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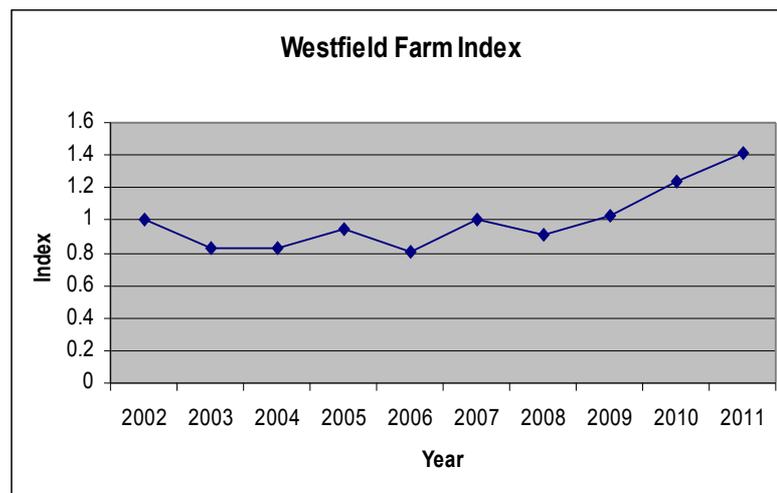
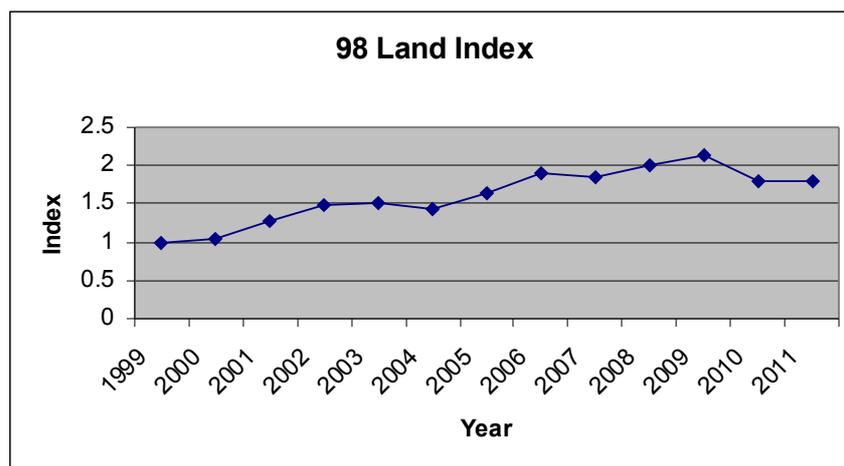
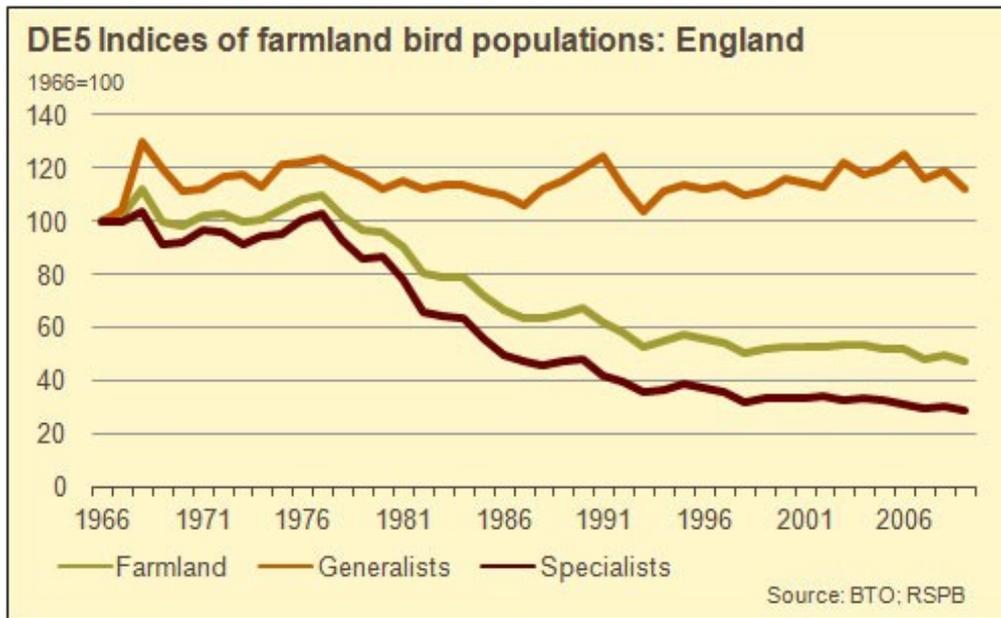
THE COUNTRYSIDE  
RESTORATION TRUST

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## **LARK RISE FARM BIRD TRENDS 2011**

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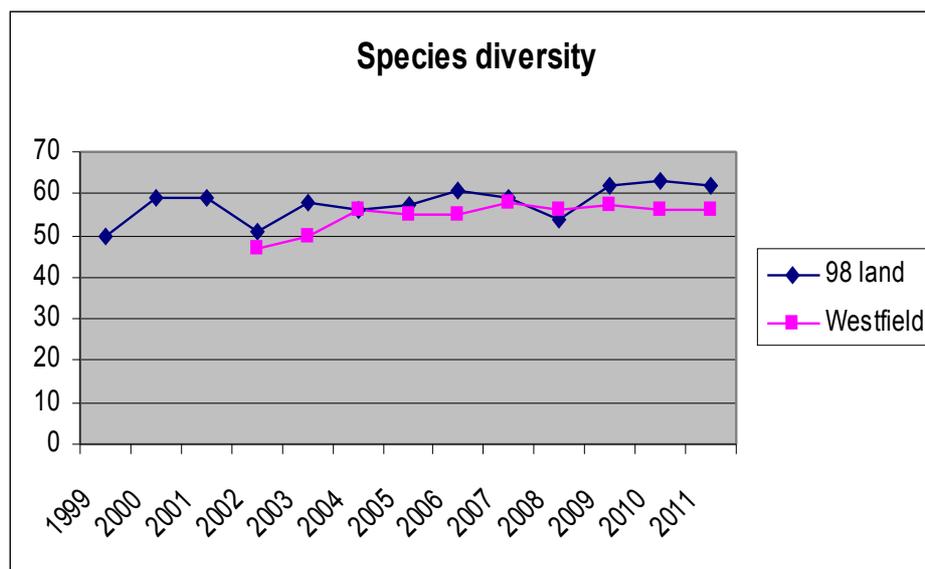
# Lark Rise Farm bird trends to 2011



The topmost graph shows the UK farmland bird index as published by Defra. This is a government measure of the population trend for 19 typical farmland bird species which are reliably monitored by (largely) volunteer surveyors across the country. Not all of these species occur on Lark Rise

Farm (e.g. Lapwing, Turtle Dove and Tree Sparrow), so a modified index based on those species which do occur has been generated for the two main areas surveyed; '98 land and Westfield. These show overall increases at both sites, although the recent trend on the '98 land has been slightly below the peak recorded in 2009, while the first year of recording at Westfield was relatively high compared to the following few years, probably as a result of higher numbers of Linnets and Reed Buntings in 2002 due to the presence of Oilseed Rape in the adjacent farmland.

