

Alnwick Wildlife Group

Northumberland Estates Arable Farm
Bird Survey Report

2026

Acknowledgements

The surveys and this report would not have been possible without the following groups:

- Alnwick Wildlife Group's team of surveyors who carry out the surveys and provide reports on their findings,
- The Northumberland Estates gamekeepers who support the work of the surveyors.

AWG would also like to thank His Grace, the Duke of Northumberland, for his ongoing support of the group's activities.

Ian Hall

On behalf of AWG

Summary

Alnwick Wildlife Group continue to carry out regular bird surveys, at the request of Northumberland Estates, on selected areas of their lands. This report summarises the results of the surveys conducted across four arable farming areas from November 2025 to June 2026.

In general, the wild bird population trends in the four arable farm areas remain stable, with no dramatic changes from previous reports.

Raptor sightings remain low, with only the common buzzard being regularly seen, but it is difficult to identify strategies that might remedy this situation.

While locally, ground nesting birds seems to be holding their own, we know that, nationally, these species are struggling. The causes of this are both complex and interrelated, and include loss of habitat, changes in farming practices, climate change, disturbance and predation¹. In particular, one of the main problems is the low level of chick survival. Unfortunately, we can't currently measure the level of fledging within our surveys, but Northumberland Estates will be aware of this issue.

The Estates' Grey Partridge Scheme continues to support a sustainable population of this species within the surveyed areas. This is in contrast to most of the UK, where the bird is red listed. It is likely that this scheme has also provided benefits to the wild bird population through the provision of food during the winter and the control of predators. During 2026, gamekeeping activities have been reduced at Ratcheugh and Snableazes, with resources being focused on other areas.

In general, the farming and game keeping practices in use in the four areas surveyed seem to demonstrate a good balance between the needs of wildlife, game bird husbandry and arable farm production. Field margins are generous across the four survey areas and are planted with a good variety of seed mixes. There has also been a major programme of hedge planting, in particular at Fieldhouse, which should provide an improved wildlife environment in the longer term.

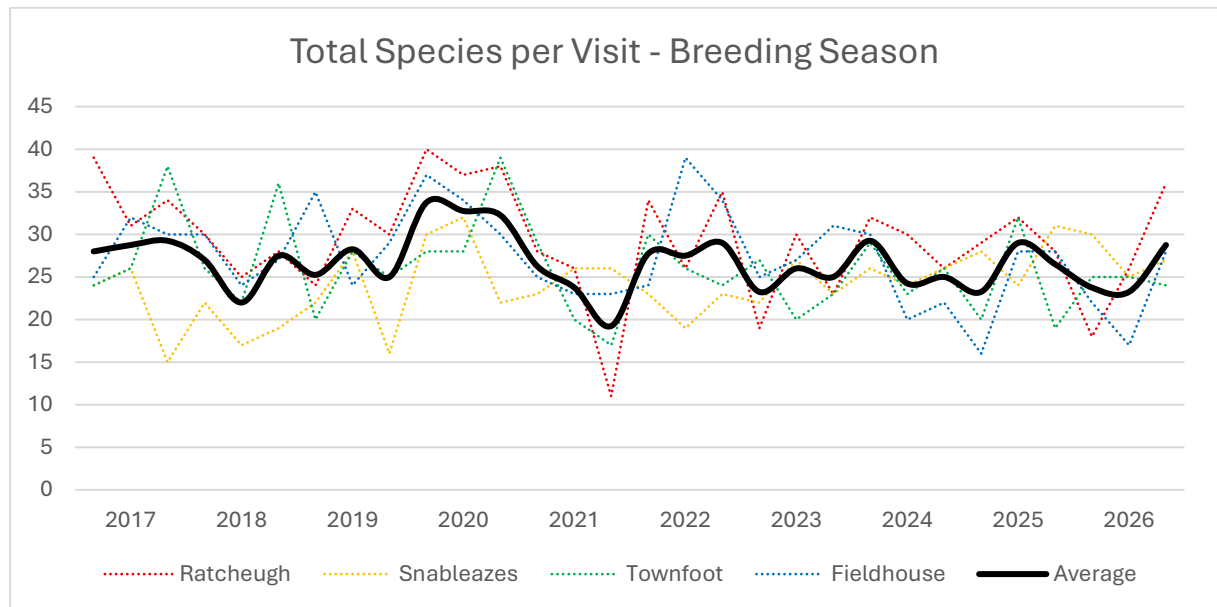
From a surveying point of view, all four arable farm survey routes are currently clearly defined with suitable parking.

¹ On moorland sites, ticks are an additional factor in reduced chick survival.

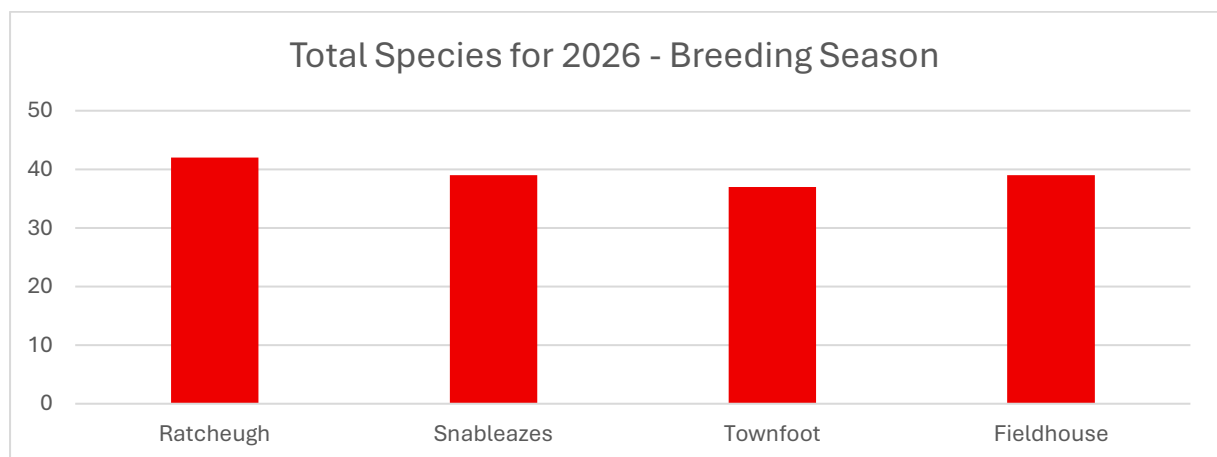
Breeding Season Survey Results

Overview

The following graph shows the number of different species counted at each survey visit (i.e. three records per year). All four areas are seeing a good variety of bird species, with the 'average' line showing approximately 25 different species are being counted on each visit.



