ALNWICK WILDLIFE GROUP.

NORTHUMBERLAND ESTATES BIRD SURVEY.

REPORT FOR APRIL2024 – FEBRUARY 2025.

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 and Kestrel has been added as another species which is considered to be at risk.

Aims of the Survey

The basic aim is to attempt to measure the effect 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 of 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 or cutting, 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 have been 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. 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 a detailed description of the areas. It 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 totalled 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 our results. The "Bird Atlas" published by the British Trust for Ornithology also gave very useful information when comparing local trends in population over the ten-year period prior to 2011 when the previous Atlas was produced but is becoming less relevant as time passes. An up to date edition of the BTO Atlas is planned for the future. 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 now 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 one 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 those 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 would be interesting to see how populations might change with hopefully, 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 managed to 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.)Information taken from the BTO national Bird Atlas is shown as **(BA)** and from the Northumbria Bird Atlas as **(NBA).** The trend Lines on the graphs are computer created.

Ticks and Tick carried Virus Infections.

The increasing population of Ticks on the higher Moorlands is recognized as being a result of Climate Change. Tick numbers are very difficult to control. Heather burning is very effective but this is only carried out on relatively small areas which are now more controlled since Moorland is recognized as a valuable carbon store. Grazing sheep collect Ticks which are killed by the use acaricides. This protects the sheep from several virus infections from which they would be at risk. To be effective in controlling Ticks the stocking rates on the moors would have to be very high, which is not practical.

One of these viruses (Louping Ill) has been shown to affect Red Grouse, leading to some high losses. There is no reason why Louping Ill will not also be affecting other moorland birds, Curlew, Golden Plover, Lapwing etc. Testing for this is very difficult as antibodies cannot be detected until 20 to 25 days after infection in young chicks.

Heavy burdens of ticks alone are sufficient to prove fatal to young chicks without any infection.

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 : - Please note the change at (B) to the last ten year period.

(A) A long-term trend as a % rise or fall over the 28 year period 1995-2023.

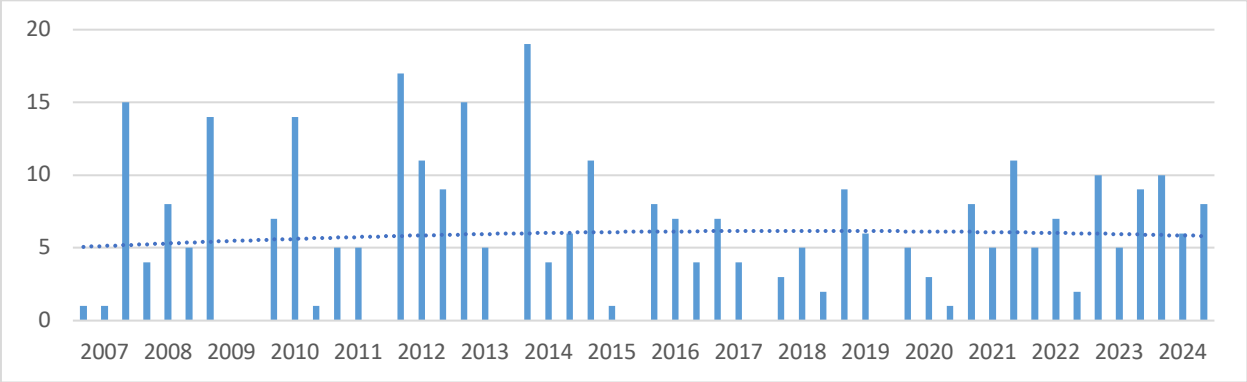
(B) A Breeding Bird Survey trend as a % rise or fall over the 10 year period 2012 to 2022. Compared to our results over the same period.

Please note that these are the latest complete figures published by BTO to the nearest whole figure. These 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.

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

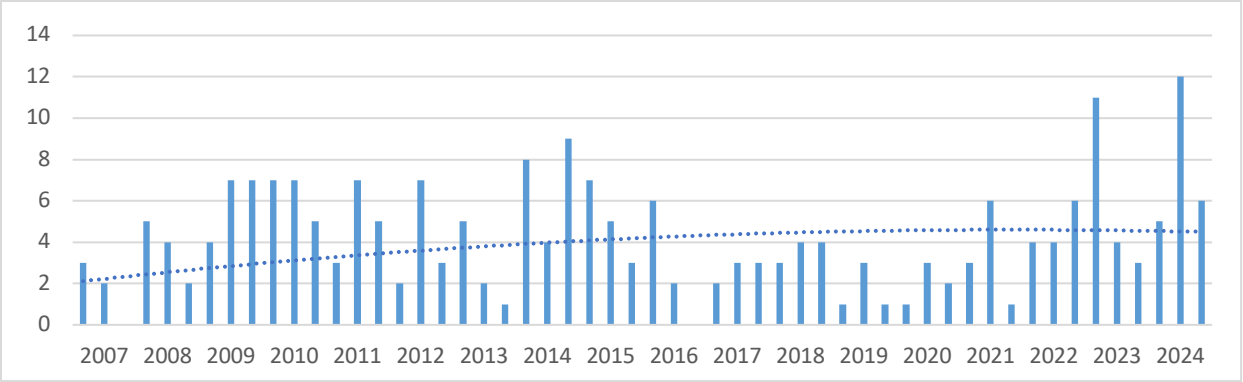
Mallard.



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. National figures 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) +6% (B) -8%

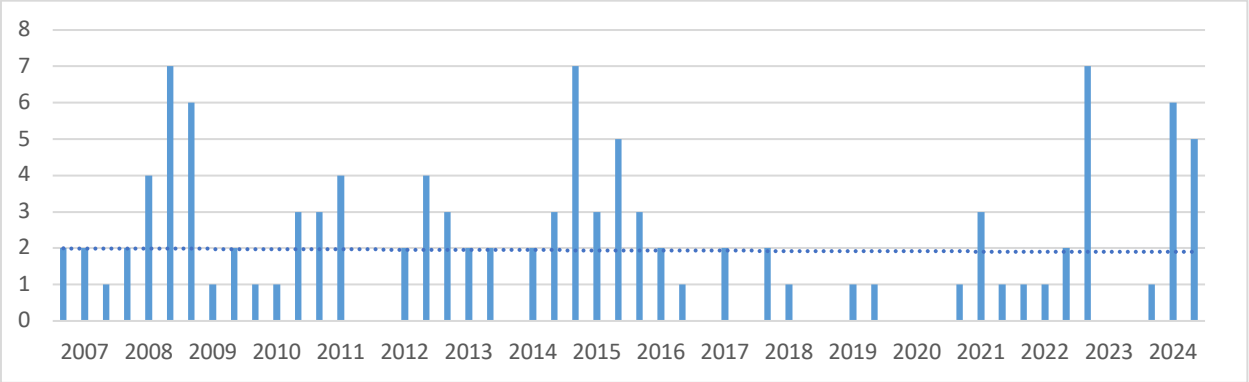
Buzzard.



