

Surveying the Birds of Cuttle Brook

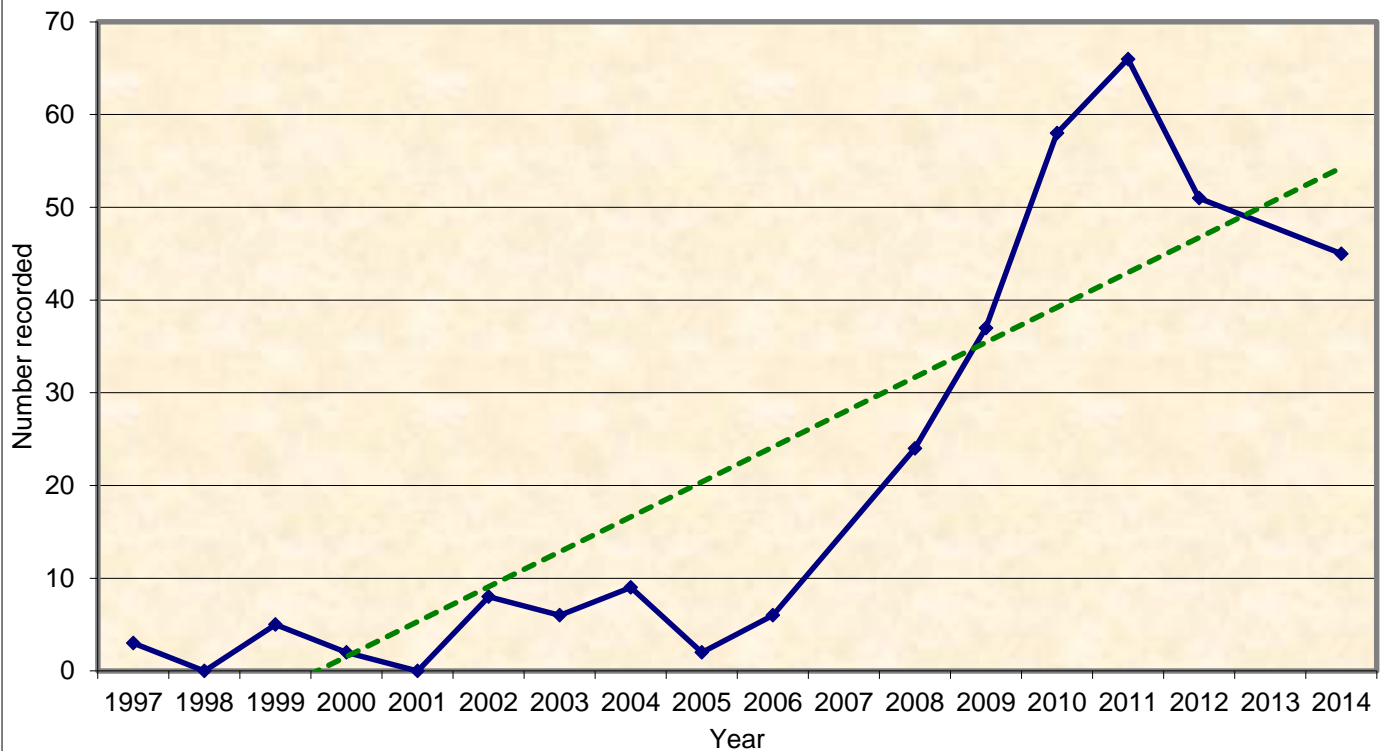
Since 1997 we have run an annual survey of the common birds of Cuttle Brook. One day each year – usually the third Sunday in May – a group of early-risers gets together on the reserve shortly after dawn to do a standardised count of birds seen. Each volunteer is given a section of the reserve to survey and sent off, recording sheet and binoculars at the ready, to do a 20 minute walk around their patch recording bird sightings as they go.

The idea of the survey isn't to try to record everything – most of us struggle to tell our garden warblers from our willow warblers – what we are trying to do is to record all the familiar, 'common' birds so that we can see population trends over time. By following the same method year on year we can get a feel for what is happening to our bird numbers, even though the individual results aren't strictly accurate.