During each survey visit we are seeing a slightly different mix of bird species. The following chart shows how many different species we identified this year on each site across the three breeding season visits. These are provided for interest; it is unclear what these numbers actually tell us.



Birds of Prey

Buzzards are being seen on all four sites. We consider the local population is currently both stable and sustainable.

Both the sparrowhawk and kestrel remain rare sighting in our four survey areas. There are no obvious actions which could alleviate this situation.

Game Birds

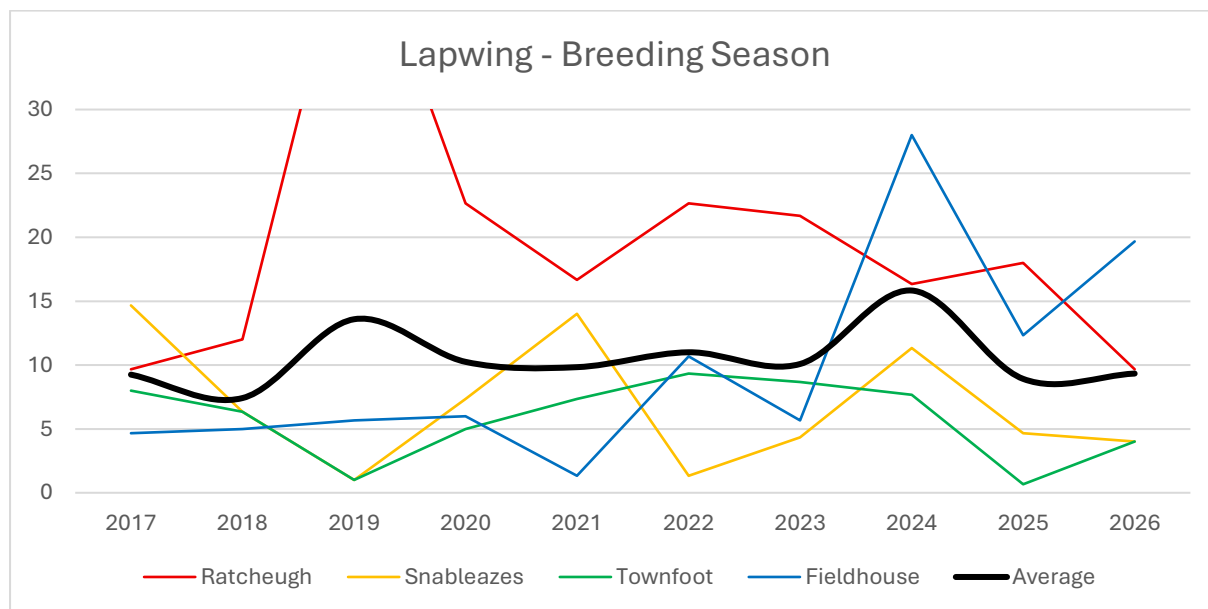
The four arable farms are part of Northumberland Estates' grey partridge programme, though gamekeeping activities have, this year, been reduced at Ratcheugh and Snableazes.

Our records of grey partridge numbers tend to be low, possibly due to the reclusive nature of these birds, but from information provided by the gamekeeping team, the population seems to be both healthy and sustainable. This is in distinct contrast to most areas of the UK, where the bird is red listed.

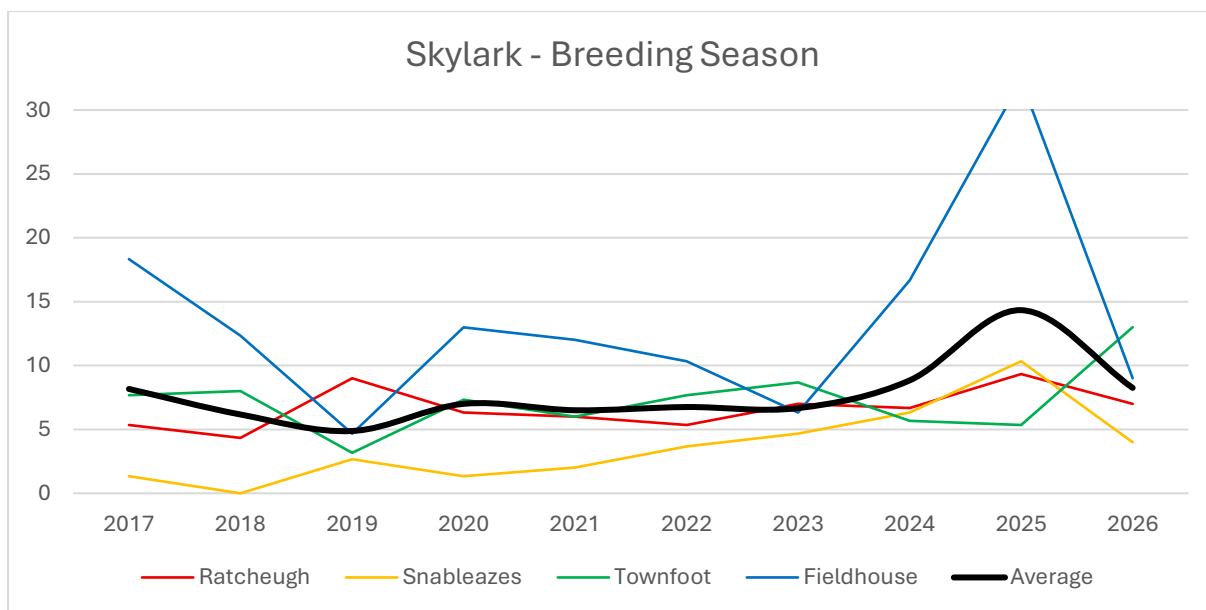
Hand reared pheasants have not been released within our survey areas for a number of years, but we continue to see a stable population.

Ground Nesting Birds

Across the UK, ground nesting birds are generally struggling. The reasons for this are several and complex, and include habitat loss, farming methods, climate impacts, disturbance and predation.



Across our four survey areas, the lapwing trend is fairly consistent. It is too early to say whether the slight increase in numbers at Fieldhouse and Townfoot, and the decrease at Ratcheugh and Snableazes are related to the change in gamekeeping priorities.