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) +80% **(B) +1%**

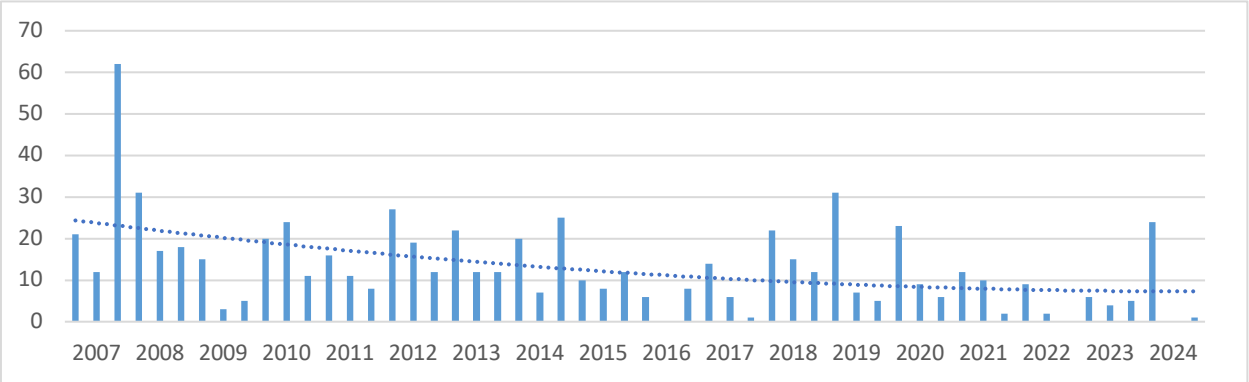
Kestrel.



Reports of the falling number of Kestrels are frequent. At the Moorland survey sites they are recorded on a regular basis and appear to be holding their own. For some years a pair of Kestrels nested in a disused quarry in the Black Lough survey area but have not done so in the last two years.

Amber Listed. (A) -40% (B) -14%

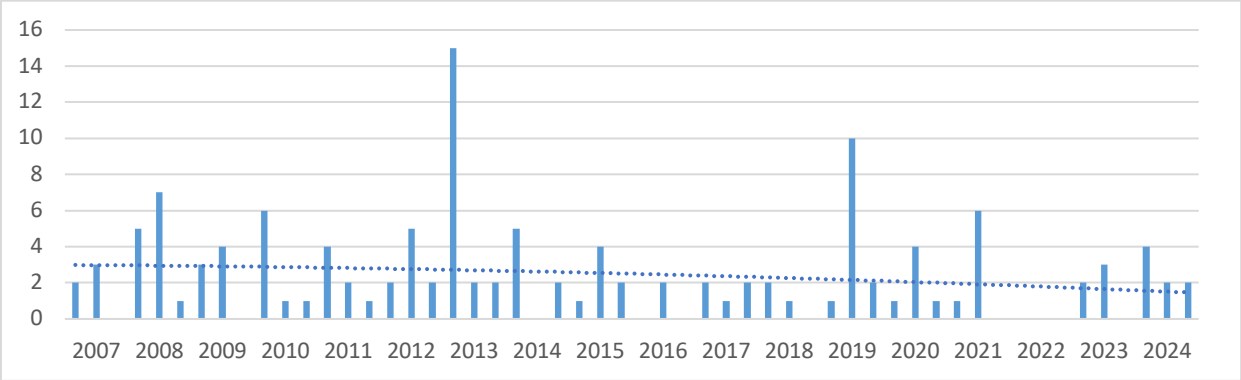
Red Grouse



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. Our records show a decline in numbers which would agree with the national figures.

Green listed (A) -16% (B) -22%

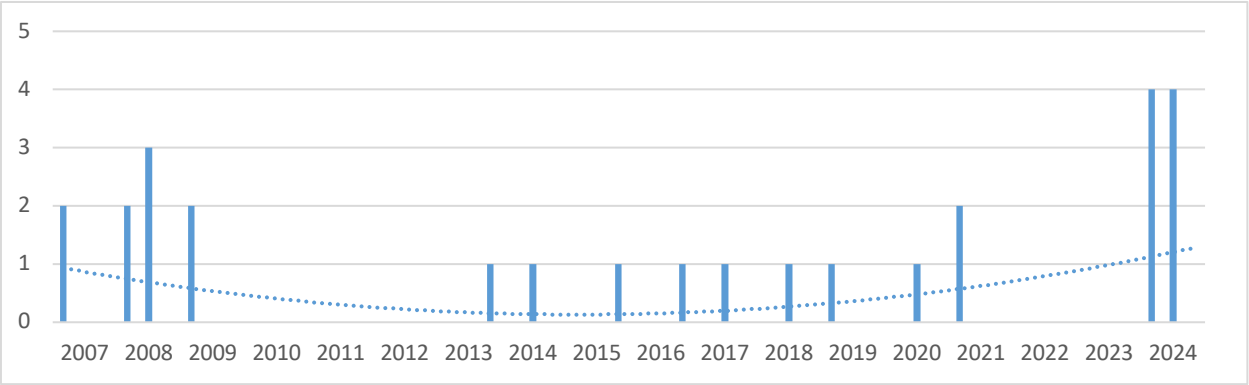
Red Legged Partridge.



Red legged Partridge in the survey areas are probably birds released here in previous years or from those released on neighbouring estates. Hand reared birds 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 the2022 breeding season and only two in 2023. See the winter results for 2024/25 which indicate that there have been more released locally.

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

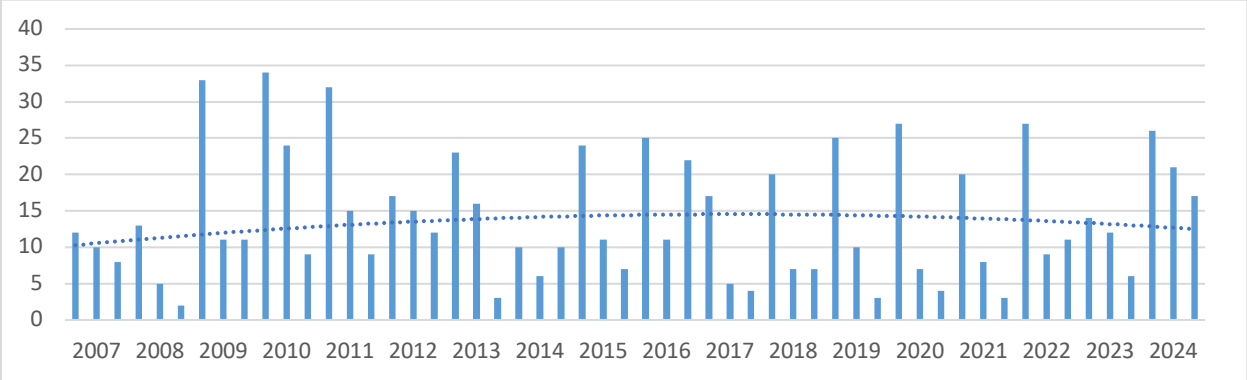
Grey Partridge



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) -19%

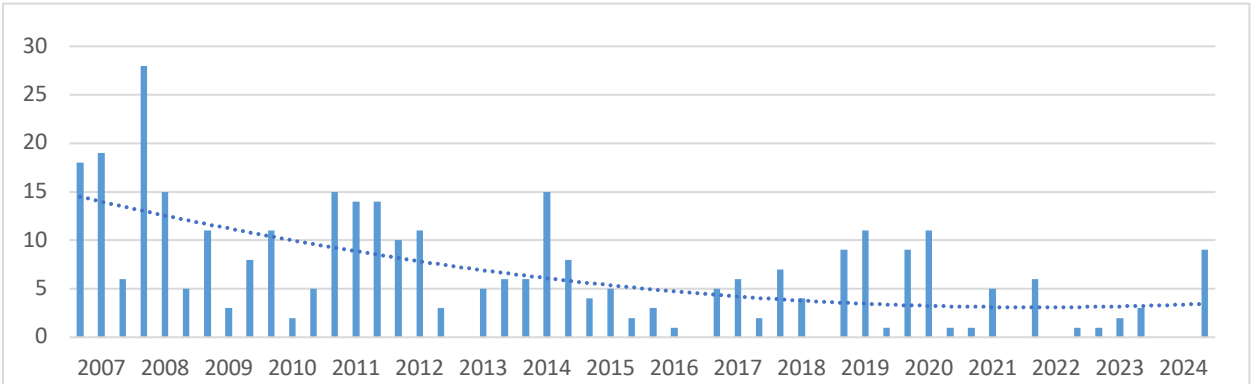
Pheasant.