The trends of most of the regular species are given in detail in the following pages. In addition to these trends, it is worth noting that the number of species has also been slowly increasing on both sites:

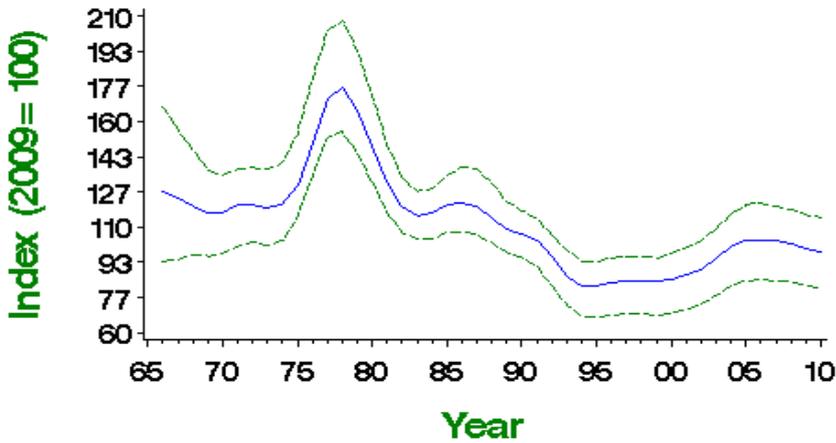


On '98 land the number of species has gone up from around 50-60 to now consistently over 60 species. At Westfield the number of species has gone from around 50 to the high 50's. The diversity includes a lot of species which occur at low levels, such as Kestrel, Moorhen and Sedge Warbler. A gradual increase in the frequency with which these 'occasional' become 'regulars' means that the overall number of nesting species is increasing. This shows the maturing of habitats. The most significant changes not covered in the main section have been losses of Yellow Wagtail and Meadow Pipit on the '98 land, while gains and increases have been noted for Green Woodpecker, Willow Warbler and Chiff Chaff. At Westfield, there has been a decline in Moorhen and Yellow Wagtail and an increase in Buzzard, Blue & Great Tit.

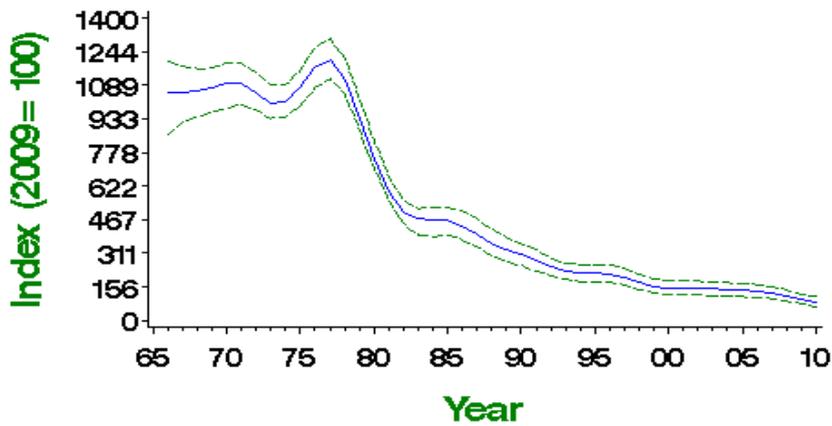
The graphs of national trends which are shown in the following species accounts were produced by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and we acknowledge the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey for providing them. The Lark Rise population trends were generated using data produced by our volunteers surveyors and analysed by Dr Roger Buisson.

Gamebirds

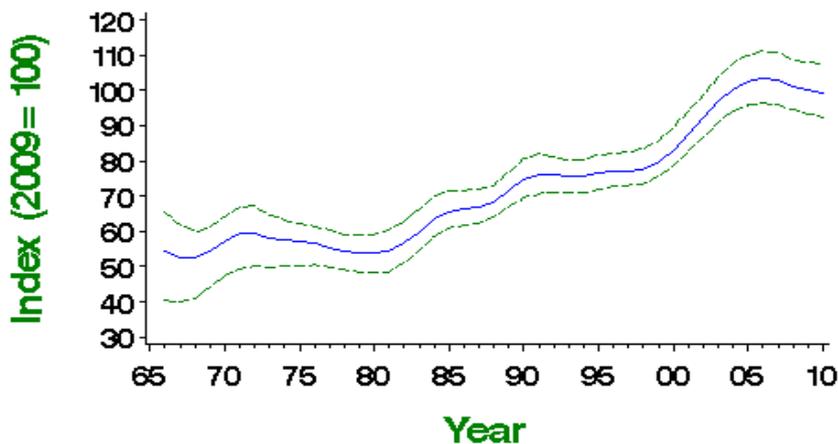
**CBC/BBS UK 1966–2010**  
**Red-legged Partridge**



**CBC/BBS UK 1966–2010**  
**Grey Partridge**



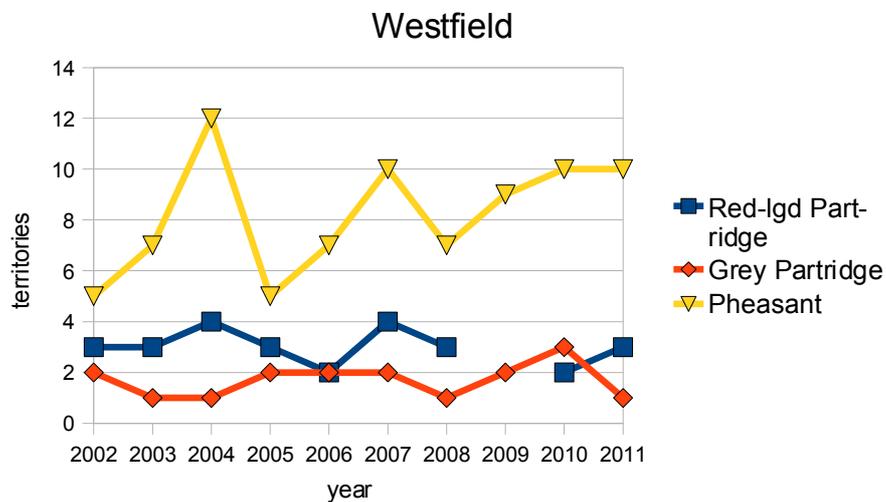
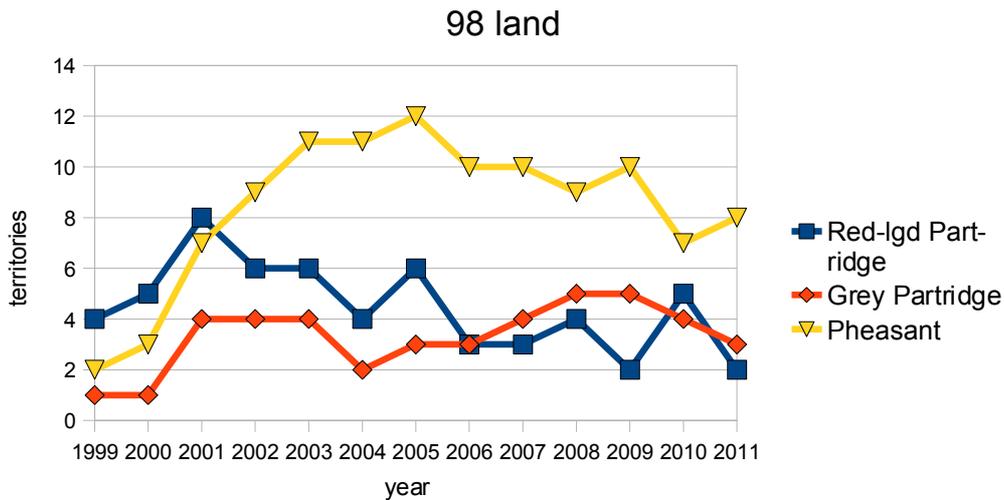
**CBC/BBS England 1966–2010**  
**Pheasant**



These graphs are produced by the BTO from bird census work across the UK since the 1960's. The methods used were initially the Common Bird Census which is the same territory-mapping method we use on the CRT land, but in the last 17 years another survey method – the BBS – has been used. This is a simple transect which has a lot more uptake from volunteers nationally but is not reliable for site specific population trends.