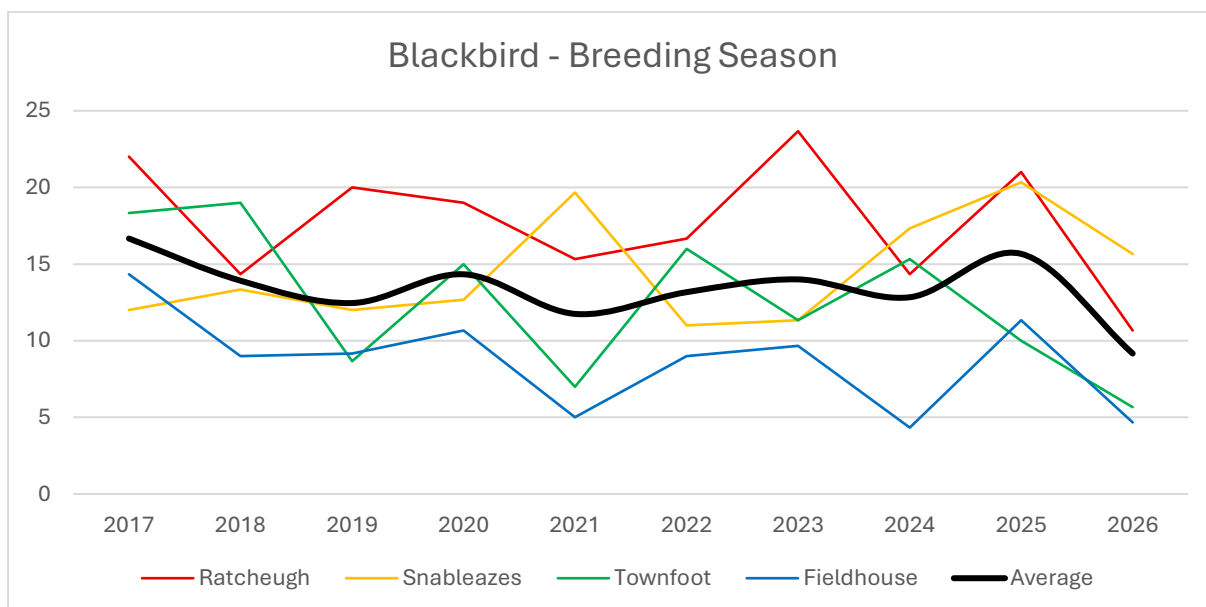


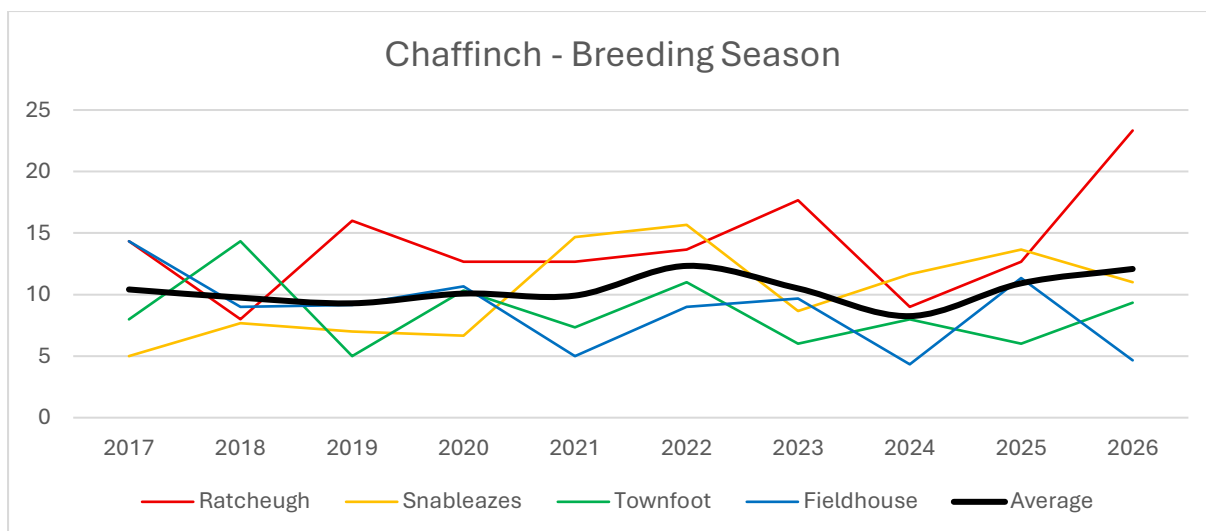
The skylark population trend is reasonably stable across all four sites.

The meadow pipit, more usually seen on our moorland sites, is only commonly seen at one arable site, Fieldhouse. This reflects the slightly different habitat at that site.

Birds of the Hedgerows and Field Margins

By far the majority of breeding birds inhabit the margins of fields, rather than the open areas. Of all these species, the blackbird and chaffinch are the most numerous, and in last year's report we used these as our "bellwether" species; any changes to these populations should provide some indication of the quality of the local conditions for the wider bird population.

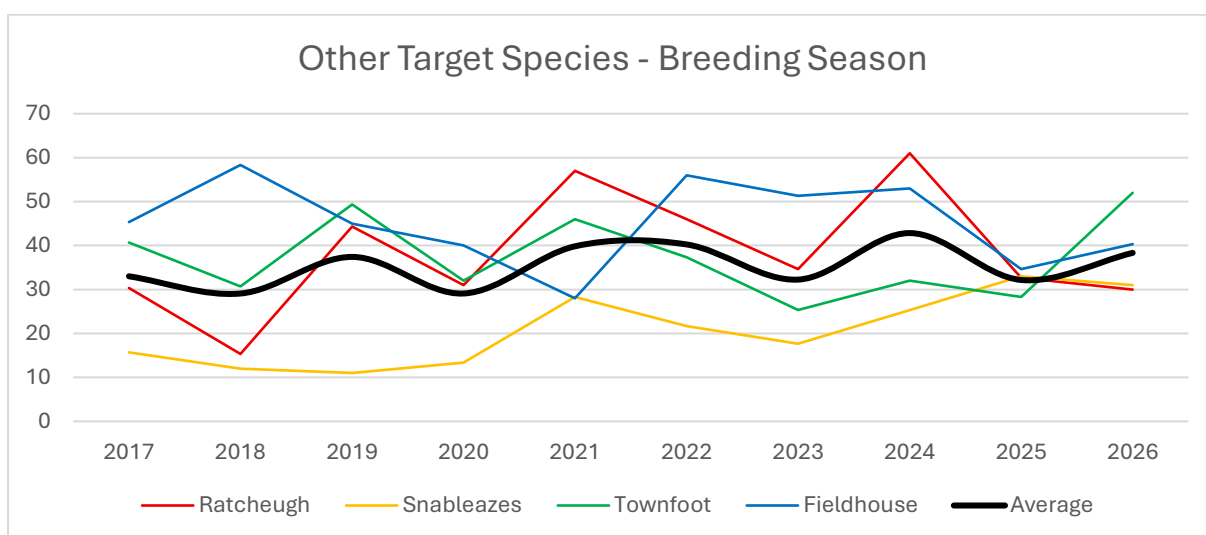




It can be seen from the above graphs, that while the chaffinch population remains stable, there is a noticeable drop in blackbird numbers. One year's data is insufficient to show a trend but it is a concern that all four arable sites are showing a significant reduction.