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) +15% (B) -4%

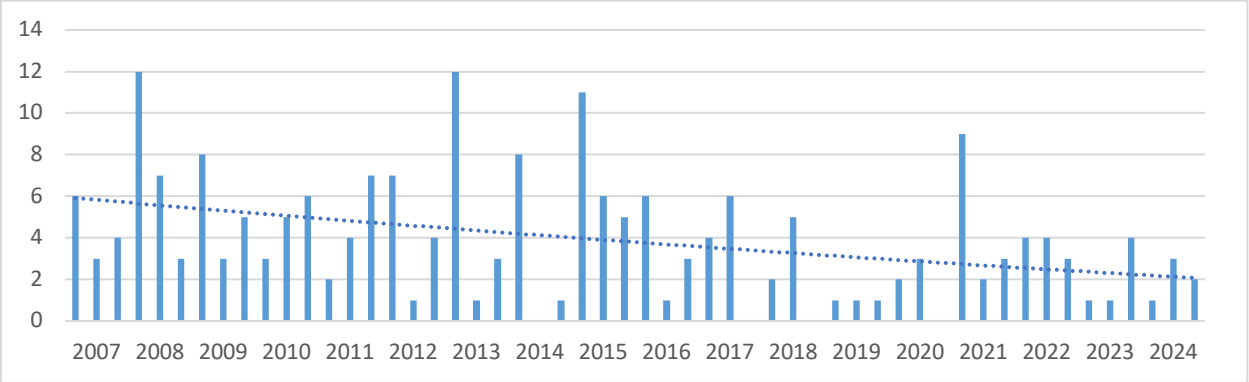
Lapwing



No Lapwing were recorded during their breeding months of April and May in 2024 and only a small number at the last visits. 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 or winter stubbles more suited to their requirements. 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) -50% (B) -13%

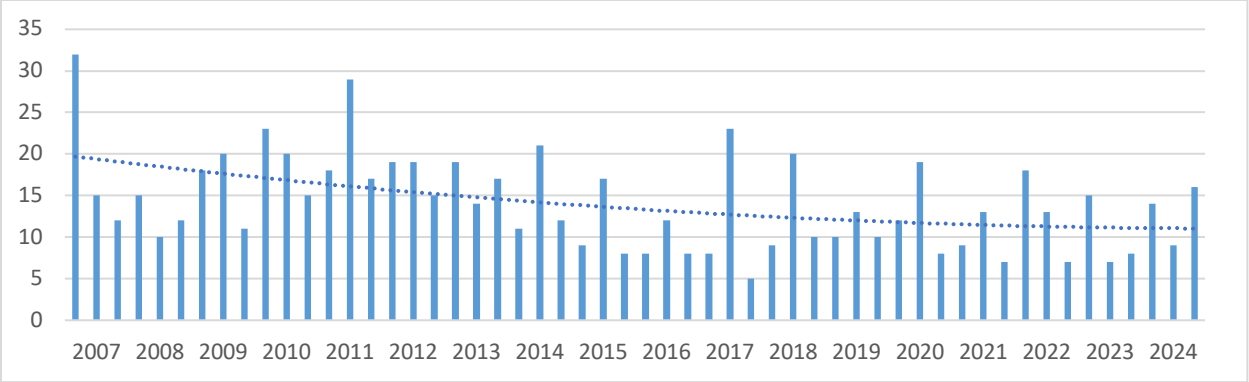
Snipe.



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) +22% (B)+15%

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.

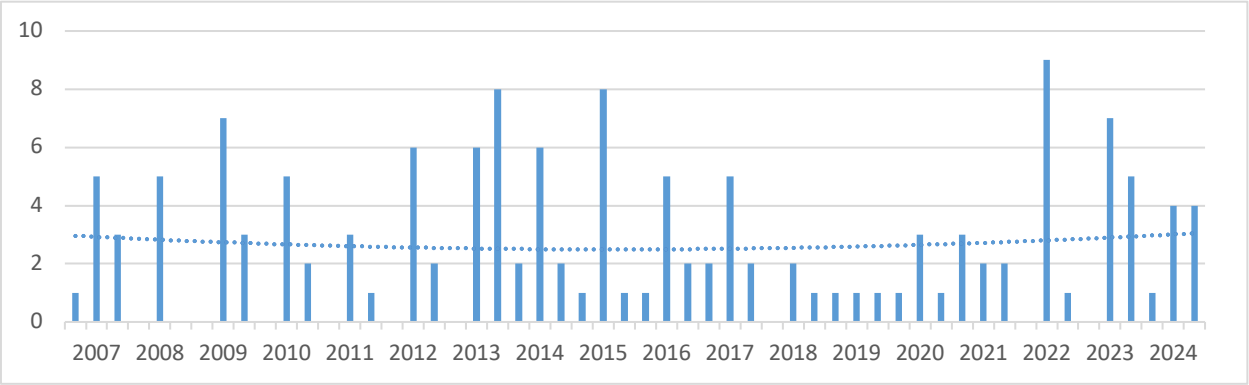
Trials have started by removing eggs produced in areas where they are not welcome, such as airfields which often have large areas of grassland very suitable for breeding Curlew. These are being hand reared and released at two years of age into more Curlew friendly areas.

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.

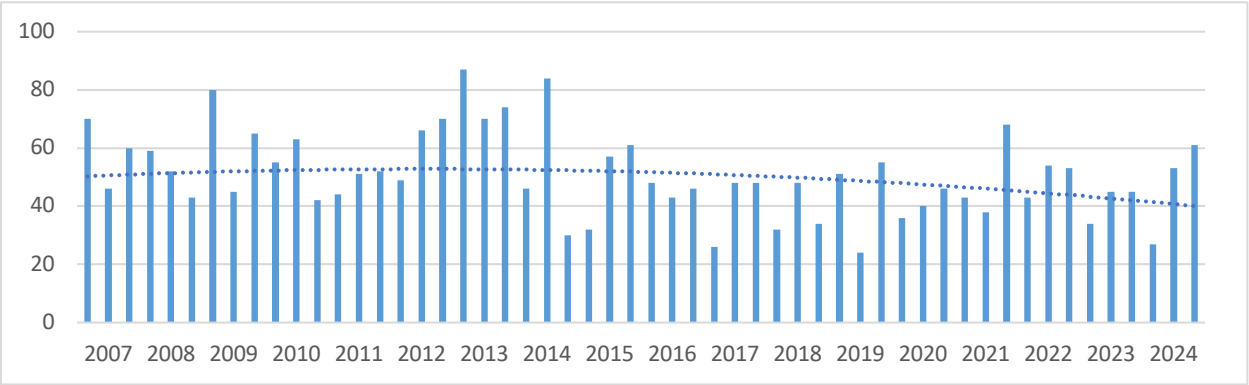
Red listed (A) -50% (B) -8%

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 to 2024 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)-22%