It's important not to over-interpret the results in the graphs below. They record how many times a bird species was seen during each year's survey, but that isn't the same as how many birds are actually there. If birds are actively foraging and flying to and fro across the reserve, they may be recorded several times by several people. But also, if some birds are having a quiet morning and aren't very active, they probably won't be seen and counted. So individual results must be treated cautiously. The weather has a big influence on how many birds we can count – on cold, damp mornings the birds, like the volunteers, are less active and apparently fewer in number! However, by using the same method over many years, we can be sure that we are seeing real trends in the populations of our birds. It's those accumulated results over 17 years of surveys that are shown in the graphs below. The spikey lines clearly indicate the variations from year to year, but each graph also includes a 'trend line' showing the general rise or fall of each species' population. Where the trend is for an increasing population, the line is green; where the species is struggling, the line is red.

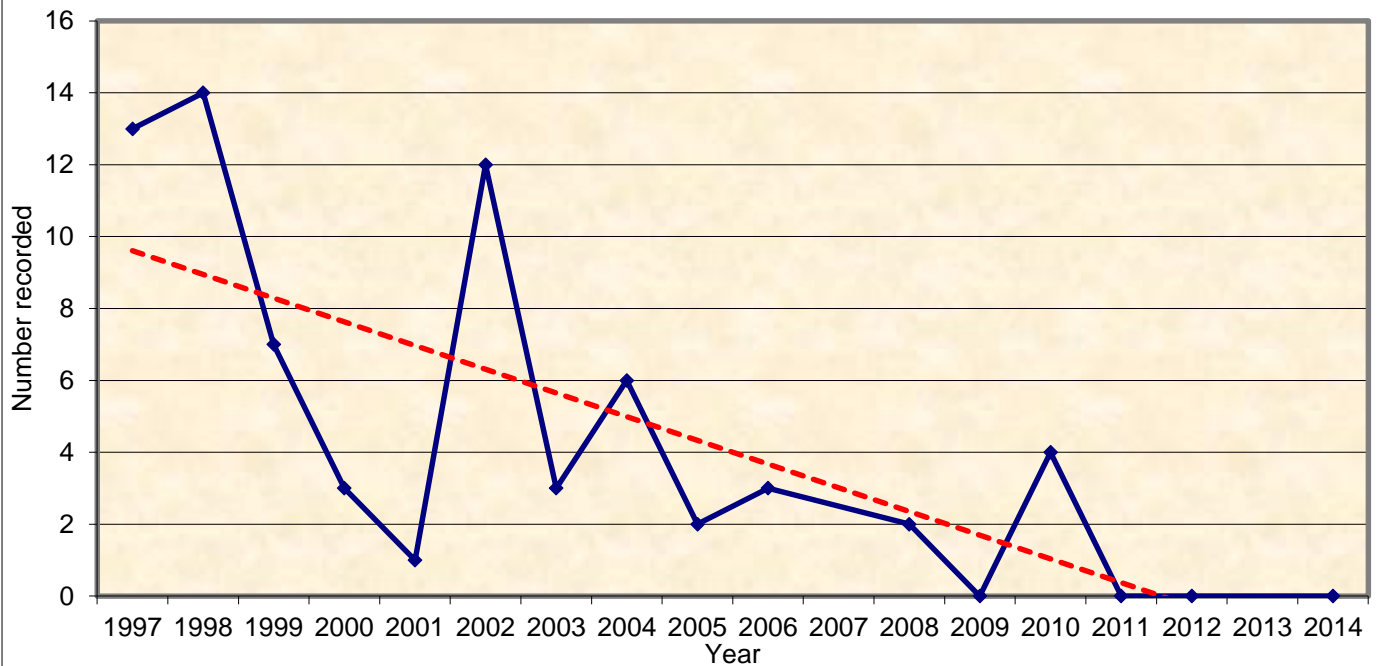
A five o'clock start on a Sunday morning isn't everybody's idea of fun, but the dawn chorus is always worth it and there is something magical about being out in the wild with no one else about. It has also become a strong tradition to follow up the survey with a slap-up cooked breakfast. It's not a bad way to start the day!