NOTE: Last year we did refer to *usutu virus* which is seriously affecting blackbird populations in the south of England but there is currently no indication it is being found in the north of the country.

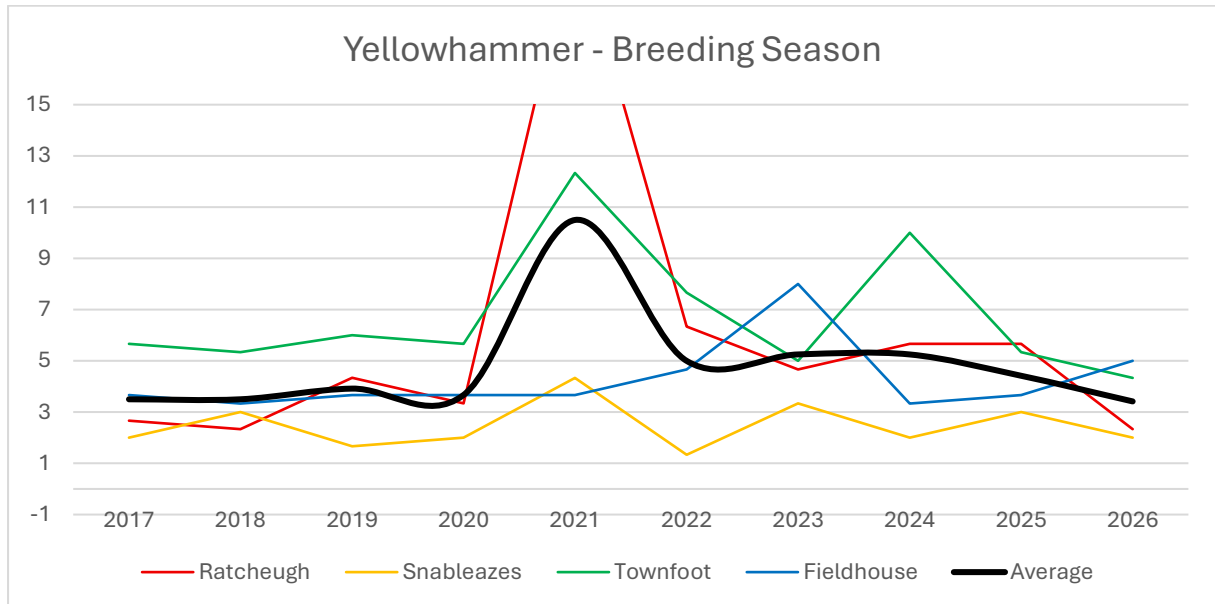
As an alternative to analysing each individual species, where the counts are often low, the following graph includes the totals of all the remaining target species (apart from Wood Pigeon) that have not already been analysed².



² Dunnock, Goldfinch, Greenfinch, Linnet, Mistle Thrush, Reed Bunting, Robin, Song Thrush, Tree Sparrow, Whitethroat, Wren, Yellowhammer

Over the period, each area has generally seen numbers holding steady, which is in contrast to the national picture where the numbers of most species are falling. This reflects well on the overall conditions in these areas.

As last year, the results for one species, the yellowhammer, have been extracted.

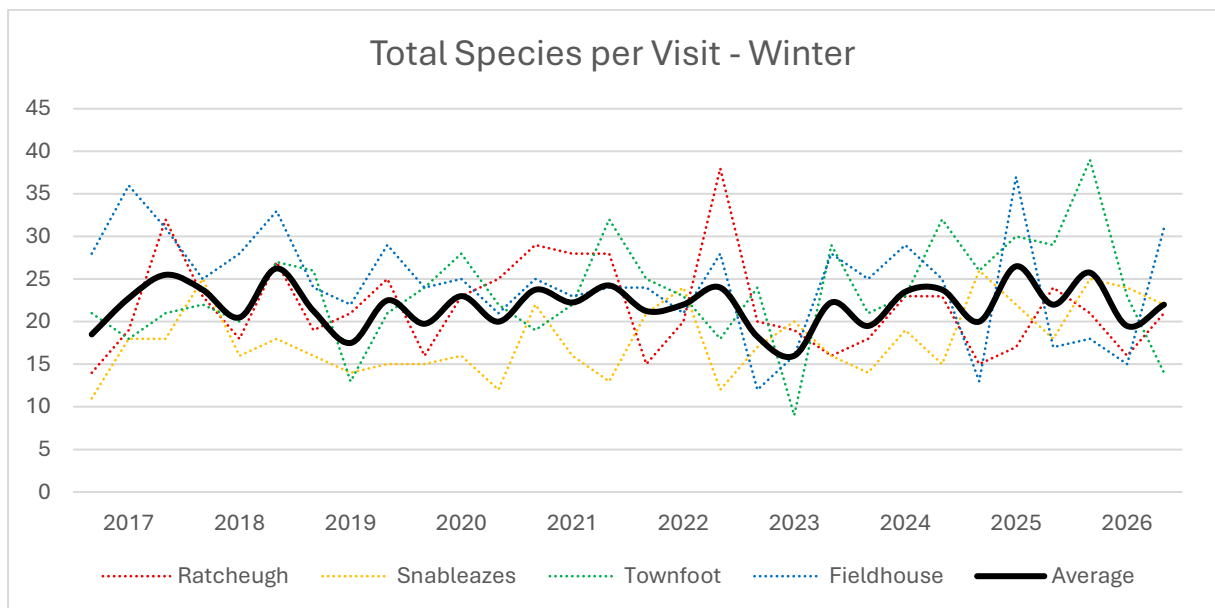


Nationally red listed, the Yellowhammers seem to be holding their own in our survey areas.