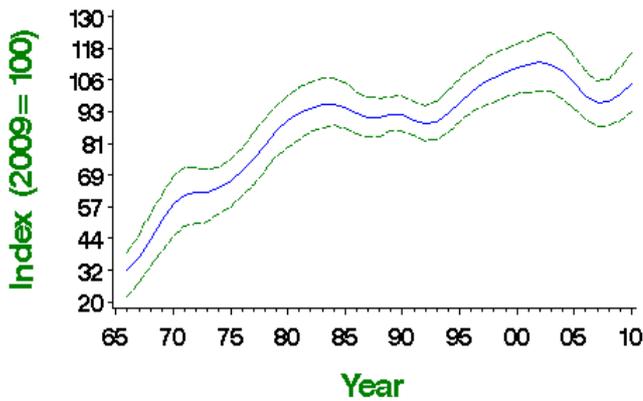
The blue line shows the most likely population as a proportion of the chosen baseline number (the population in 2009). The index is not a population estimate but a relative proportion. The green lines are the 95% confidence intervals – wide separation indicates less confidence in the estimate e.g. with Red-legged Partridge there is greater uncertainty than with Grey Partridge.

These are the most up-to-date graphs currently available, but data has been released concerning the national change in 2011; for most species the trends are not dramatically different from one year to the next – e.g for Red-leg, grey and the pheasant the annual change from 2010 to 2011 was an increase of 4%, 8% and 4% respectively. Where other species show significant changes in 2011 nationally it is mentioned in the text.

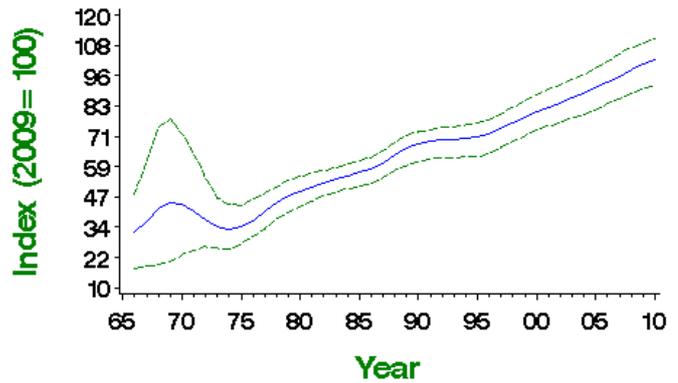


The trend on Lark Rise land for both Pheasant and Grey Partridge has been steadily upwards over the CRT history, although in 2011 Grey Partridge both slightly dipped from their recent high points. A possible second pair of Greys were thought to be present at Westfield but not quite enough evidence was collected to prove this. Red-legged Partridge numbers have not changed dramatically. These numbers are in the absence of any releases of birds, but may be supplemented by drift from releases of Red-legs and Pheasant on neighbouring land. Tim's counts may be more accurate for these particular species as he is able to view from tractors within the fields, where gamebirds spend much time, whereas the bird surveyors operate from ground level around the edges. With some 35 million Pheasant and 6.5 million Red-legged Partridges released nationally there are no conservation concerns regarding these introduced species other than the potential negative impact that such numbers may have on other species such as the Grey Partridge which has been in steady decline since the mid 1970's. The 2011 breeding season was ideal for this species, and many large coveys were seen across Lark Rise and elsewhere locally, so the slight dip may well be rectified in future years. It is likely that prolonged frost and snow cover over the previous winter would have caused some losses for this species, despite supplementary feeding. Concentration at feeding stations may cause problems of increased predation risk and disease transfer, particularly the increasingly prevalent *Trichomonas*.

CBC/BBS England 1966–2010  
Stock Dove



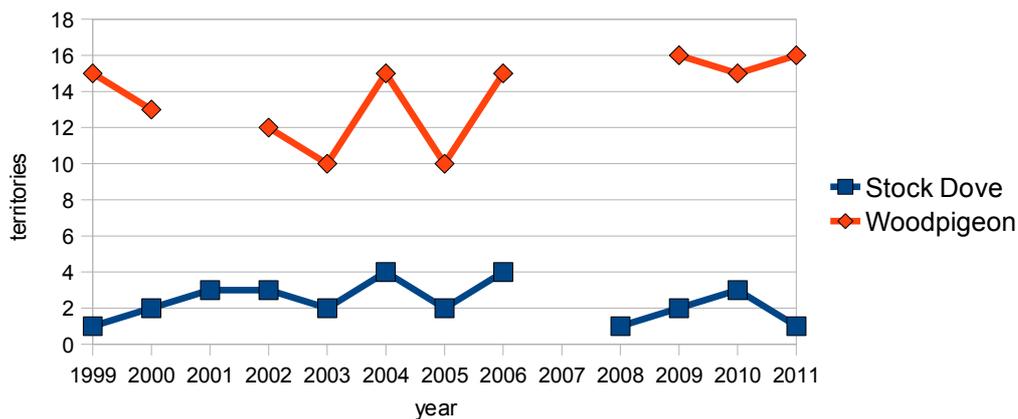
CBC/BBS UK 1966–2010  
Woodpigeon



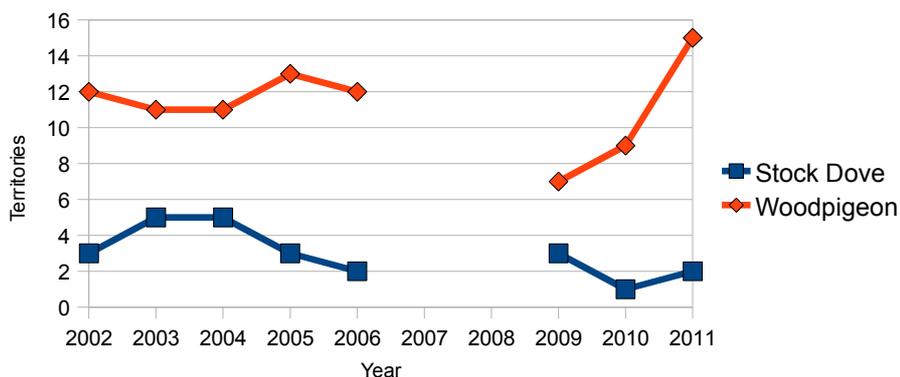
### Pigeons & Doves

The two main pigeon species at Lark Rise are Woodpigeon, considered an agricultural pest, and Stock Dove, which are much less common. Both species are hard to assign to territories because there are non-breeding birds around at all times. Singing and display activity are relatively less frequent than in other species, and some observers have a blind spot for them. For this reason, in some years the number of territories was not estimated – hence the gaps in the graphs. Both species seem to have fairly stable populations on Lark Rise as far as we can tell. Both species have increased nationally, though the Stock Dove has stopped rising in the last decade. By contrast with the Woodpigeon, the Turtle Dove has declined nationally, at a steep and steady rate. Only one territory has been recorded on CRT land, at Westfield in 2003. The habitat may be suitable for this species, but the opportunity for birds to discover the farm are close to nil due to the low local numbers. The other species recorded are Feral Pigeon and Collared Dove, the latter generally having one or two territories close to the village houses at Roman Hill.