Birds of Cuttle Brook Blackbird (*Turdus merula*)



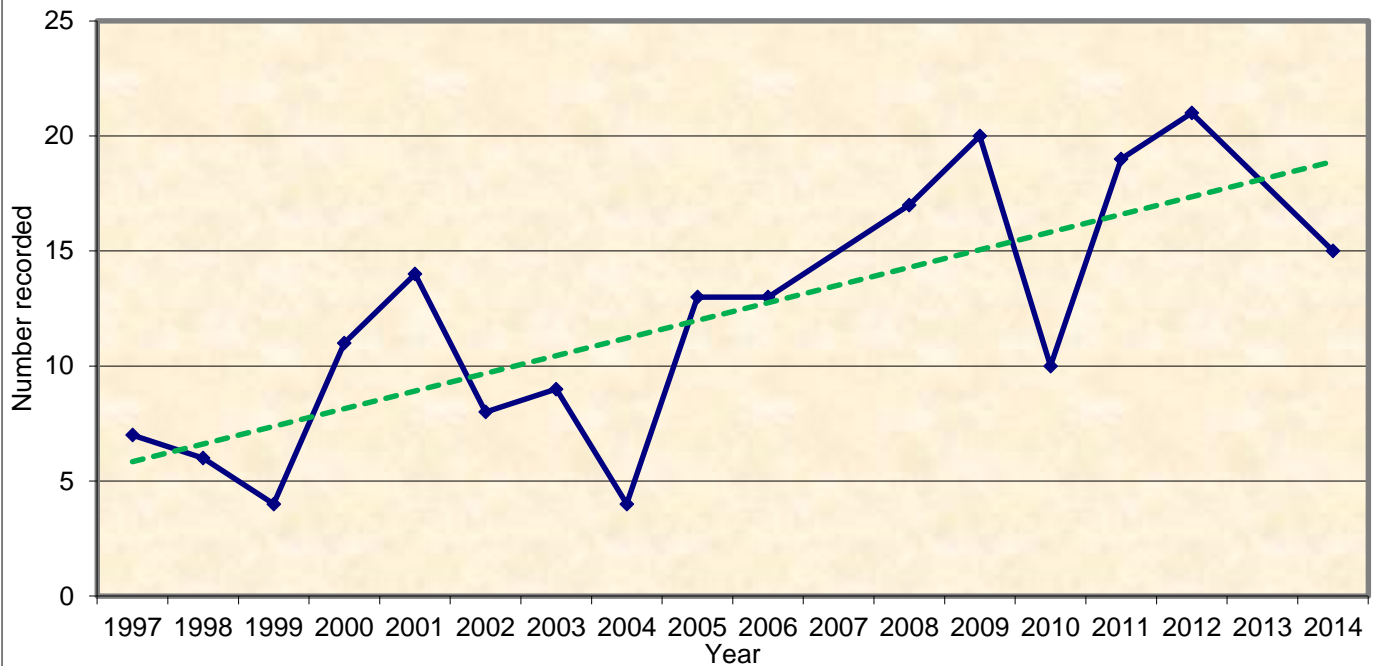
Blackbirds like deciduous trees and dense undergrowth, where they feed on a wide range of worms, insects, seeds and berries, so perhaps the rapid increase in sightings since 2005 relates to the rapid growth of trees around the reserve. As with all of our birds, their numbers will vary from year to year depending on the harshness of the winter and the availability of food. Each pair of blackbirds needs at least one third of an acre – more for open grassland – so we may be getting near to the Reserve's natural limit.