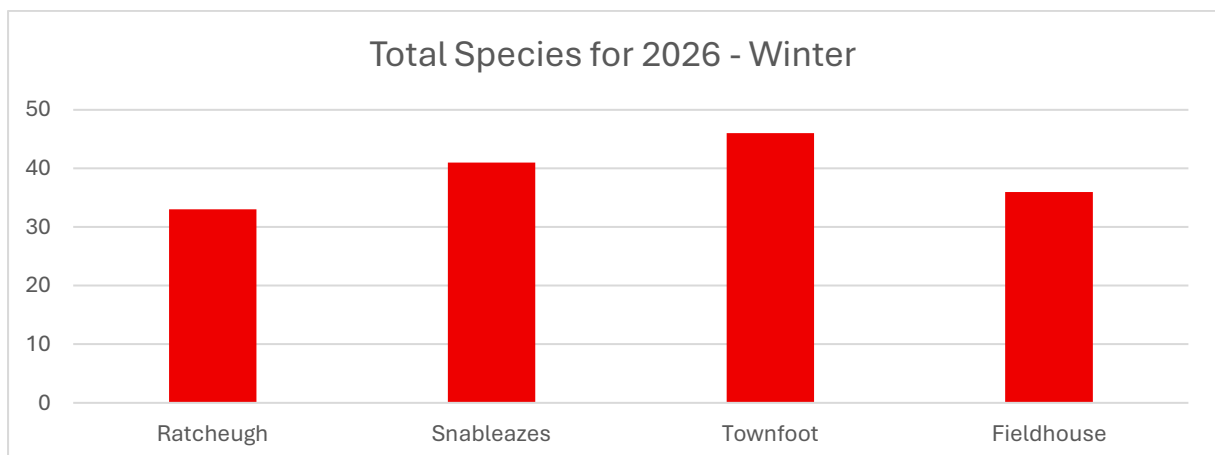
Winter Season

Meaningful analysis of the winter season is more difficult. Weather conditions can make identification more challenging and can lead to birds seeking cover, making counting more difficult. The arrival of migrant species can also vary dramatically from year to year, depending on conditions well beyond our own area. We therefore need to be cautious about what we extrapolate from our winter survey results.

Looking at the range of species seen during the winter, however, we see a very similar picture to the breeding season with all areas having a good range of species, with over 20 different species being seen on each survey visit.



As with the breeding season, during each survey visit we are seeing a slightly different mix of bird species. The following graph shows how many different species we identified on each site across the three visits.



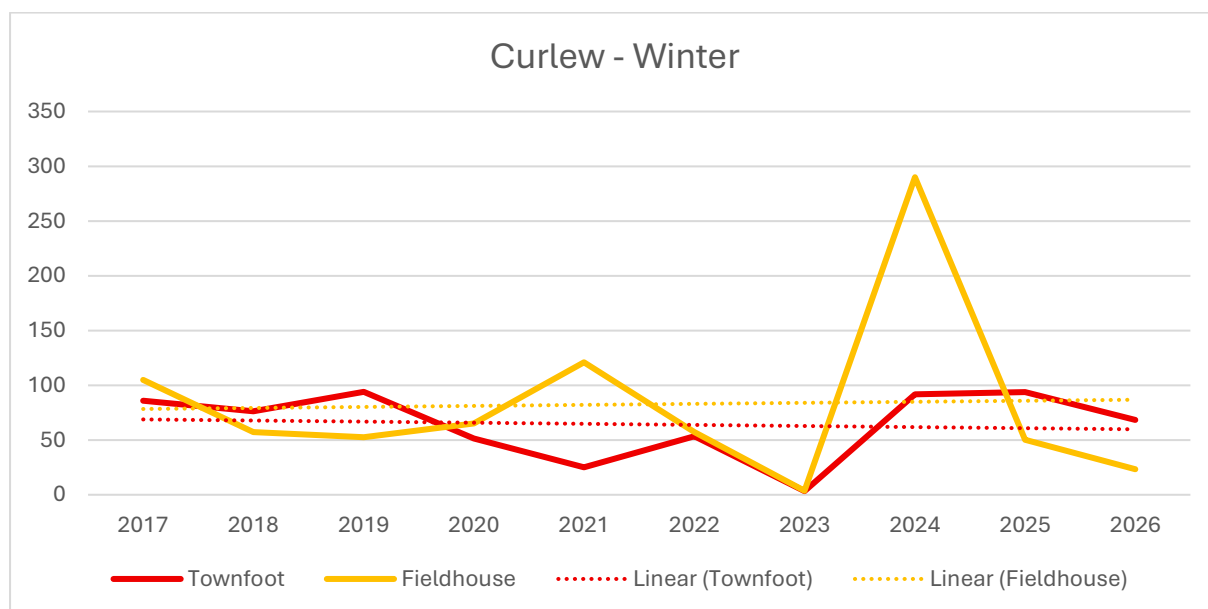
Birds of Prey

The winter counts of birds of prey reflect those in the breeding season in that the common buzzard population in the area is now stable and well established, and both the kestrel and sparrowhawk are rare sightings.