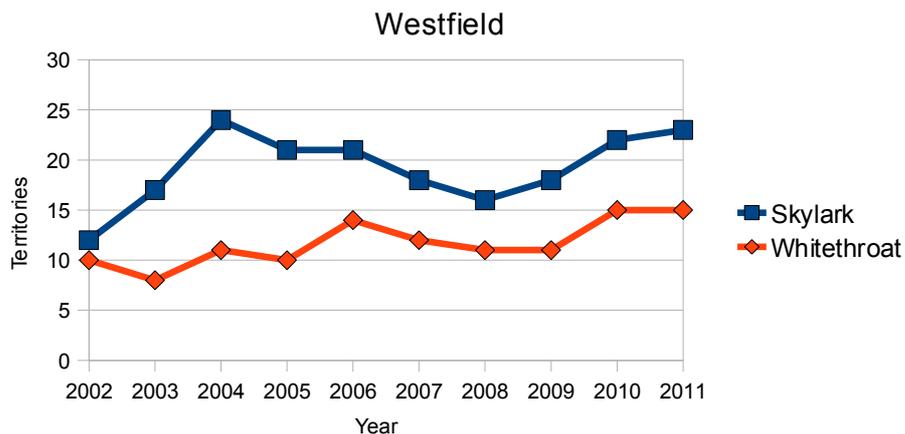
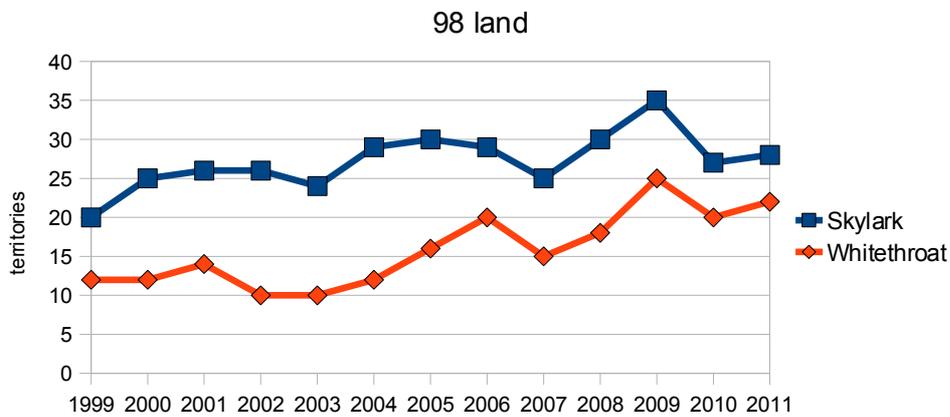
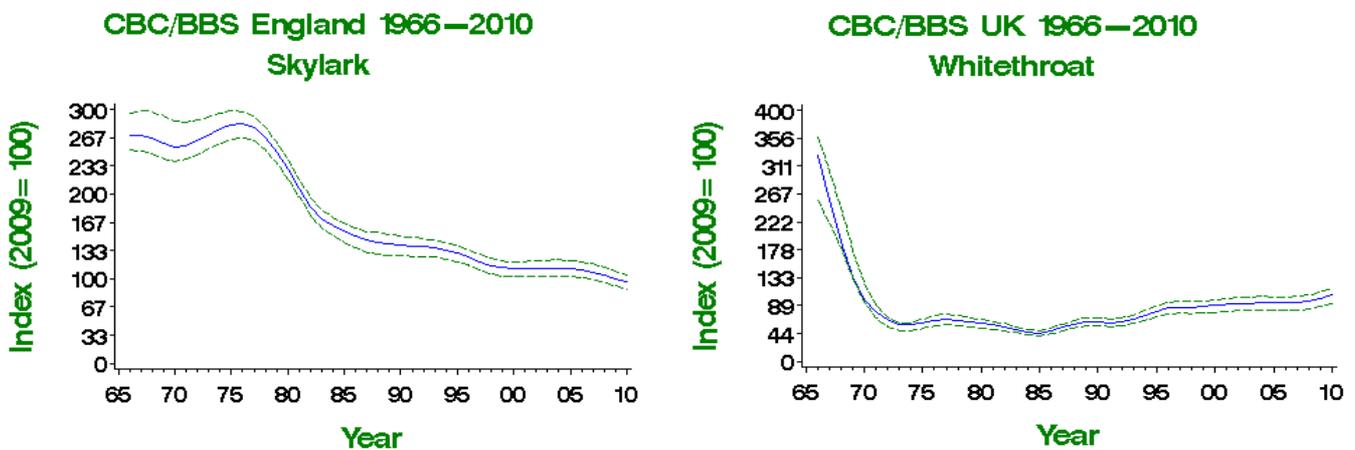
98 land



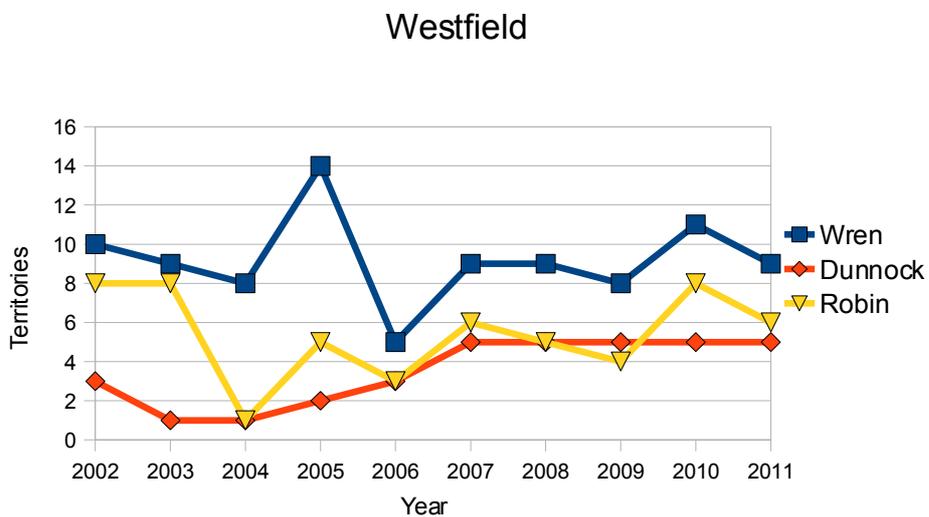
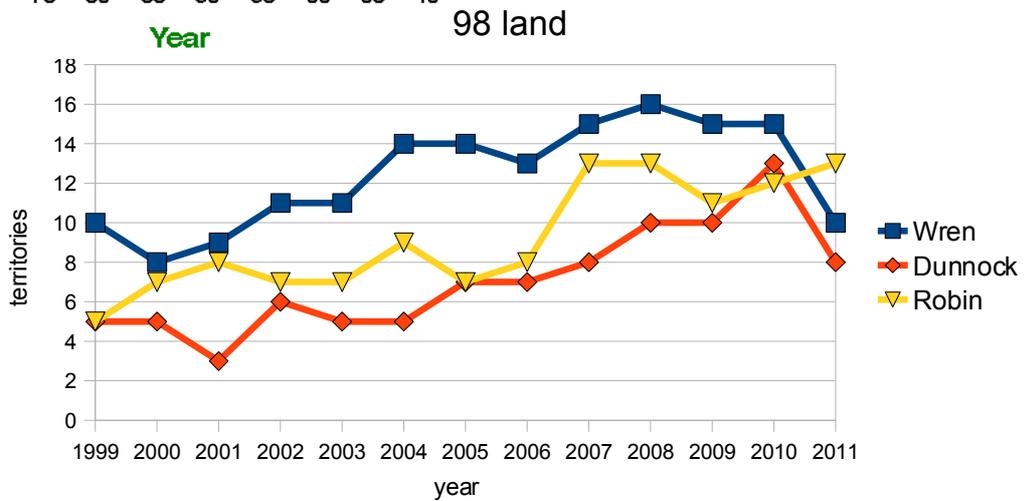
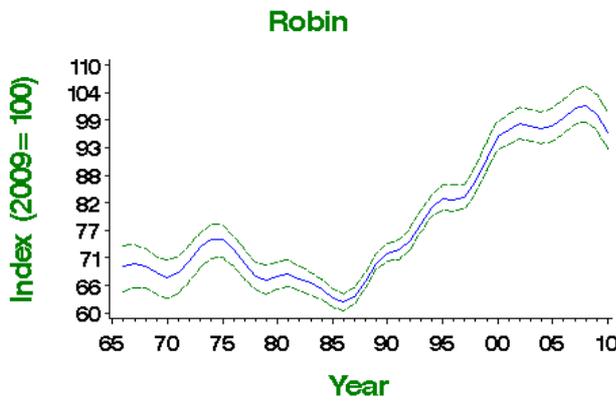
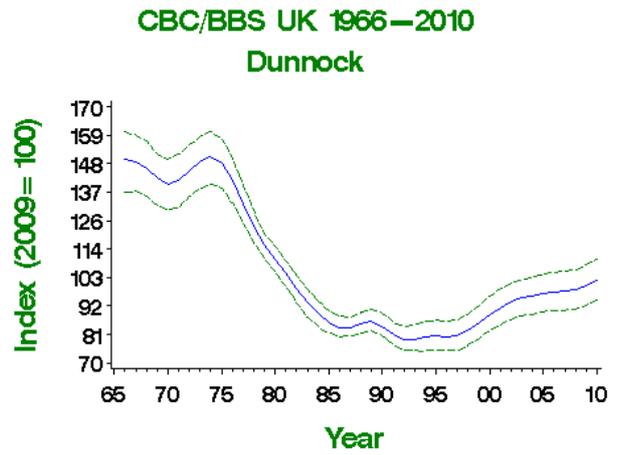
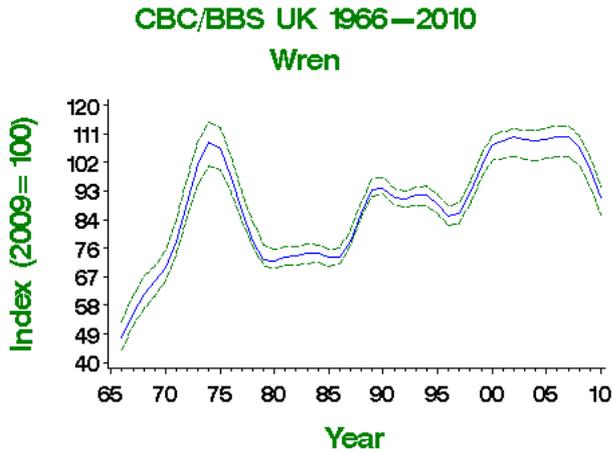
Westfield