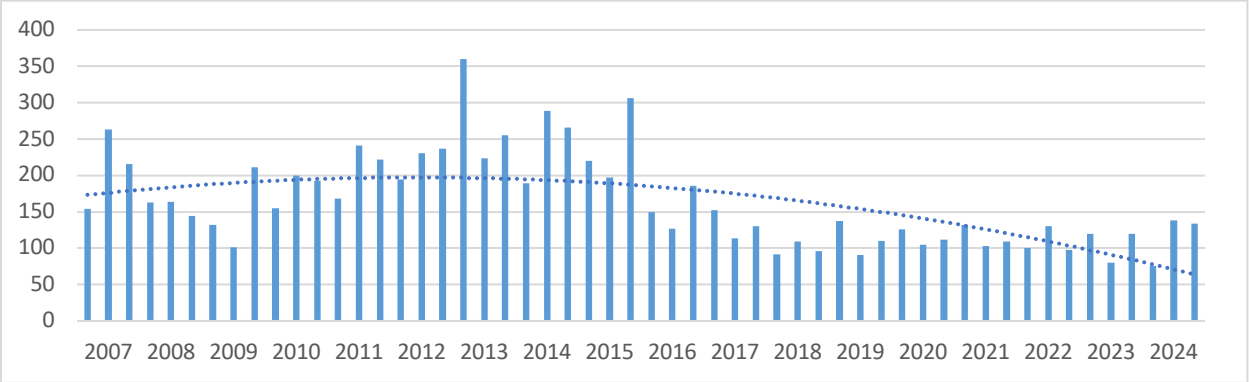
Skylark



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) -11% (B) +15%

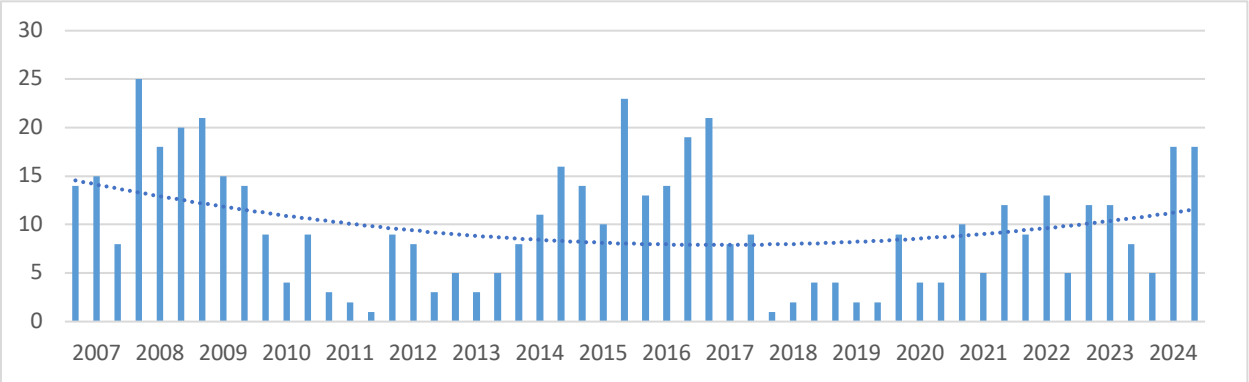
Meadow Pipit.



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) -13% (B) +4%

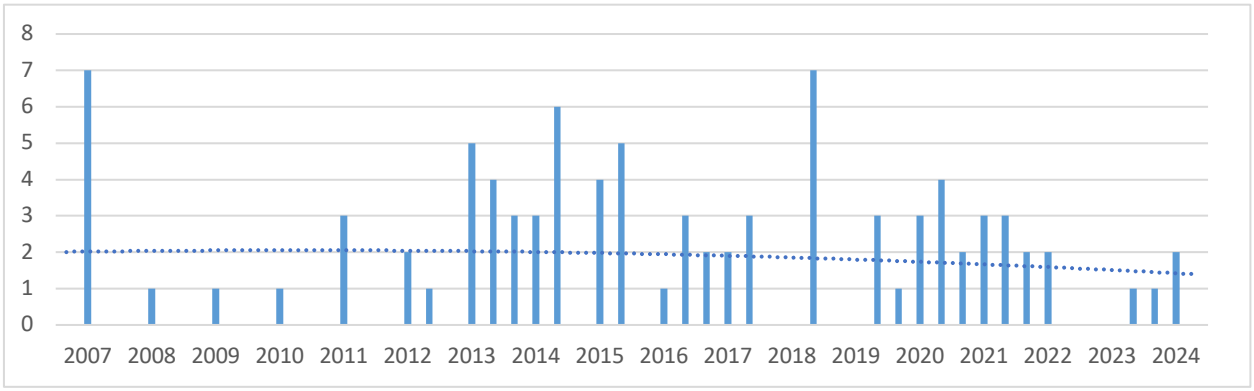
Wren



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 continue to increase 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.

Amber listed (A) +29% (B) +28%

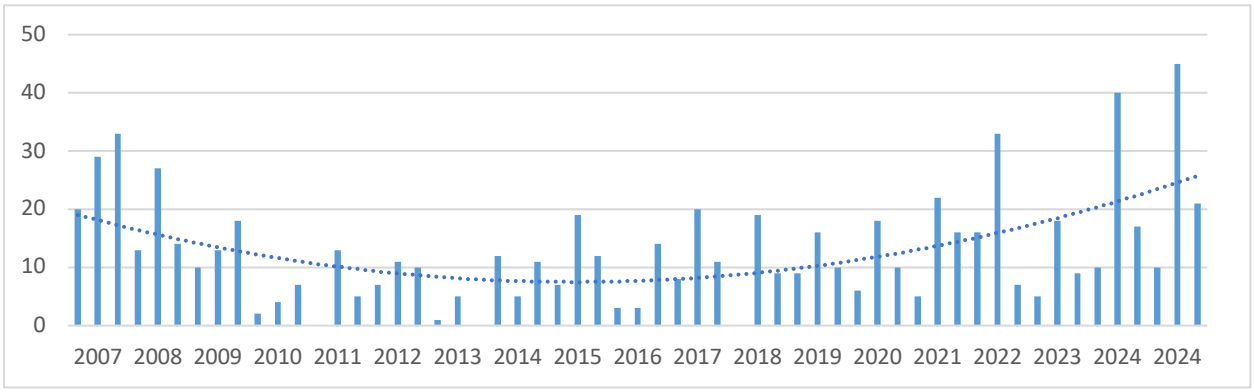
Whinchat.



Whinchat numbers have increased during the early years of the surveys 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). 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) -60% (B) -12%