Ground Nesting Birds

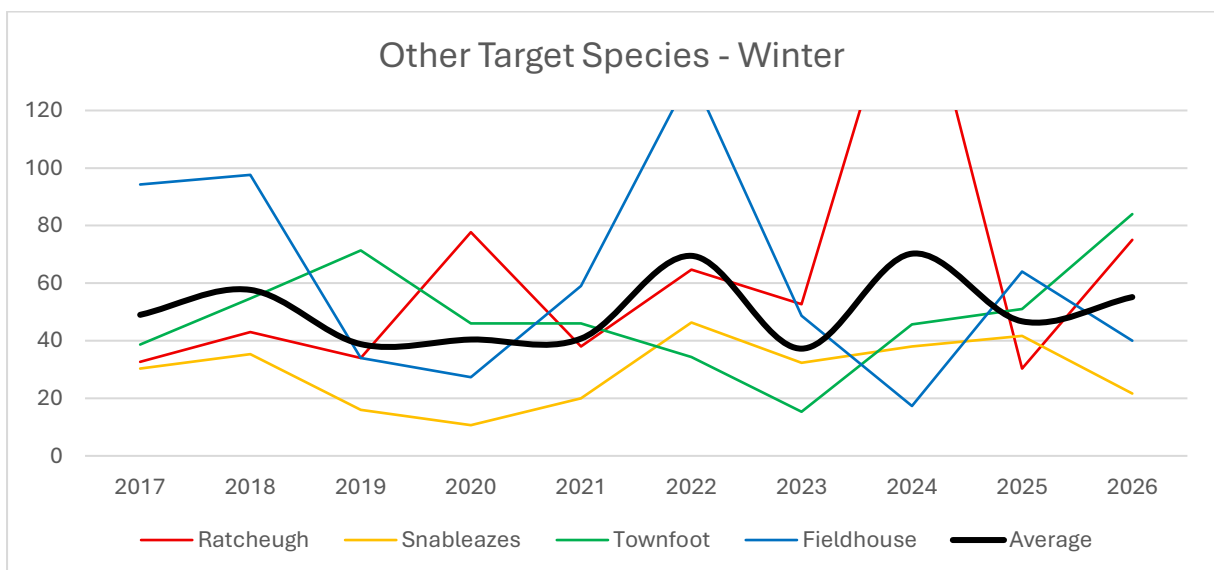
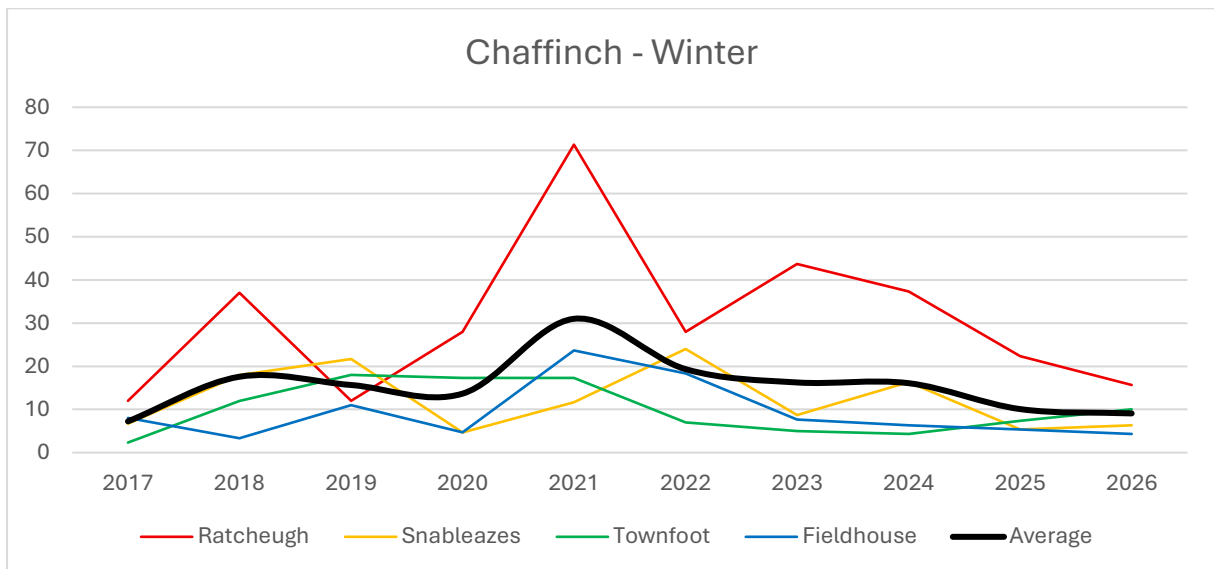
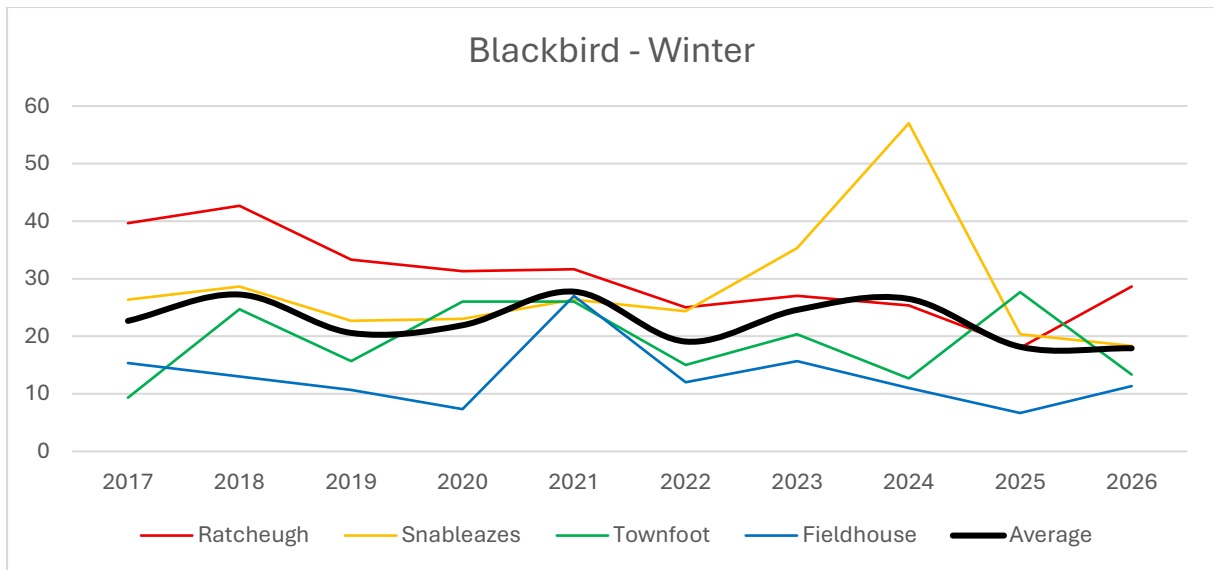
It is difficult to evaluate ground nesting bird populations during the winter as they move around, depending on the prevailing conditions. These birds prefer the coastal areas, but move inland, as large groups, in poor weather.

The one species that we have consistently reported has been the curlew. This is not one of our target species, but their numbers have, in the past, been of interest to Natural England, so we will continue to include them in this report. Curlews are present in significant numbers on both the Townfoot and Fieldhouse sites during the winter but totally absent from the other two areas. The trend lines (shown as 'linear' on the graph) for these two sites are level.