**Skylark** and **Whitethroat** are typical farmland birds at Lark Rise, two of the most abundant species, which makes them suitable for placing together on the same graph. Although they have different requirements, both species have responded positively to the CRT farming approach. Nationally, the Skylark has been in steady decline since the mid 70's, whereas Whitethroat crashed in numbers before this time – the effect of conditions on their wintering grounds – and has been slowly climbing back. At Lark Rise, the trends of these two species have been generally upwards with some fluctuations which probably reflect weather conditions. The increase in Skylark is more notable at Westfield, from 12 to 23, whereas Whitethroats have increased more dramatically on the '98 land from 12 to 22. This probably illustrates the different habitat of the two areas, with more emphasis on hedges on the 98 land and a more open aspect at Westfield. It is likely that the number of Skylarks had already started to increase by the time of the first survey in 1999, but no survey was conducted in 1998 to establish a baseline figure. Nationally, Whitethroat had a good year in 2011 with a 33% increase over 2010 numbers, but this was not reflected at Lark Rise – perhaps more birds survived the winter or migration and occupied empty habitat elsewhere, but we may have been 'fully occupied' with this species.

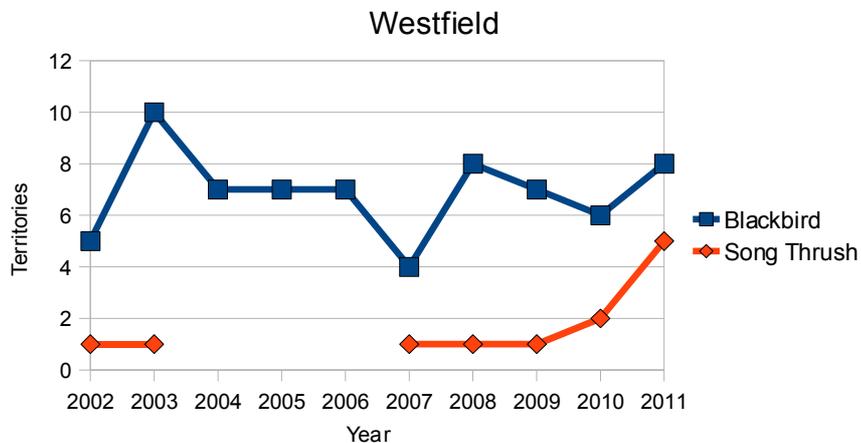
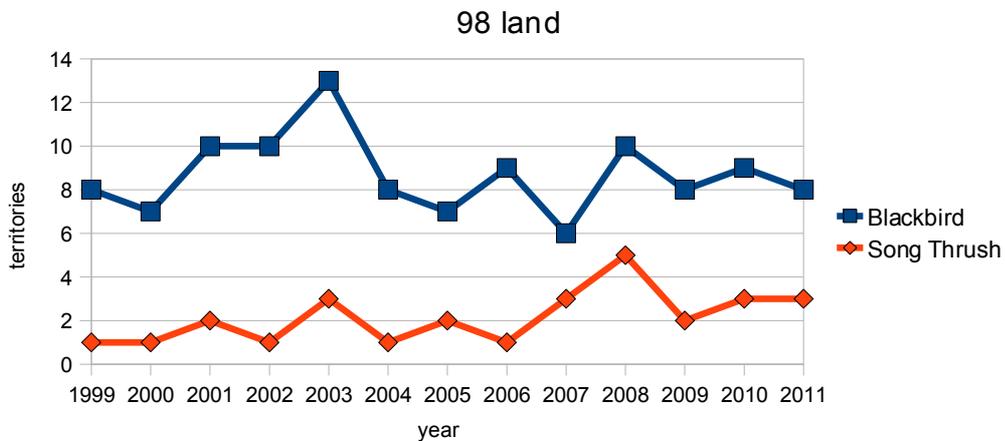
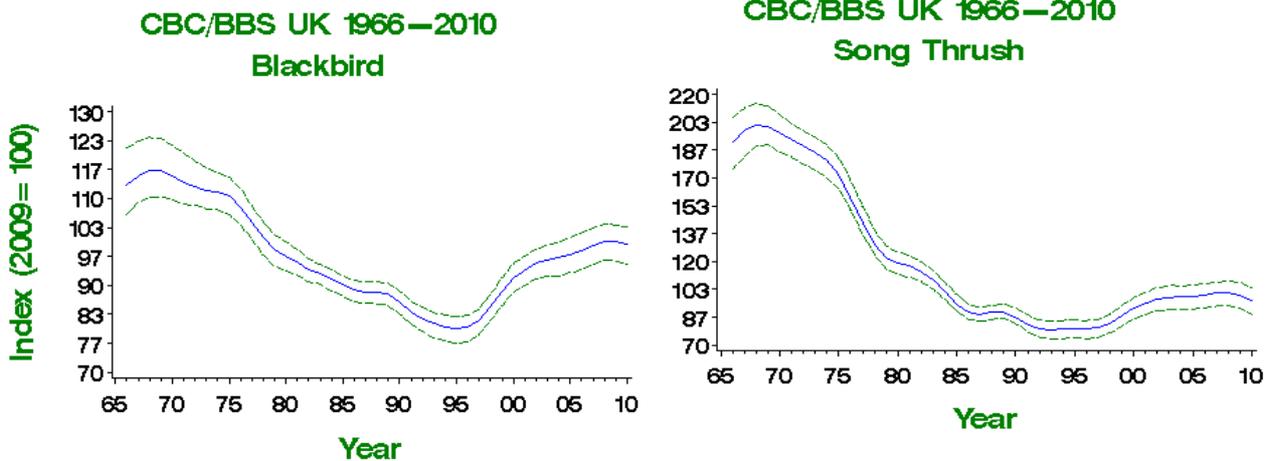


Wren, Dunnock, Robin.



