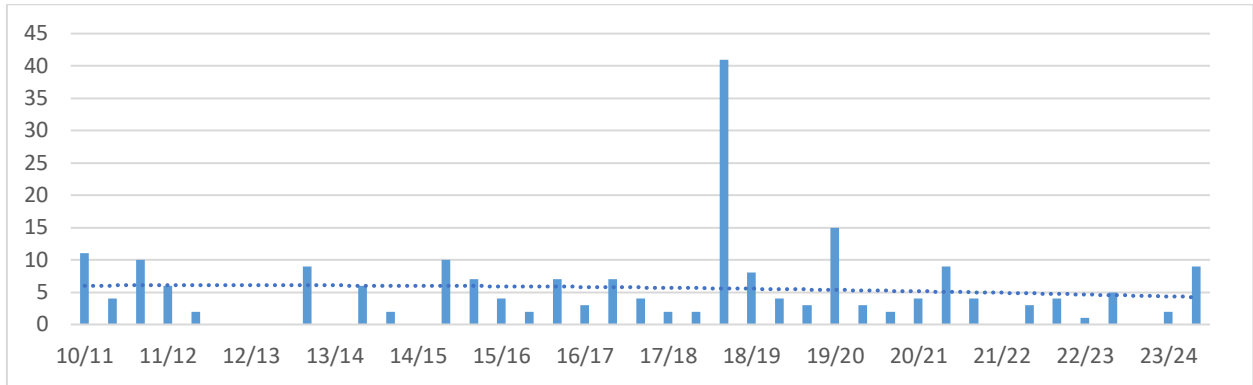
Greenfinch



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

Red listed.

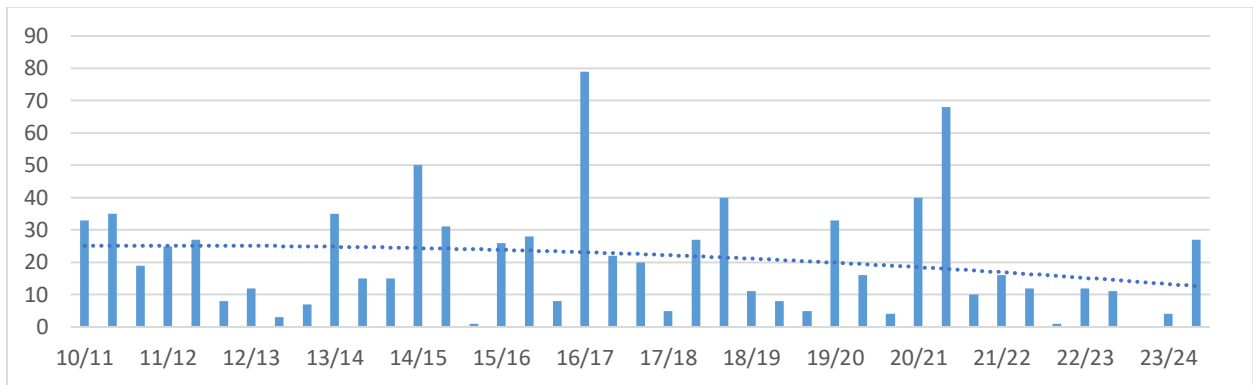
Reed Bunting



In winter more often seen in small numbers in mixed flocks of Finches but occasionally in large numbers themselves.

Amber listed

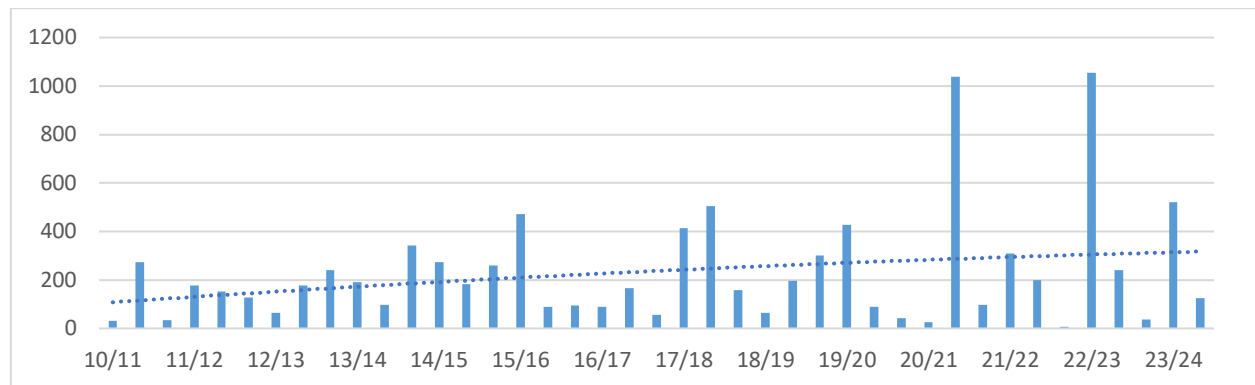
Yellowhammer



As for most of the finches, they are most commonly seen during the winter in larger flocks of seed feeders. Being a larger Finch they are also more able to feed on cereal sized seeds.