Birds of Cuttle Brook Greenfinch (*Carduelis chloris*)



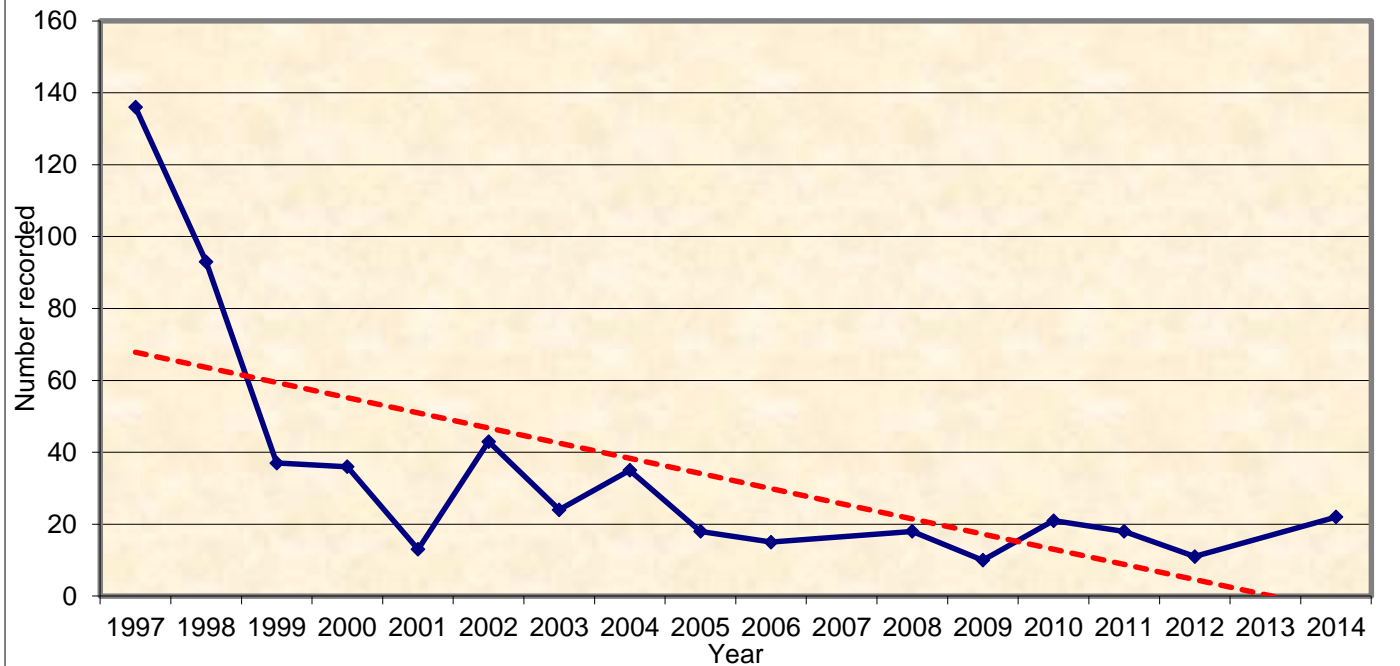
The greenfinch is a bird of woodland edges and hedgerows. They feed on seeds and insects and their population increased significantly in the 1990s but they are now being badly affected by a disease called *trichomonosis* which prevents them feeding. The population trend for Cuttle Brook has plummeted and they have not been seen in our annual survey for the last two years, although they are still around in smaller numbers.

Birds of Cuttle Brook Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*)