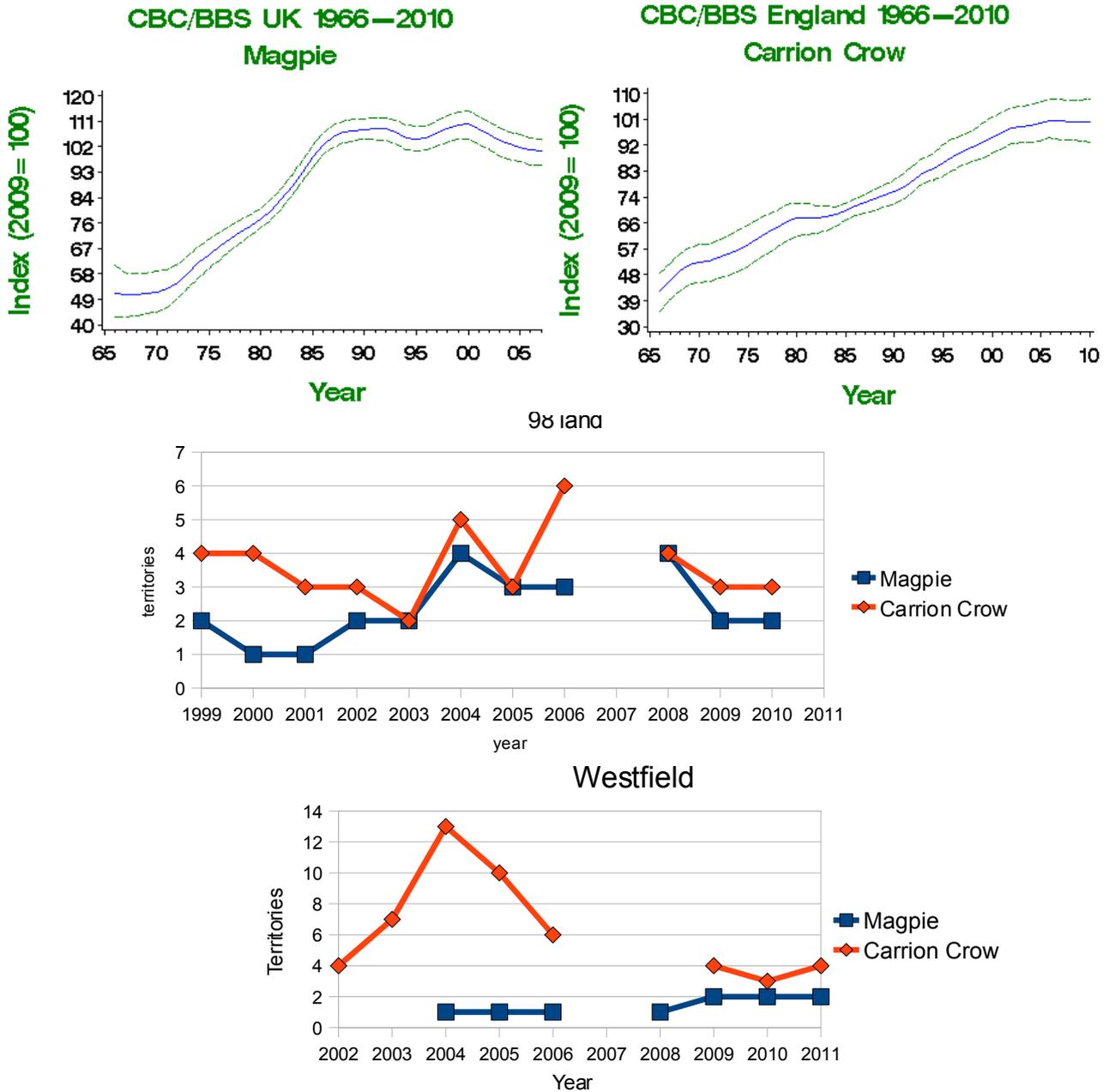
These three species could be described as 'resident insectivores' although Dunnock depend heavily on small seeds for winter feeding as well. All three should respond positively to maturing habitats such as small copses and thick hedgerows, but only the Dunnock is strongly affected by farmland changes, utilising areas of bird cover crops and sometimes foraging in stubbles, oilseed rape crops etc. All three are potentially susceptible to severe winter weather. Oddly, the recent cold winters have seen declines for Wren & Dunnock on the '98 land and possibly Robin at Westfield. Apart from these short-term changes, the trends on CRT farms have been fairly stable at Westfield and increasing on '98 land. This reflects the fact that hedges are more a feature of the changes on '98 land. Wren & Robin at Westfield are largely associated with the mature scrub, willow trees and woodland along the Bourn Brook and disused railway line. The national trends also show recent dips following long-term gains for Robin and Wren; this is thought to be due to the cold snap following a period of generally milder winters. In general, Wrens respond more rapidly to deep freezes and snow cover, being less migratory than the other species but also more prolific in reproductive output when times are good, with larger broods and more breeding attempts per year. The changes from 2010 to 2011 for these species all showed significant declines nationally (not shown on the BTO graphs); Wren -13%, Robin -12% and Dunnock -8%. Dunnock has been on a more steady decline over time, though the last decade has shown improvements but not to the sort of level that occurred in the early '70s. This species used to be the most common host for cuckoos in lowland England but has probably now been replaced by Reed Warbler for this honour. The new hedges on the '98 land are big enough to attract Wren & Robin for foraging, but nesting cover may not quite be suitable yet, with a lack of dense creepers such as ivy or dead hollows in old trees which they like to nest in. Dunnock are slightly less demanding, with a tangle of bramble or tightly clipped hawthorn hedge among their many nesting sites.