Red listed

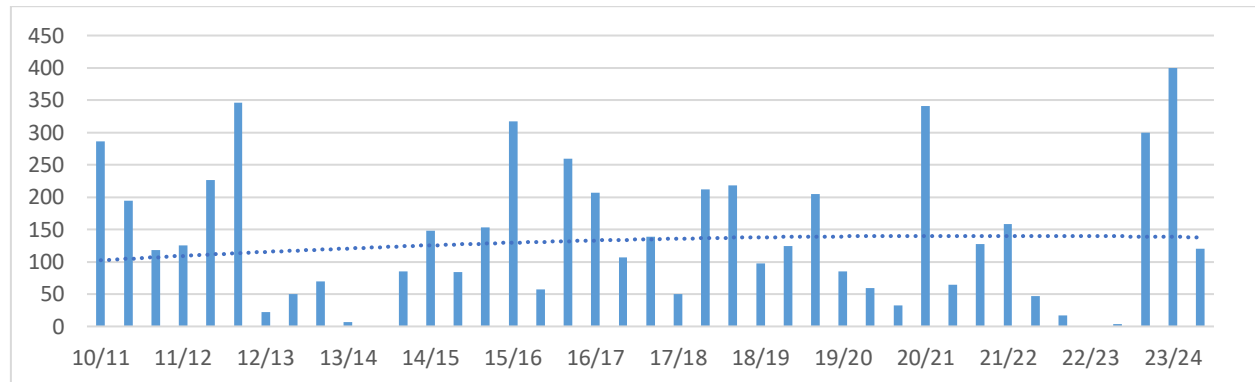
Woodpigeon



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.

Amber listed.

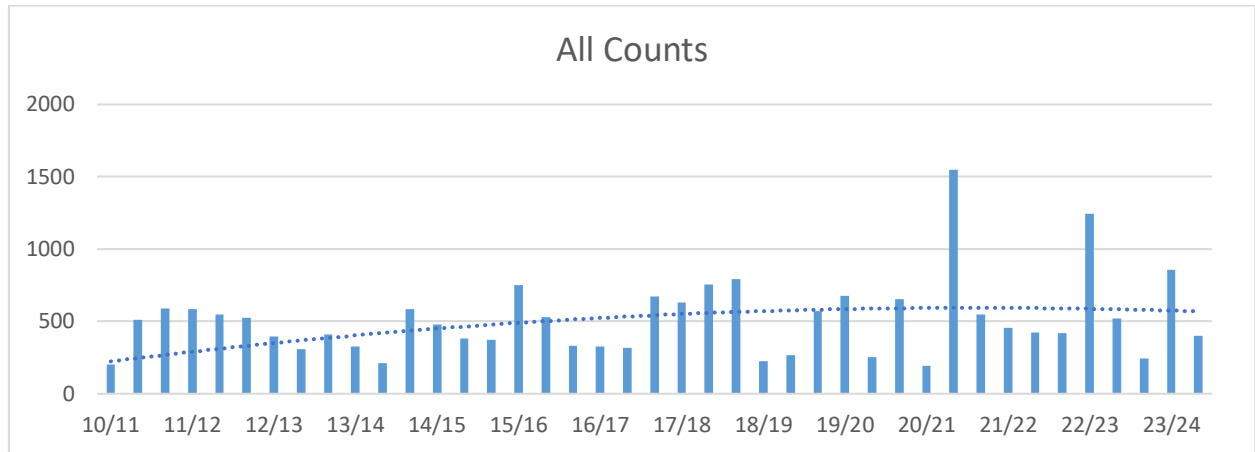
Curlew



The Curlew is not one of our target species, but the graph of its winter numbers is included here because in the early years of these surveys, Natural England asked to see our records for wintering Waders at Fieldhouse and Townfoot. As a result, the tenant farmer of Fieldhouse was asked to retain or increase the amount of grassland on the farm, which he did. Now that the management of Fieldhouse has changed to Northumberland Estates, with the resultant increase in arable ground over grassland, it seemed worthwhile looking at the graph of Curlew counts made through the winter months. The result would seem to indicate that there has been no reduction in counts but with Curlews using both arable and grassland areas. The flock of Curlew most often seen here are regularly seen feeding on the seaweed covered rocks at Seaton Point or on Fieldhouse or neighbouring land. The tides largely controlling their movements.

Red listed.

Total of All Winter Period Counts (Target Species)



The total counts are similar to those of the breeding period. The highest counts are mainly due to large influxes of Woodpigeons.

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.

Jim Clark. (July 2024)