

Horned Lark

Eremophila alpestris



Named for the black, pointed tufts above its eyes, the Horned Lark has a rakish look, appropriate for the males' aggressive territorial battles. In what appears to be an avian death match, males flail at each other in mid-air, claws outstretched and wings akimbo. The fight may last more than a minute and almost always ends when combatants settle to the ground and sing their high-pitched, twittering song. The Horned Lark is one of the most wide-ranging species on the planet, with a Holarctic distribution that includes all of North America, except interior Canada, extending south into interior Mexico and Baja, with a disjunct population in the mountains of Colombia (Beason 1995).

Historically a species of open, barren lands, including short-grass prairie, deserts, alpine and Arctic tundra, the Horned Lark is unique among grassland birds by its acceptance of row crops and heavily grazed pastures. The nest is built in sparse, short grasses or on bare ground (Beason 1995). The first songbird to breed each year, the Horned Lark arrives in Vermont as early as mid-February (Ellison 1985); by the middle of April, most females have completed a nest (Beason 1995). At our latitude, Horned Larks are double-brooded; egg dates span from early April through late July (Ellison 1985, Beason 1995). Nestlings have been sighted in Vermont as early as 17 April (Ellison 1985), and fledglings are usually found May through July (Ellison 1985). Horned Lark presence in blocks may be under-represented in the atlas. The species uses habitat not frequented by birders and blends into the dirt background as it scurries along the ground. Its song requires concentration and a sharp ear to pick up, even in calm conditions. Confirming breeding can be equally challenging; multiple visits to observe pairs at Bridport and Dead Creek produced only PR records.

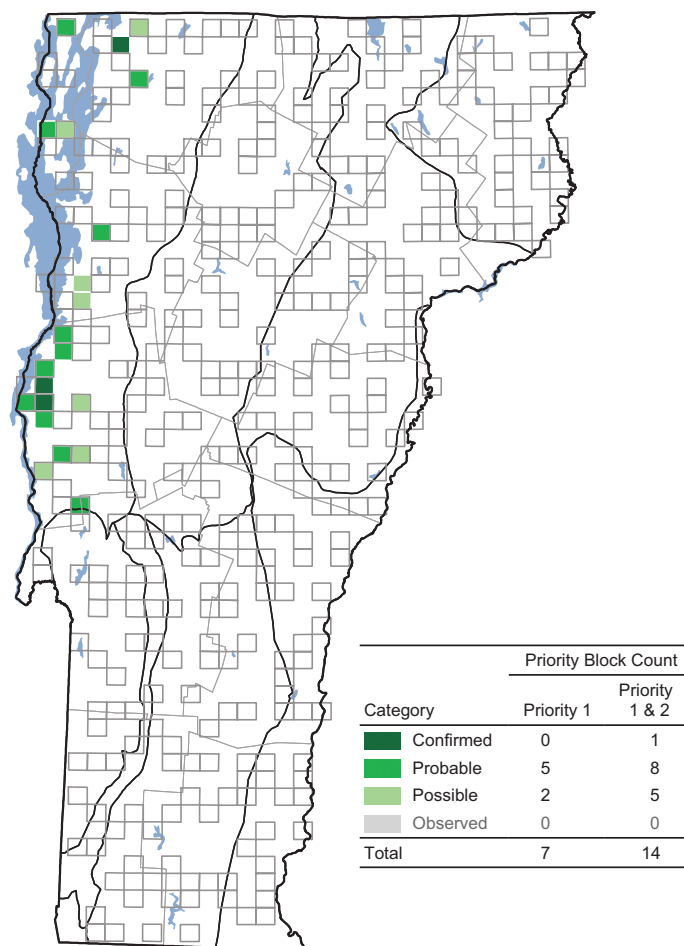
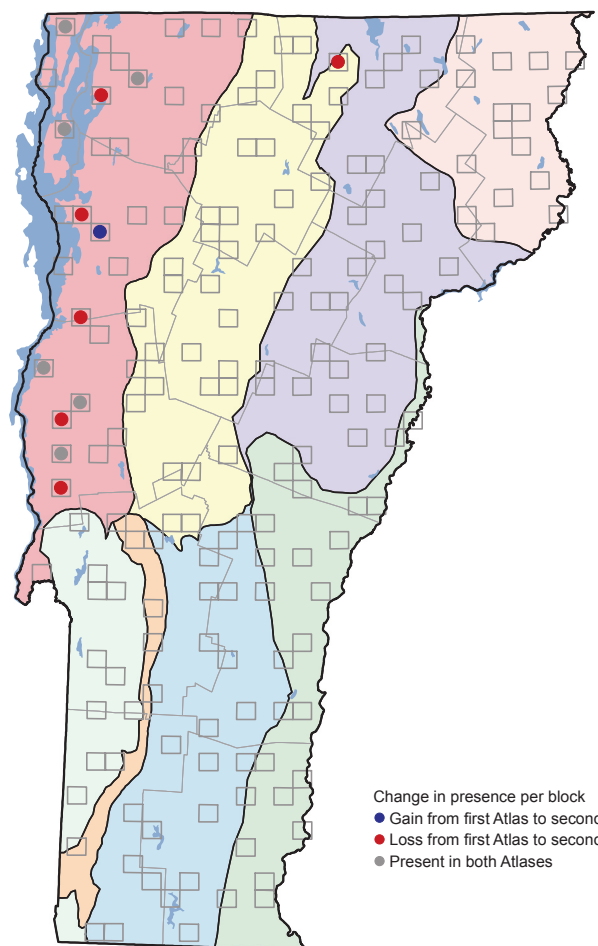
In Vermont, the Horned Lark population tracks agricultural land use. The species is restricted to the state's lowlands, where open lands under intensive agricultural management have supported a small population since the late 1800s (Forbush 1927). Although the species undoubtedly benefited from the clearings created during