## Blackbird & Song Thrush



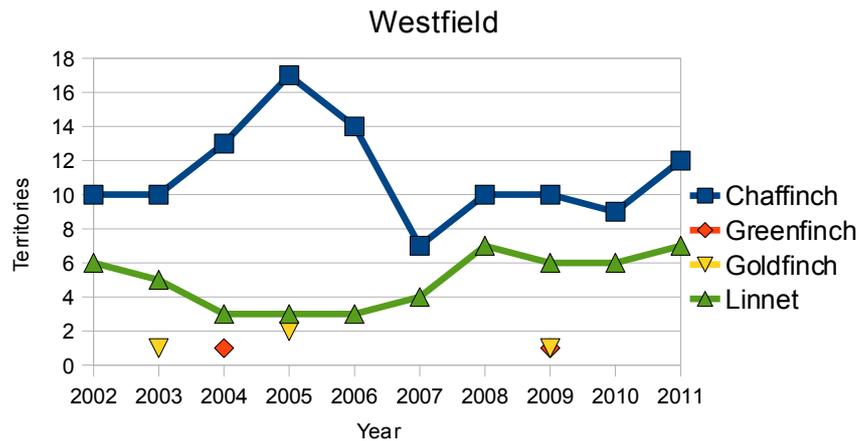
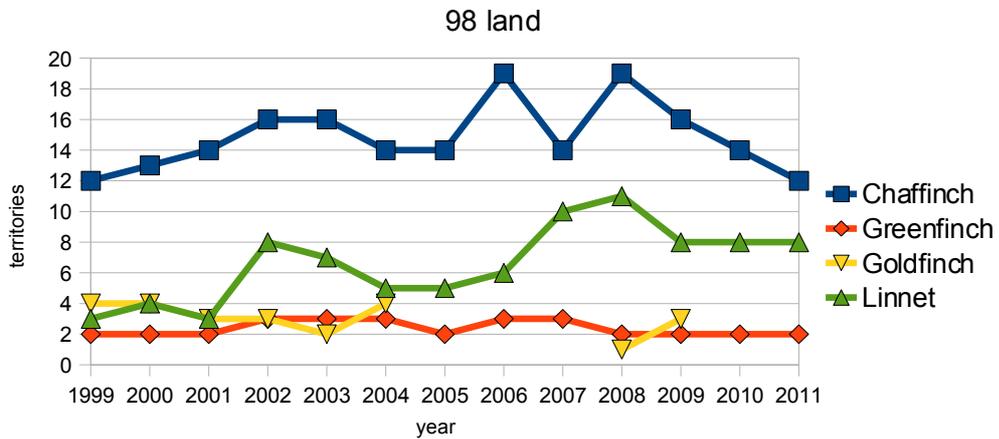
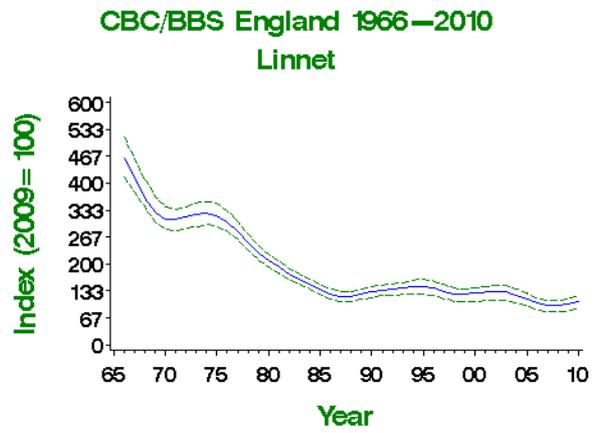
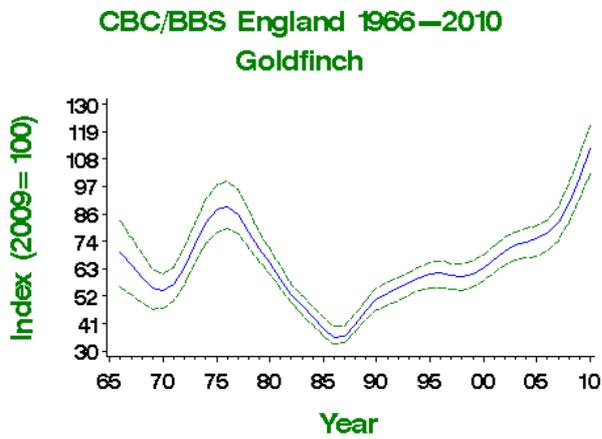
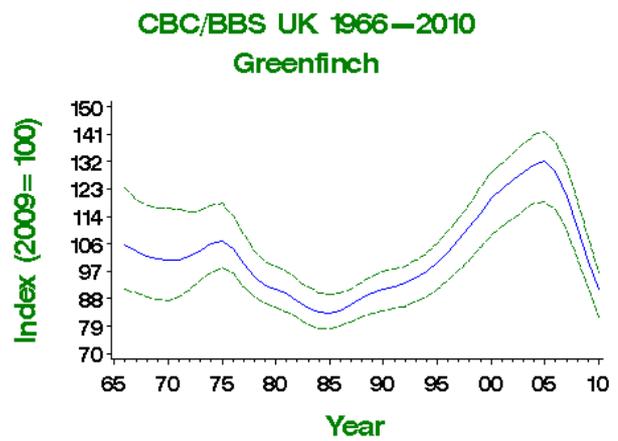
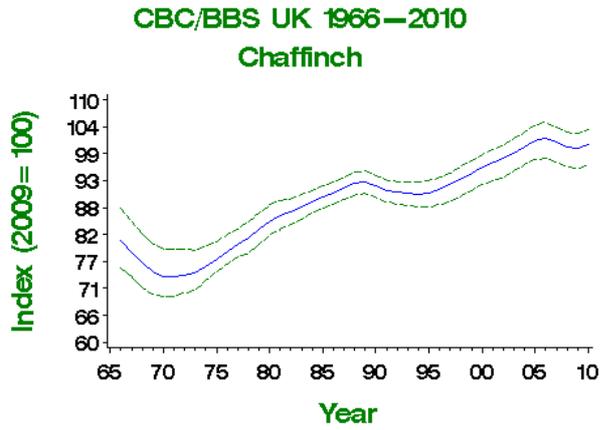
These two species feed on large invertebrates at ground level, under cover, and nest in dense cover. Song Thrush has declined steeply at a national level, Blackbird less so; both have shown recovery in recent years but Blackbird has seen greater improvement. The causes for these declines, and recoveries, are not fully understood. Candidate theories have been put forward; probably a combination of these is involved. The loss of large hedgerows, increase in molluscicides and other insecticides on crops, ivermectins in livestock and loss of understorey in woodland due to shading and deer browsing are habitat factors that may have reduced food supply to critical levels. While one study has suggested increased predation may have been correlated with Song Thrush declines, further work contradicted this and found no link. It is hard to see why predation would be greater on one of these two species over the other, given their general similarities in nesting and behaviour – if anything, Blackbird is the more conspicuous potential prey item. At Lark Rise, Blackbird have been stable and Song Thrush increasing slightly with a dramatic upturn at Westfield in 2011 – a blip?