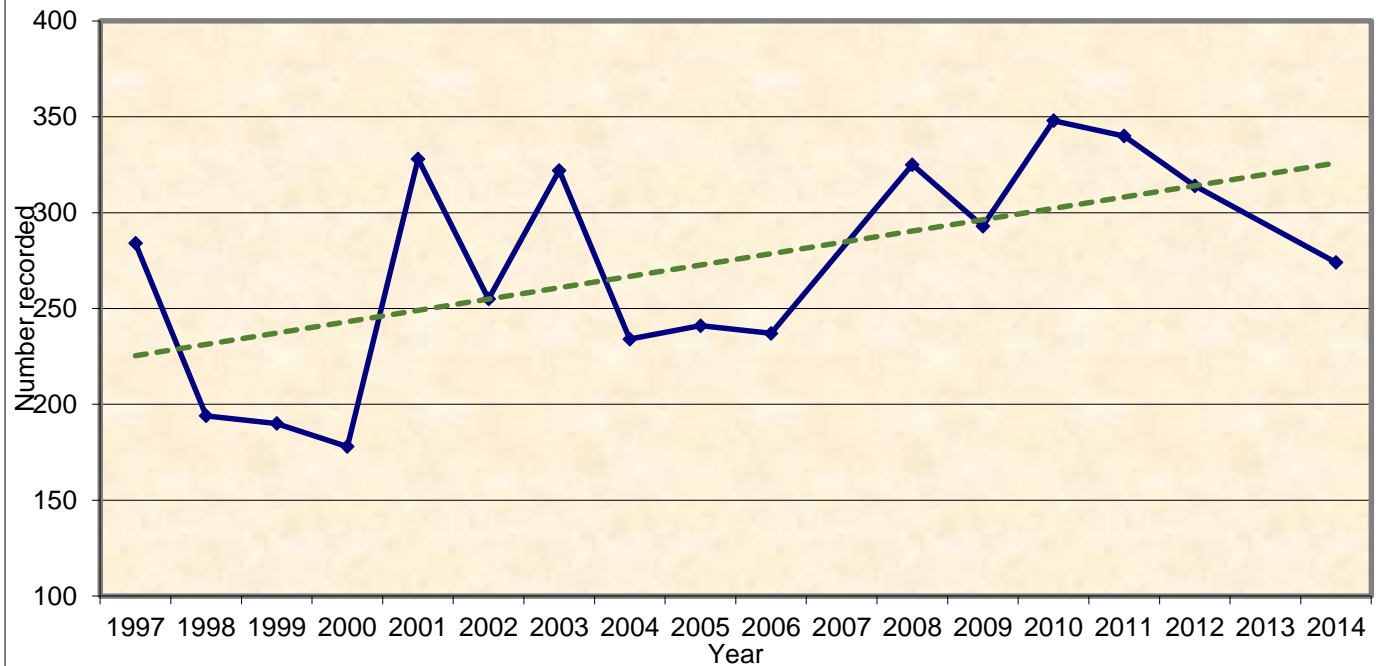
The wren is one of the few birds with a scientific name longer than itself. It also has one of the loudest songs – especially in relation to its very small size. Wrens feed mainly on spiders and insects, especially in dense undergrowth. Although its small size and habits of hopping about in the bushes mean that it isn't often seen, the wren is the UK's commonest breeding bird. The population on Cuttle Brook is steadily increasing, perhaps because of the increased scrub and undergrowth available, but numbers can be hit badly by hard winters.

Birds of Cuttle Brook Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*)



The starling is a sociable bird, usually seen in small flocks and often roosting in huge numbers, displaying in cloud formations before diving into the reed beds or other cover for the night. but its numbers in the UK have fallen in recent years – possibly due to a shortage of grassland insects for feeding its chicks (the adults are omnivorous, happily eating insects, seeds or fruit). When we started our surveys in 1997, starlings were the commonest bird but numbers fell quickly over the next few years. We are hoping that, as the meadows get more flowers and less grass, the food insects will increase and starling numbers pick up again.

Birds of Cuttle Brook All sightings



While individual species have seen different fortunes, the overall trend for birds on Cuttle Brook is definitely positive, with an average increase of more than 50% in sightings since our records began.

The figures for sightings doesn't mean that this is all of the birds on the reserve; it is only an indication of the relative abundance of common species from year to year. There are winners and some losers but the increase in habitats on Cuttle Brook, from being mainly grassland in 1997 to a better mix of woodland, meadows, reed beds, hedgerows and so on now, has generally benefited the birds. There will always be variations from year to year but, by doing our best to keep the reserve as natural and varied as possible, we can ensure that Cuttle Brook is a growing haven for birdlife.

You can help by volunteering, telling us about your sightings of unusual species, and keeping your dog on a short lead during the nesting season.