settlement, the demise of the dairy and sheep industries and associated forage crops led to a dramatic reduction in habitat. Although this downward trend began long before the first atlas (Ellison 1985), it continues today: one-third fewer blocks were occupied in the second atlas, and the distribution of Horned Lark is now restricted to the Champlain Valley. The recent abandonment of traditional agriculture in that area, often replaced by development, is a likely reason for the continued decline of the Horned Lark in Vermont.

Data from the Breeding Bird Survey and second-generation atlases show mixed results for Horned Lark. From 1982 to 2007, populations decreased both range-wide and in eastern North America by 2.3 percent annually (Sauer et al. 2011). The second New York atlas documented a 37 percent decrease in occupied blocks (McGowan and Corwin 2008) and, in Ontario, the probability of observing Horned Lark decreased significantly between atlases (Cadman et al. 2007). Results from atlases south of Vermont, however, showed increases in the proportion of blocks occupied: in Pennsylvania by 26 percent (Wilson et al. 2012), and in Maryland by 5 percent, with local fluctuations commensurate with changes in row crops (Ellison 2010).

Despite a downward population trend across much of its range, the Horned Lark has not yet earned conservation attention in Vermont. In New York, it is listed as a Species of Special Concern; in Connecticut, it is listed as threatened. If agricultural lands continue to be lost in the Champlain Valley, a decline in Vermont's Horned Lark population would likely follow. A few small, scattered populations of Horned Lark may persist, however, as long as some cropped and heavily grazed fields remain.

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CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	11	7	- 4	- 36
Northeastern Highlands	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Northern Green Mountains	1	0	- 1	- 100
Northern Vermont Piedmont	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Southern Green Mountains	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Southern Vermont Piedmont	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Taconic Mountains	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Vermont Valley	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	12	7	- 5	- 42

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	19	100
Northeastern Highlands	0	0
Northern Green Mountains	0	0
Northern Vermont Piedmont	0	0
Southern Green Mountains	0	0
Southern Vermont Piedmont	0	0
Taconic Mountains	0	0
Vermont Valley	0	0