## Corvids



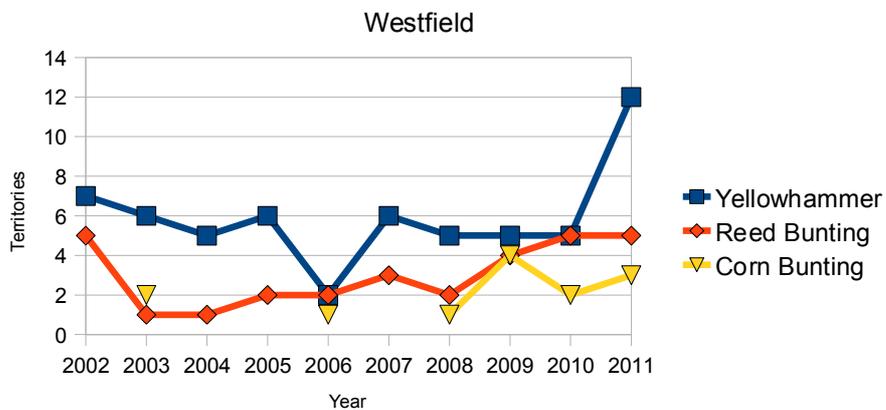
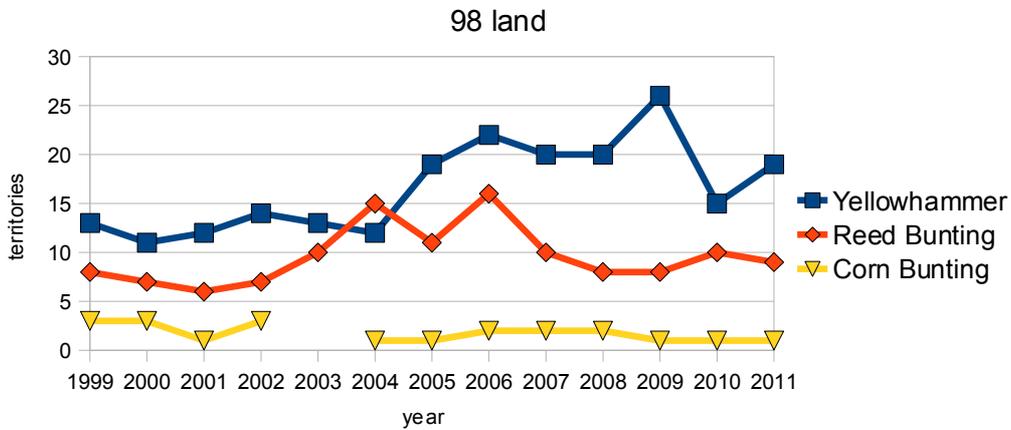
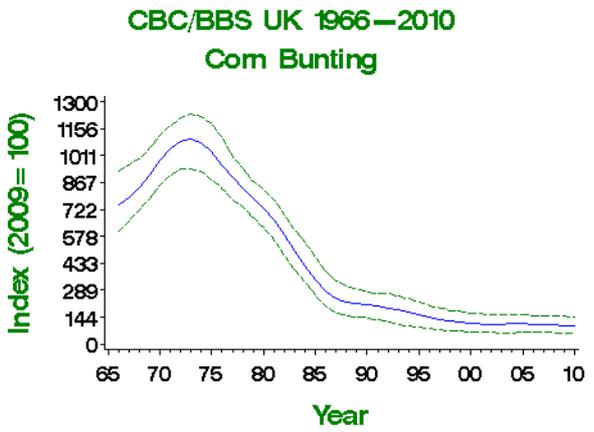
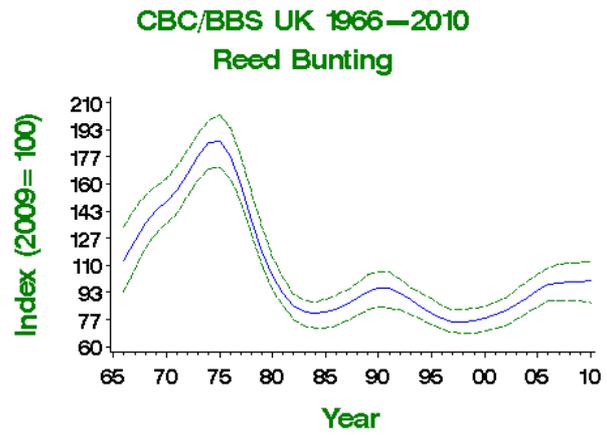
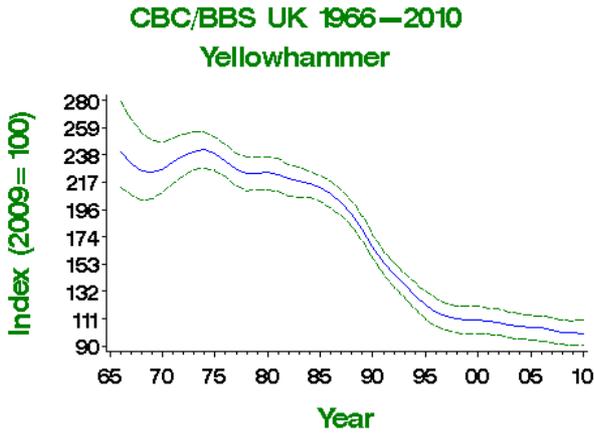
As with the pigeons, corvids are more difficult to ascribe to territories than some other species, they do not sing and are often quite secretive around their nest sites, non-breeders hang around and territorial birds may cover large areas overlapping with other territories. Hence, the figures for Lark Rise should be treated with caution and this explains some missing data. Figures such as 13 territories of Carrion Crow at Westfield in 2004 are highly unlikely, and probably reflect the fact that this area used to attract a lot of non-breeding crows which could be interpreted as a large number of 'pairs'. Nationally, both species have increased dramatically over the time-scale of census work, although this has levelled off for Magpie since the mid-80s and may be starting to plateau for Carrion Crow now. Both species are relatively stable on CRT farmland, with a couple of pairs of Magpies at both sites and perhaps double this number of Carrion Crows. With increasing food supply and nest sites, they may be expected to increase slightly, although both species require quite large territory sizes and, with well established pairs being long-lived, may maintain stability. Of the other Corvid species, Rook and Jackdaw both use the farmland in good numbers, but only occasional breeding has been noted for Jackdaw, while Jay is recorded every year at both sites but proving the presence of a territory is not always possible.

# Finches



The main finch species found on Lark Rise show some highly contrasting fortunes nationally, as revealed by the BTO graphs and other surveys. The most typical 'farmland' finch is Linnet, although this species also occurs on coastal habitats, heathland and moorland, the majority of its population is found on farmland; the other species are found in gardens, woodland and other habitats as well as farms. Note that the scale for the Linnet graph goes up to 600 to cope with the scale of population loss relative to the arbitrarily-chosen baseline year of 2009. There is a long-term decline of about 75%, i.e. there are a quarter of the Linnets that were around in late 1960's. By contrast, the other finches here have fluctuated but not shown anything like the same degree of change. Chaffinch and Greenfinch have been rising steadily over the period of national monitoring, until recent steep declines in Greenfinch numbers which are known to be due to *Trichomonas* parasites. Goldfinch were declining until the 90's when they showed a switch to feed in garden habitats, where small seed such as niger and sunflower hearts may be maintaining and now raising their numbers. Only Chaffinch and Linnet are present in sufficient numbers and regularity to be given territory numbers every year on both sites. A steady increase in Linnet numbers is particularly noteworthy given the parlous state of the national population, and demonstrates that provision of adequate seed on farms can restore their numbers. At Westfield, we started with a high number of Linnets, probably as a consequence of neighbouring farmland being down to oilseed rape in the first year, a popular crop for this species. The rise since 2004 is probably indicative of steady improvements made by Tim's farming approach, which is more clearly shown on '98 land where numbers have clearly doubled. Chaffinch numbers were already higher at the start of the survey effort at Lark Rise, and seem to be relatively stable and satisfactory. This is the only finch here that requires a large proportion of insect food in its diet, particularly for raising chicks, and they generally collect a lot of chick food from trees, which are slow to develop. Goldfinch and Greenfinch are now mostly associated with garden habitats; neither are regular enough to show any kind of trend at Westfield, but on '98 land they show a stable, if rather low, situation. Our other regular species, the Bullfinch, is harder to detect during fieldwork – it is quiet, skulking and rarely sings – and it is too infrequently recorded to show any trends, but is consistently present at both sites, with a definite territory in 2011 the first confirmed on '98 land, and single territories confirmed in 2008 and 2011 at Westfield. This species may increase as hedges mature.

# Buntings



This group has suffered great declines on farmland habitats, especially the Corn Bunting. The other species also utilise other habitats to a greater degree (Reed Bunting in reedbeds, Yellowhammer on heathland and young plantations for example). As with Linnet, it is important to note the scale bar differences, with Corn Bunting declining by nearly 90% over the study period. All three species have benefited from CRT management. Yellowhammer has risen steadily on '98 land, but very sharply only in the last year at Westfield, with the overall effect being approximately double the numbers we started with. This possibly reflects the long time it has taken for hedges to establish at Westfield, where the scrubby ditches have been the main breeding site for most of the years. They nest in loose brambly scrub and thick grassy herbage. The Reed Bunting has been slightly less responsive, with a slight decline in the last few years on the '98 land, possibly associated with a maturation of hedgerow habitats, making them too large for this species of open habitats and a shunning of oilseed rape by Tim until relatively recently. At Westfield, there was a dramatic decline after the first year, which may be related to the presence of oilseed rape on adjacent land in 2002 attracting a larger than normal number of these birds; since 2003 it has steadily risen in number to return to its starting point. Corn Buntings are generally scarcer throughout, but have 'held on' on the '98 land and increased at Westfield. The Barton territory is not thought to be a productive one, with just a lone male singing, whereas at Westfield some of the territories contain more than one breeding female, and nesting has been proven in most of the last few years. The more open habitat at Westfield is certainly more like the sort of habitat that Corn Buntings prefer, their other strongholds in the county being the vast open barley fields of the chalk land in the south, and the unhedged mixed arable crops of the fens in the north; they are notable for their absence on most clay lands. The provision of winter stubbles & cover crops and unsprayed, spring-sown cereals are ideal for this species. Bird ringing has been a relatively low-level activity on CRT land, but there was one recovery of a Reed Bunting ringed as a nestling at Westfield and retrapped at a wild bird cover crop on Trumpington Farm land nearby in December the same year. Mist netting of Yellowhammers feeding on the stubble fields at Westfield gave the opportunity to assess their condition; 'very well fed' according to Michael Holdsworth, Cambridgeshire Ringing Secretary.