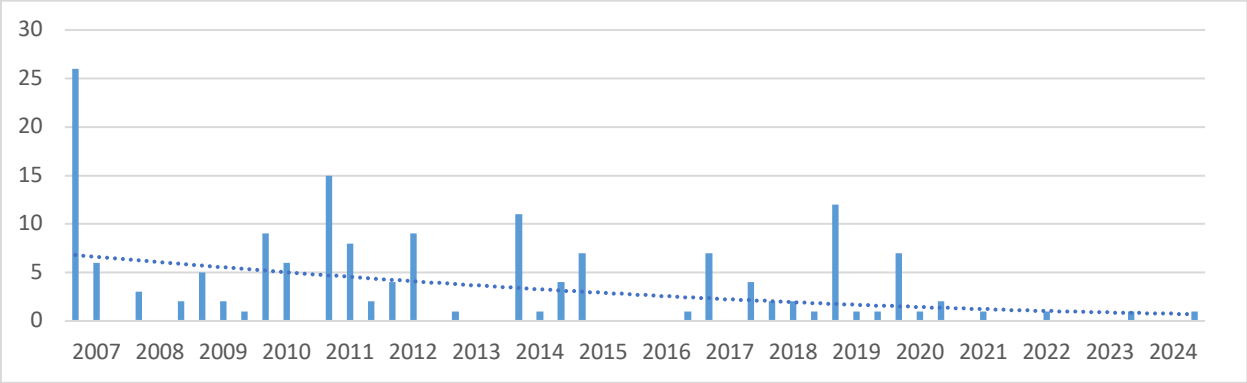
Stonechat



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) +243% (B) +197%

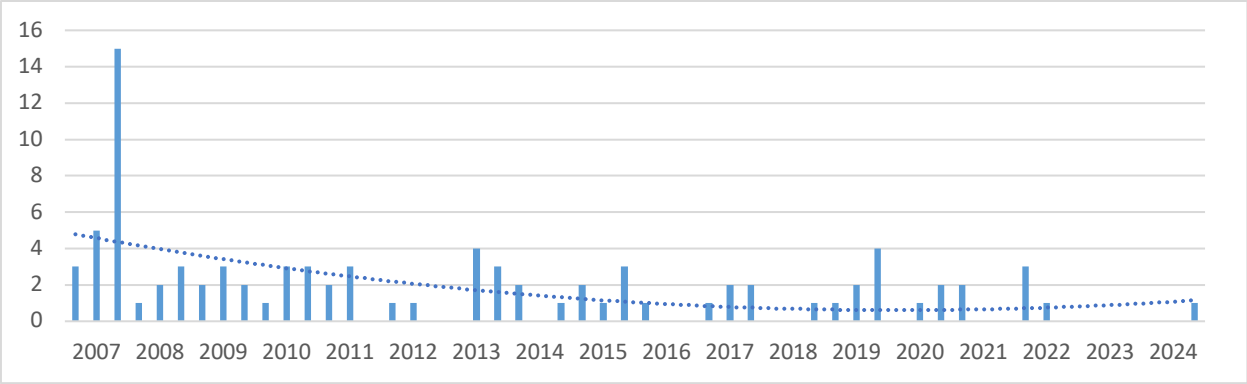
Wheatear.



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.

Amber listed (A) -32% (B) -32%

Song Thrush

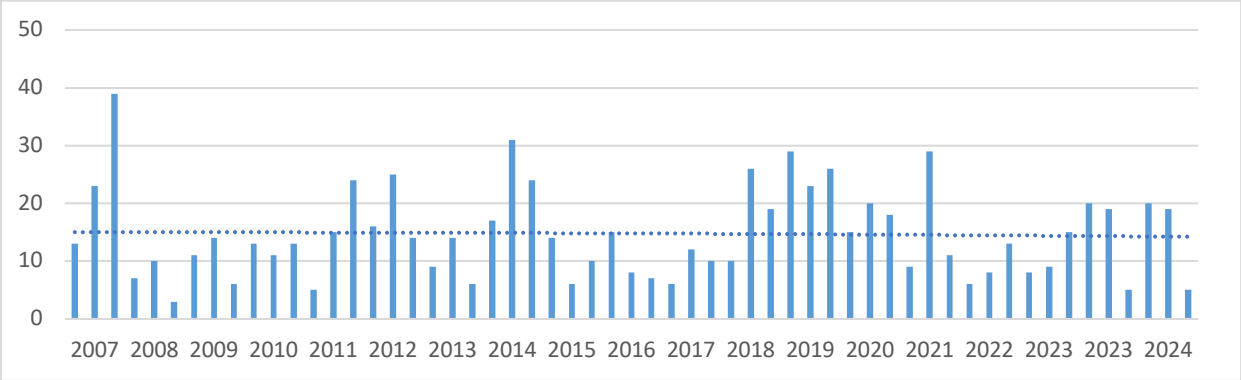


Song Thrush continue to be seen in very small numbers. Most records have been made at the edges of the survey areas where forestry plantations form the boundary. More of these trees have now been removed, which will obviously have an effect on numbers recorded and make this graph inaccurate. Nationally 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) +30% (B) +22%

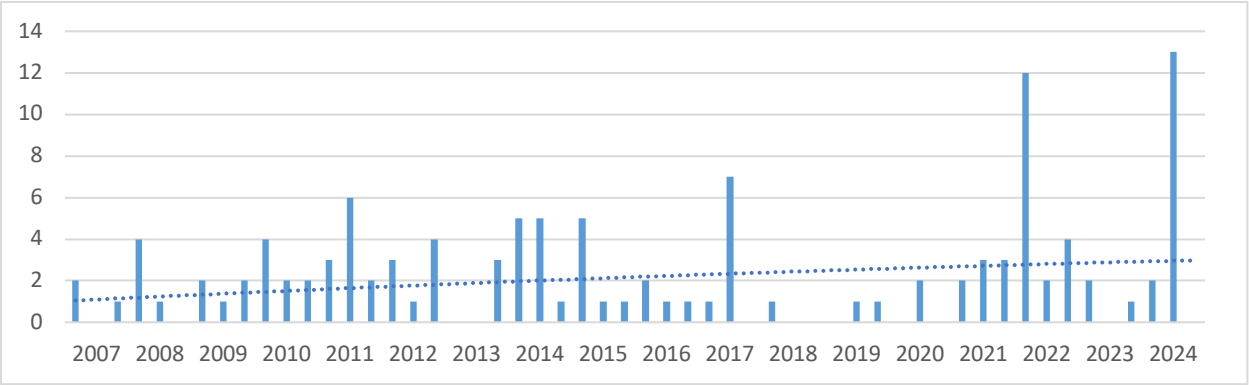
Carrion Crow.



Despite gamekeeper control, numbers remain steady as vacant territories are recolonized from outside the area. 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) +18% (B) +1%

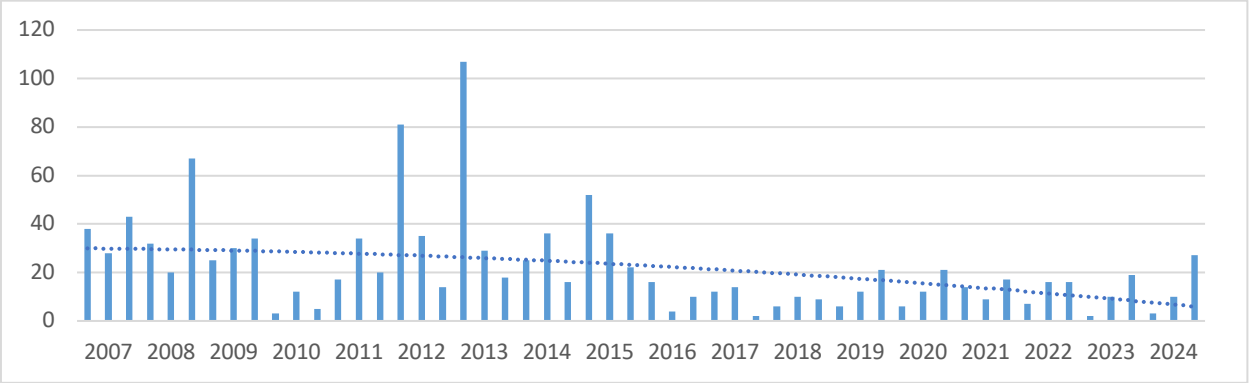
Yellowhammer



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. The higher counts are probably of small flocks prior to breeding of family groups later in the season.

Red listed (A) -31% (B) -19%

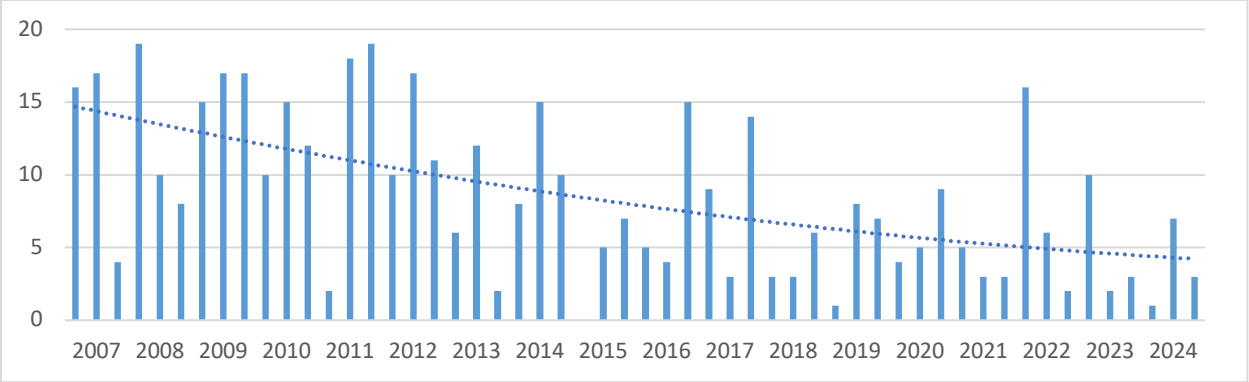
Linnet.