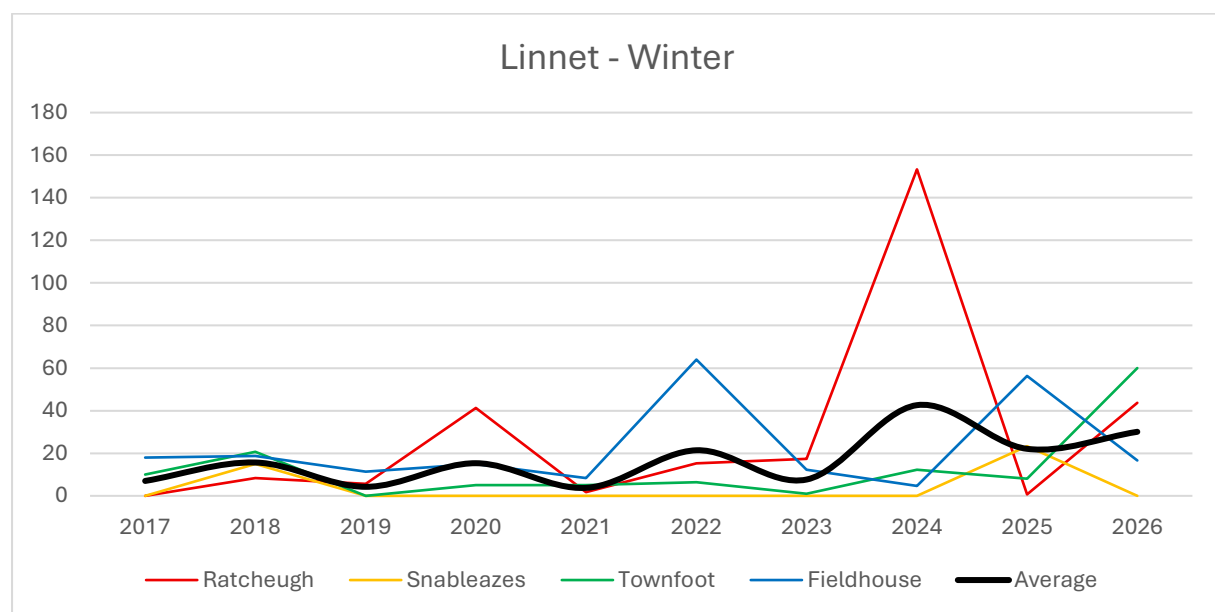
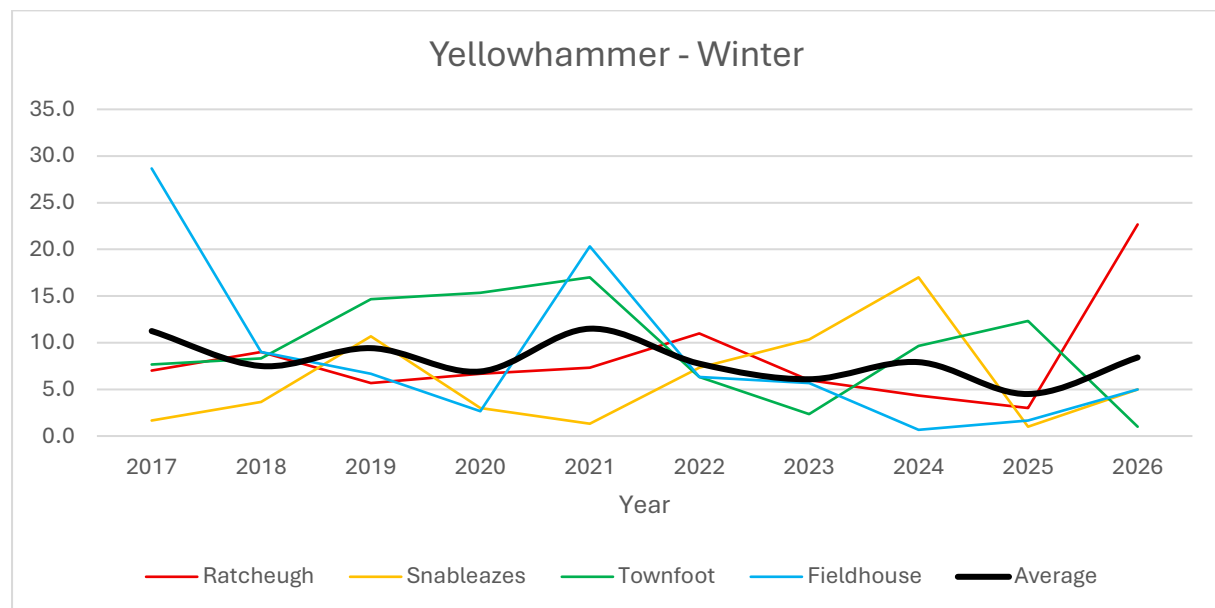


Birds of the Hedgerows and Field Margins

Overall, it is difficult to interpret the survey results for most of the songbird species we record during the winter. The following graphs all show reasonably level trends, though there are variations between survey areas. Counts are generally higher than during the breeding season, probably due to migration and to both male and female birds actively feeding. Overall, the winter results are encouraging.



Extracting the sightings of two 'red listed' species that are seen in our area, the yellowhammer numbers are trending level and linnet numbers trending up.



Appendix 1: Site Specific Data

The following tables provide the individual site data for our target species from each of the survey visits. The bird species are coloured in accordance with the current UK conservation status.

In addition to specific birds identified in this report, three species stand out as performing poorly across all sites; the greenfinch, mistle thrush and tree sparrow.

Conversely, the wood pigeon, although amber listed nationally, is seen in large numbers across all sites. This bird can cause significant damage to crops and can out-compete other species for scare food supplies, particularly in the winter.

Ratcheugh

2025/26	Winter Season			Breeding Season		
	Nov	Jan	Feb	Apr	May	Jun
Blackbird	59	20	7	6	9	17
Chaffinch	2	40	5	40	17	13
Common buzzard	4	2	0	2	1	0
Dunnock	1	2	3	0	3	2
Goldfinch	0	0	5	10	0	9
Greenfinch	0	1	0	0	0	0
Grey partridge	20	6	7	7	0	4
Kestrel	0	1	0	0	0	1
Lapwing	0	30	35	20	3	6
Linnet	21	100	10	0	2	11
Meadow pipit	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mistle thrush	0	0	0	0	1	0
Pheasant	15	14	11	4	5	2
Reed bunting	1	0	0	0	0	9
Robin	6	1	1	0	2	5
Skylark	0	0	3	6	5	10
Song thrush	0	0	2	0	0	6
Sparrowhawk	1	0	0	0	0	1
Tree sparrow	0	0	0	0	0	0
Whitethroat	0	0	0	1	0	8
Woodpigeon	26	7	34	50	35	39
Wren	1	0	2	2	2	10
Yellowhammer	6	50	12	2	0	5

Snableazes

2025/26	Winter Season			Breeding Season		
	Nov	Jan	Feb	Apr	May	Jun
Blackbird	18	23	14	9	12	26
Chaffinch	3	9	7	11	12	10
Common buzzard	1	0	0	1	2	1
Dunnock	3	2	2	7	2	2
Goldfinch	0	5	0	5	6	6
Greenfinch	0	0	12	0	0	0
Grey partridge	5	13	9	9	3	7
Kestrel	0	1	0	0	0	0
Lapwing	0	0	0	8	2	2
Linnet	0	0	0	3	2	14
Meadow pipit	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mistle thrush	1	0	0	0	0	0
Pheasant	2	2	2	3	1	0
Reed bunting	0	0	0	0	0	0
Robin	6	3	5	2	2	1
Skylark	1	0	1	4	4	4
Song thrush	0	0	2	1	8	5
Sparrowhawk	0	1	0	0	0	0
Tree sparrow	2	0	0	0	0	0
Whitethroat	0	0	0	0	1	0
Woodpigeon	9	20	72	17	50	27
Wren	4	2	1	4	10	6
Yellowhammer	2	13	0	2	2	2