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 nine 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) +1%

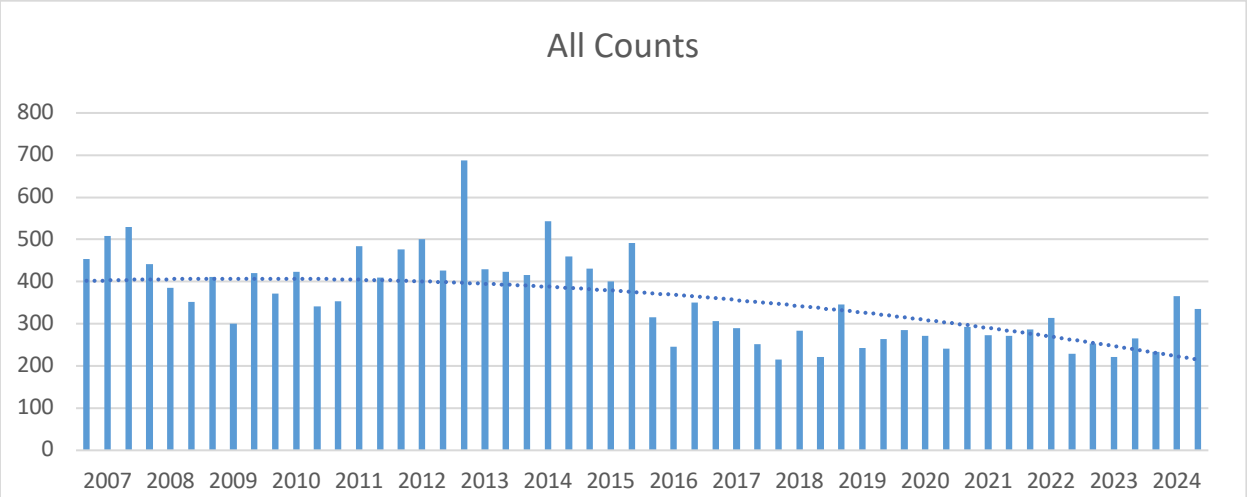
Reed Bunting



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) +28% (B) +8%

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. It is good to see an increase here in the 2024 counts.

Others Species of interest throughout the years.

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, with no evidence of breeding. The total number of breeding Merlin in Northumberland has been estimated at fifteen pairs. One pair were recorded in late April 2024 at Alnwick Moor and a possible male bird at the June visit. One bird was recorded at Alnwick Moor in Nov.2024.

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. Three other flocks were reported, all 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. The latest report was of 50 birds again at Alnwick Moor in April 2024. Large flocks are regularly recorded during Winter on the Northumberland coast.

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. There have been no records in the last few years.

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 reducing. Numbers were higher than usual in the 2023/24 winter, and again in 2025.

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 but Peter Hooley reports having seen them in the area.

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 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 their 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.

Short Eared Owl.

There have been two reports of Short Eared Owls in the Alnwick Moor and Post Office Pylon areas during the breeding season of 2024. It is always possible that they have attempted to breed here.

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.

Please note that a change has been made in this report. The conclusions are based on only the last ten years of the surveys, compared with the figures which BTO have provided for the last ten years of the National Breeding Bird Surveys.

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 breeding seasons 2012 to 2022 compared to the last ten years of BTO National averages.

Grey Patridge (Red Listed)

Wren (Amber Listed) Very weather dependent.

Cuckoo (Red Listed) Affected by conditions in Africa and during migration.

Yellowhammer (Red Listed)

Stonechat (Green Listed)

Buzzard (Green Listed)

Species with lower counts during breeding seasons 2012 to 2022 than the last ten years of BTO National averages.

Red Grouse. (Green listed) Possibly affected by Tick born diseases.

Linnet (Red listed)

Meadow Pipit (Amber)

Snipe (Green Listed) Small numbers.

Curlew (Red listed) May be affected by Tick born disease

Lapwing (Red listed)

Whinchat (Red Listed) Small numbers and may be affected when on migration.

Wheatear (Amber Listed) Very small numbers and may be affected by migration.

Song Thrush (Red Listed) Small numbers. Affected by timber extraction.

Species with little variation in breeding seasons from to 2012 to 2022 and the last ten years of the BTO National averages.

Skylark (Red Listed)

Carrion Crow (Green Listed)

Pheasant (Green listed)

Red Legged Partridge. (Green listed)

Mallard. (Green listed)

Kestrel. (Amber listed)

Summary of the five areas.

Kimmer Lough, Breeding Season 2024.

2024 was a cool spring and even at the June visit the temperature was only about 13C. But the wetness of the preceding winter had led to quite lush vegetation by the May and June surveys. The overall totals were unremarkable, and even the apparent high May figure of 219 was swollen by 90 gulls on the Lough.

There was only one new species to the site. The Grey Wagtail recorded at the May visit was identified only by the mobile phone Merlin app, But we have tacitly come to accept Merlin app records provided they don't seem very unlikely, and the habitat at Kimmer seems reasonable for Grey Wagtail.

A single Red Grouse in April was only the fourth sighting of this species here in 18 years.

On two visits the lough was providing good hawking opportunities for Hirundines and, in June, also for Swifts.

The habitat seems absolutely right for Snipe, so for the fourth year in the last six the absence of any records of this species is disappointing.

Kimmer Lough, Winter Season 2024/25.

The December survey produced the first ever winter count of Siskin at this site and a pleasing number of Yellowhammer. The Siskins were a bit surprising, given the absence of conifers in the immediate vicinity. Perhaps they were using the Alders by the Titlington Burn. But overall bird numbers were small and if one subtracts the 70+ Graylag Geese, the total would have been only 50. Ten of the target species were not recorded.

The February visit was particularly disappointing – had it not been for the count of 24 Pheasants, the bird total would have been only 14 and only three of the target species were recorded. There were no birds on the Lough; none on the hillside where gorse seems a potential feeding area: none in the big Birch area in the top corner of the site or in the Birch copse by the Kimmer fence; and no moorland birds at all.

Clearly the people who rent the shooting rights at Kimmer have been busy during 2024. In addition to two large release pens, one by the outflow from the Lough and one towards the south-east corner of the site, there has been a big increase in the number of feeding points for the game birds. I have no idea what effect there may be on other bird species, caused by having a large artificial increase in Pheasant numbers. The organisation of the new structures has also meant additional large vehicle

tracks, particularly on the south- western side of the Lough. A largish area in the south-east corner has had the heather closely topped -Possibly in an attempt to begin to attract Red Grouse over the coming years. But at least this time, unlike ten or so years ago, the topping has left alone the large stand of Bog Myrtle.

Richard Poppleton.

Black

Black Lough 2024 – breeding season.

Black Lough has always been a pleasure to visit, partly because during the survey years it has never been used for shooting. Unfortunately it seems that is about to change.

Always having a good population of Meadow Pipits, this year is no exception, with good counts all round. Skylarks were also very well represented. These two species are mainly found on the higher area above the Lough which has more grass than heather and very suitable for them to breed. Curlew also prefer the higher hill where only one was recorded in May although others had been heard in April. This is fewer than have been usually counted here. Wren numbers were better again, as with the other moorland areas where they have returned in increased numbers. The best counts since the severe weather in the winters of 2010/11.

Bird sightings on the Lough have always been disappointing with very few Waterfowl seen. This year has been the same with reports of only a few Mallard, 4 Greylag Geese, One pair of Coot and a single Greater Black Backed Gull. I am told that there have been releases of fish into the Lough but that has not attracted more bird life. This year there has been no evidence of Otters in the spring as there has been in some previous years. It has been suggested that the Lough contains Pike which would be likely to take young waterfowl.

Stonechats have certainly increased with good numbers in May and June, Probably family parties. Stonechats are certainly on the increase on the east side of the UK with some movement from the west. Two Whinchats were recorded in May. Unlike their cousins, their numbers are falling. They are more migratory in winter, moving mainly to Africa and suffering with the droughts there.

One Cuckoo recoded in May but none in June.

Black Lough. Winter 2024/2025 summary.

The two winter surveys at the Black Lough were carried out in cold conditions and the number of birds recorded were very small. 2 Woodcock were seen. Good numbers of Woodcock have been recorded generally this winter. The most pleasing thing is the number of Wrens wintering on the heather moors, the best counts for a long time. Otherwise 1 Kestrel and the usual Carrion Crows completed the surveys, apart from an unusual number of Pheasants. I wonder if this is a sign of things to come at Black Lough with a new shooting tenant in this area.

Alnwick and Hulne Moors. Summary of 2024 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 in 2023. They continue to be recorded at Freemans Gap Pool, along with the usual Tufted Ducks, Greylag Geese and Moorhens, At the Gull Ponds a pair of Mute Swans, and Coot also visited in 2023. No Black Headed Gulls have been recorded there since the start of these surveys.

Only one sighting of Wheatear has been recorded in 2024. Stonechat continue to increase very healthily but counts of Whinchat are very few.

Lapwings are now recorded here in very reduced numbers. Curlew are continuing to breed in their usual small numbers with probably four pairs on Alnwick Moor and possibly one pair on the Hulne Moor side of the wall.

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

Red Grouse continue to be recorded in ever smaller numbers. No details are available at the moment about the results of any shooting. It is believed that the Grouse population here are being affected by Tick infections.

One Peregrine was recorded hunting over Hulne Moor at the April survey.

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 2024/25

All these surveys were carried out in cold conditions and sometimes a little windy. The two areas are treated together since they are adjoining with only the Duke's wall between them.

These are the two areas which carry the main population of Red Grouse. Unfortunatly counts have been on the small side. There have been large counts of Red Legged Partridge (80 +) which must have been released in the locality, perhaps to replace the smaller number of Red Grouse.

The pond at Freemans Gap held 60+ Teal in November and 4 Mallard and only 6 in February.

The Gull ponds at the west end of Alnwick Moor survey area had 9 teal and a Greylag Goose in November and one Coot in February.

Pheasants on Hulne Moor are usually seen in high numbers because of the adjoining release pen, but this winter they have also been recorded in numbers on the Alnwick Moor survey area.

Wren counts in November have been higher than in recent years but as expected, at the February visit, numbers were much reduced.

Only one Woodcock was recorded at Alnwick Moor in November.

A variety of Birds of Prey where recorded with a Ringtail (female or immature) Hen Harrier seen on Hulne Moor in February and Buzzard, Sparrowhawk and a Merlin on Alnwick Moor at the November count.

Unlike the other moorland survey sites, Stonechats have been almost completely absent.

Post Office Pylon, Summary of Breeding Period 2024.

Four Curlew were recorded at each visit, which suggests that there were at least two pairs breeding here. They are not early nesting, not usually completing a clutch of eggs before the first week in May. Numbers of Red Grouse were very low with only one being seen but there were plenty of signs with typical Grouse droppings.

Similar to the other moorland sites, Wrens were seen in better numbers, the highest average counts since the 2010 and 2011 winters of month long periods of constant snow cover and very low temperatures.

It was good to have a report of even one Whinchat. There have been very few recorded this year and national counts are falling very quickly. Probably affected by extreme dry conditions in their wintering area in Africa.

One Short Eared Owl was recorded when Richard almost stood on it. It remained watching at a distance. A second Short Eared Owl was watched by other members of the Group, hunting and apparently successfully at another area very near the Post Office Pylon survey area during the breeding season.

Cuckoo is a regular at the POP and one was in attendance during both the May and June visits. April would have been on the early side.

Regular sightings of Stonechats shows that they are really on the increase. Kestrels appeared on two visits, a single bird and a pair.

Generally an interesting season at the POP with a good range of species seen, including a pair of Greylag Geese that obviously settled on the area as a place to breed. A good population of Meadow Pipits, Buzzard, Kestrel and a selection of Warblers with Whitethroats. Chiffchaff and Willow Warblers.

Post Office Pylon. Winter summary 2024/25.

The northerly part of this survey area is very wet, even in the dryest periods and is not well covered by the survey route and should be explored more as a matter of interest. The two winter visits have recorded only small numbers of very few species. Meadow Pipits have appeared early with a count of five in February

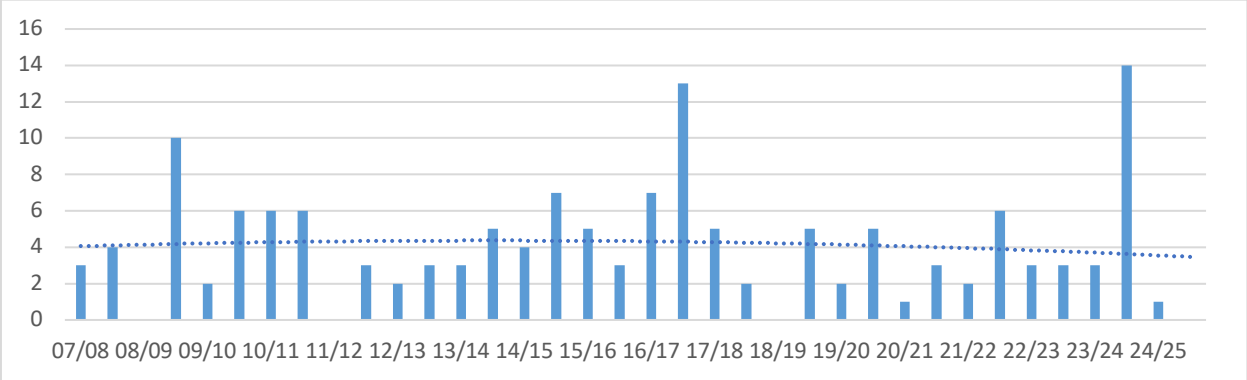
Wrens have remained in their heather habitat in good numbers but have been reduced by half at the February visit.

Woodcock were recorded at both visits. They have been more numerous than usual this winter.

Red Grouse were only seen or heard in very small numbers.