Townfoot

2025/26	Winter Season			Breeding Season		
	Nov	Jan	Feb	Apr	May	Jun
Blackbird	13	7	20	4	4	9
Chaffinch	8	6	16	11	6	11
Common buzzard	0	0	3	0	1	2
Dunnock	5	0	1	2	2	3
Goldfinch	23	5	0	4	2	0
Greenfinch	0	0	0	0	0	0
Grey partridge	7	0	0	0	4	2
Kestrel	0	0	0	1	0	1
Lapwing	10	2	0	7	3	2
Linnet	40	110	30	100	7	0
Meadow pipit	11	0	0	0	0	3
Mistle thrush	0	1	0	0	0	0
Pheasant	17	7	15	10	5	6
Reed bunting	2	0	0	0	2	1
Robin	5	4	1	1	0	0
Skylark	5	0	10	30	4	5
Song thrush	0	1	0	0	2	6
Sparrowhawk	1	0	0	0	0	1
Tree sparrow	8	4	0	0	0	0
Whitethroat	0	0	0	1	1	3
Woodpigeon	125	40	100	150	21	100
Wren	5	4	0	1	1	4
Yellowhammer	3	0	0	6	1	6

Fieldhouse

2025/26	Winter Season			Breeding Season		
	Nov	Jan	Feb	Apr	May	Jun
Blackbird	4	21	9	6	1	7
Chaffinch	0	7	6	11	0	2
Common buzzard	0	0	1	0	0	2
Dunnock	0	3	1	0	0	0
Goldfinch	26	0	0	2	20	2
Greenfinch	0	0	0	0	0	0
Grey partridge	10	13	17	0	4	0
Kestrel	1	0	1	1	0	0
Lapwing	90	2	100	17	20	22
Linnet	50	0	0	29	0	35
Meadow pipit	10	0	2	6	1	18
Mistle thrush	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pheasant	11	36	25	13	6	5
Reed bunting	1	4	2	0	1	3
Robin	2	1	2	0	0	0
Skylark	1	0	9	8	2	17
Song thrush	0	0	2	0	0	2
Sparrowhawk	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tree sparrow	0	0	2	0	0	0
Whitethroat	0	0	0	0	0	6
Woodpigeon	60	19	150	100	20	21
Wren	5	0	4	4	0	2
Yellowhammer	2	3	10	9	2	4

Appendix 2: Survey Background and Methodology

Background

The aim of AWG's bird surveys is to assess the effects of Northumberland Estates' gamekeeping and farming management methods on the wild bird population. Regular surveys are carried out across four arable farms: Fieldhouse, Ratcheugh, Snableazes and Townfoot. Surveys are also carried out across five areas of moorland. These results are reported separately.

The surveys of Ratcheugh and Snableazes have been carried out since 1999, and Townfoot and Fieldhouse since 2010. The only periods when surveys were not completed was in 2001 during the foot and mouth period, and 2020 during Covid. The results for these years are based on averages from adjacent years.

The Arable Farm Survey Areas

Northumberland Estates joined the national Farm Stewardship Scheme at its inception in 2003. Now known as Countryside Stewardship, the scheme provides funding to farmers and land managers to improve their local environment, including restoring wildlife habitats, creating woodlands and managing flood risk. Looking forward, there are potential changes in the way farm subsidies are to be paid, though the details are currently unclear.

Ratcheugh, Snableazes and Townfoot have plentiful hedgerows and well-developed field margins which contribute to the diversity of wildlife in these areas.

Fieldhouse, in contrast, includes more open areas which go back to its period as a wartime airfield. Recently there has been considerable hedge planting, particularly along the edges of the old airfield runways and roadways. While these will take a number of years to become established, together with the creation of new field margins, these changes should help create an improved wildlife habitat.

In 2004, Northumberland Estates initiated a programme of more intensive gamekeeping practices in order to encourage the grey partridge population to a point where some sustainable shooting could be carried out. Predators, such as stoats, weasels, foxes and carrion crow are actively controlled. Extra feed, game plots and shelter are also provided.

This work started on the Ratcheugh and Snableazes farms. As a result, measures are well established on both farms and a good range of game plots are in place.

The work has subsequently spread to a number of other farms, including Fieldhouse and Townfoot. Townfoot is becoming established as a grey partridge area, while the changes implemented at Fieldhouse mentioned above should allow this area to similarly develop.

Fieldhouse, Ratcheugh and Townfoot survey areas each encompass approximately 110Ha, while Snableazes is much smaller, at about 40Ha.

Survey Methodology

In order to make comparative counts as consistent as possible, surveyors walk a predefined route and spend approximately the same time in each area. Each of the survey areas is visited six times a year; three in the winter between November and February and three during the breeding season between April and June.

Wherever possible, surveys are carried out on days which are not too windy or wet; adverse conditions make comparative counts more difficult. Recording is carried out by visual observation or song and call recognition. Any counts relying solely on call recognition apps, such as Merlin, are not included in the report.

Although all species are recorded, reporting concentrates on particular target species; a set of species which are felt to be representative of the birds which inhabit arable areas in our region and which routinely feed and breed on arable land and the adjoining hedges and trees.

Target species

Blackbird, Chaffinch, Common Buzzard, Dunnock, Goldfinch, Greenfinch, Grey Partridge, Kestrel, Lapwing, Linnet, Meadow Pipit, Mistle Thrush, Pheasant, Reed Bunting, Robin, Skylark, Song Thrush, Sparrowhawk, Tree Sparrow, Whitethroat, Woodpigeon, Wren, Yellowhammer

It is important to be aware that six visits each year produce only a limited amount of data upon which to base any conclusions. There are a large number of variables which affect the counts, including the weather. The surveyors can only count the birds that are there at the particular snapshot in time. We therefore need to be cautious about how much we infer from survey results. Over a period, however, trends do emerge from which we can make reasonable assumptions.

Records of the surveys date back to 1999, but within this report we have concentrated on the last 10 years. The bird count graphs presented are based on the average counts across the three survey visits. This has some advantages as it smooths out some of the variations, but some detail may be lost.