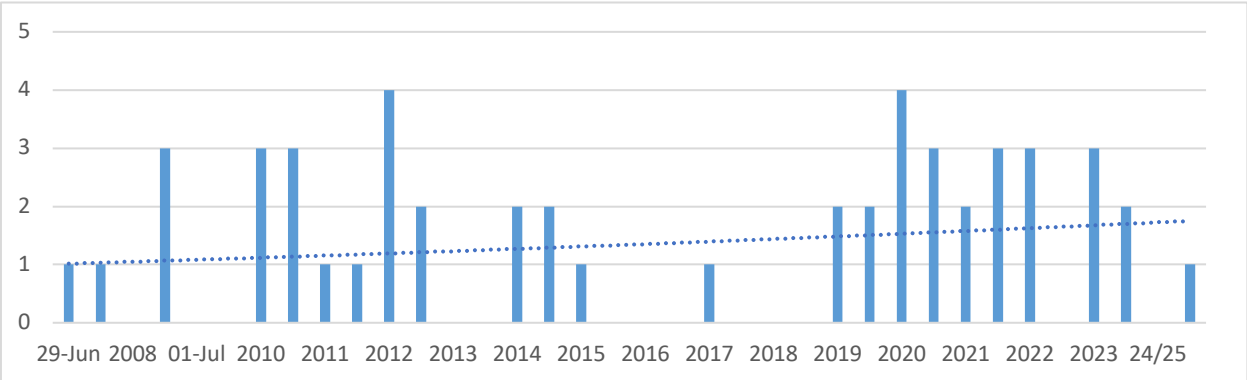
Graphs of Winter Records.

Buzzard



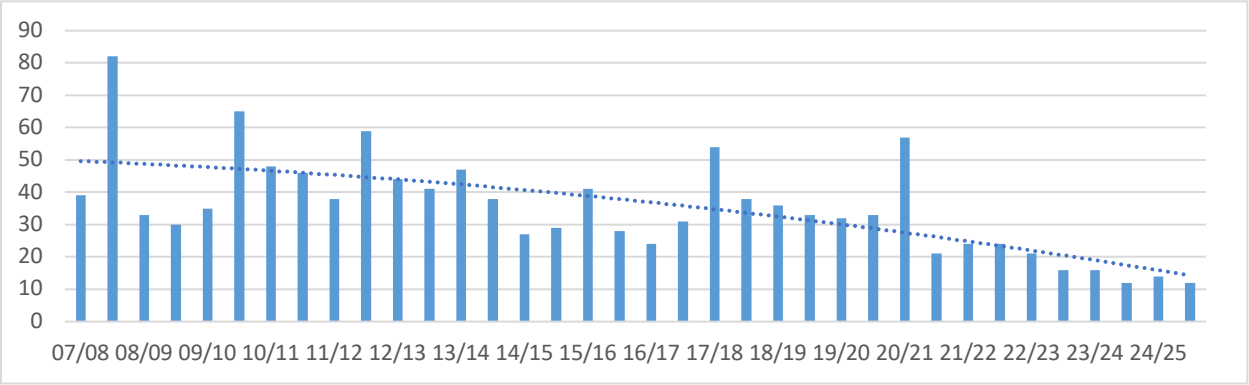
Buzzard numbers continue to maintain a more or less level population remaining in their chosen territories In winter. In this part of Northumberland a regular source of winter food is available as “road kill” Years with high counts may include Juveniles or gatherings of birds from neighbouring territories.

Kestrel



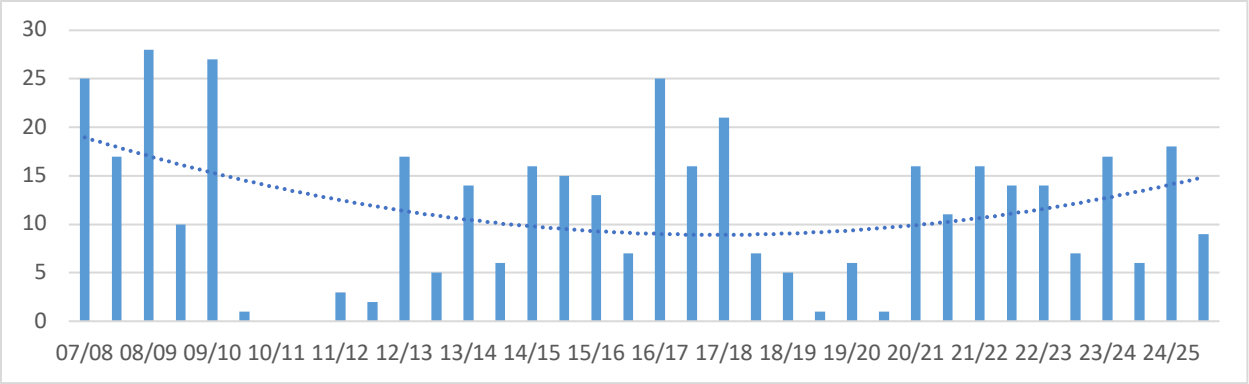
Apart from the current winter period, Kestrel have been regularly recorded in recent winters.

Red Grouse.



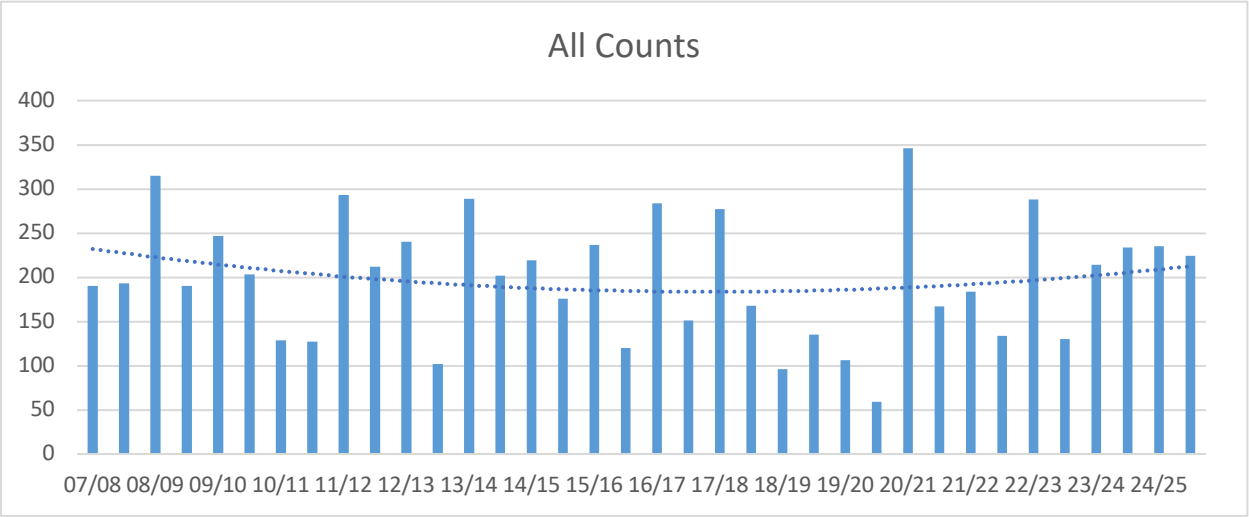
Counts of Red Grouse in the winter have always been higher than in the breeding season when they appear to be much more secretive. After several years without any shooting the proportion of birds that are now mature enough to breed should have formed a sound basis for a healthy increase in the population 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 and possibly also from Tick born Louping Ill.

Wren.



This graph illustrates the effects of winter on the Wren population. In severe winters such as 2010/11 and 2011/12 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 can loose 50% of their numbers every year even in average conditions. November counts indicate that the Wren population has increased to a point were the heather moorland is again home to a much higher number of birds. It will be interesting to see if this increase shows in the next breeding period.

Total of all Winter Counts (Target Species)



Winter populations of the reduced number of species due to seasonal movements 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. This is even when some survey areas are recording very low numbers probably affected by the weather at the time of the surveys.

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 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 winter. 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. Movement of these wintering flocks is very regular between tides from rocky shores to arable fields near the coast. Counts of up to 600 0r 700 have been made in some years.

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 their breeding areas 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 2024 December visit. This is the first record during the surveys on any of the Moorland sites where in past years they have been in good numbers.

Jim Clark. March 13, 2025.