Wilson's Snipe

Gallinago delicata

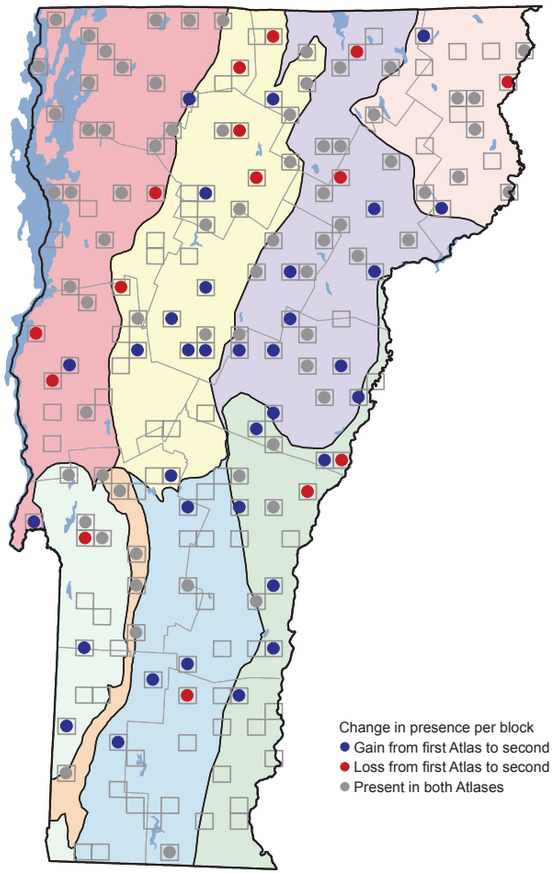
Wilson's Snipe is a secretive bird of boreal wetlands, the sound of its winnowing flight a background serenade above grassed-in beaver ponds and bogs throughout the northern half of the continent. Once considered conspecific with the Common Snipe of Eurasia, the Wilson's Snipe is one of the most abundant and widespread shorebirds in North America (Mueller 1999). It breeds throughout Alaska and Canada, south to New Mexico and California. In the Northeast, it breeds locally to Pennsylvania, rarely to West Virginia. It has been an uncommon but regular breeder in Vermont since the late 1800s (Perkins and Howe 1901).

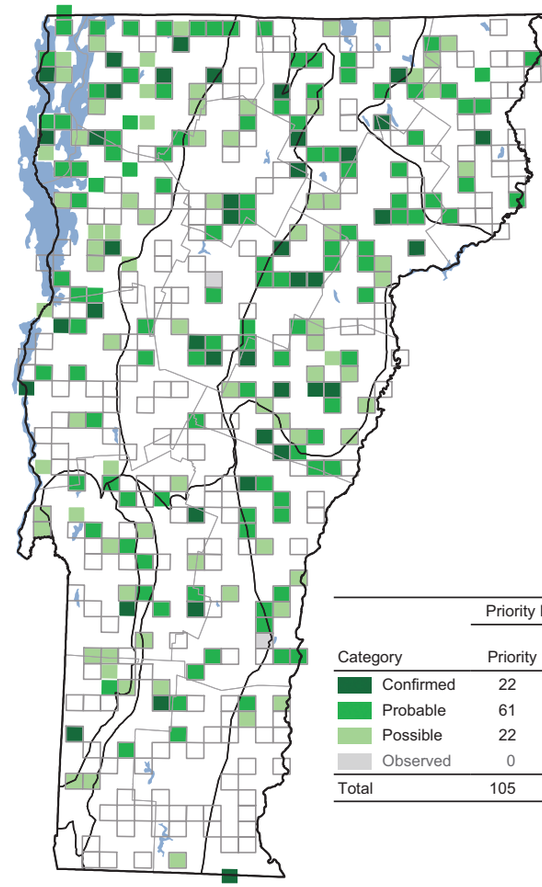
The Wilson's Snipe prefers closely cropped marshland and wet meadows for breeding. Pasturing of emergent wetlands may enhance habitat suitability for this bird, which prefers relatively short marsh vegetation compared with many other marsh-loving birds such as rails (Kibbe 2010). Wilson's Snipe return to Vermont in late March, well before wetland vegetation has started to grow. The majority of the population breeds north of Vermont. Because they winnow during migration, it is difficult to pinpoint arrival dates for local breeders. Males display above breeding areas from April into May. The ground nests are well hidden; only six (with eggs) were found from 25 May to 15 July. Although the young are precocial and may start to fly in 2 weeks, they are typically fed by their parents for more than a week (Tuck 1972). Observations of fledglings, by far the easiest means of confirming breeding for Wilson's Snipe, were reported 1 June to 17 August (N = 19). The species is one of the state's most difficult birds to confirm, however, and less than 20 percent of occupied blocks included confirmations. The male defends his territory using a winnowing aerial display and, in antagonistic situations, females will also display. They may perform aerial displays for several weeks, but cease the activity when they commence nesting (Mueller 1999).

The Wilson's Snipe is widely distributed in Vermont. It remained most common in the northern half of the state with the majority of records coming from the Champlain Valley, Northern Vermont Piedmont, and Northern Green Mountains. Statewide, block occupancy increased 22 percent in the second atlas. The greatest increases occurred in the Southern Vermont Piedmont and Southern Green Mountains. No region showed a decrease, and populations do not appear to have been adversely affected by pastureland abandonment, as predicted in the first atlas (Kibbe 1985).

Breeding Bird Survey data for Vermont support atlas findings for Wilson's Snipe, showing a significant, positive trend of 3.2 percent per year from 1982 to 2007. Numbers were stable in New Hampshire and New York for that period (Sauer et al. 2011). The second atlas in New York documented a 2 percent increase (McGowan and Corwin 2008). Pennsylvania's small population, limited principally to the northwestern corner of the state (Kibbe 2010), may have decreased; the second atlas recorded an 8 percent loss in block occupancy (Wilson et al. 2012). The Ontario atlas found Wilson's Snipe declined substantially (44 percent) in the south; this was offset, however, in the Hudson Bay lowlands, where nearly three-quarters of the province's half million birds were found, and the population increased by 26 percent (Peck 2007).

Although Vermont's snipe population appears to be doing well, climate change may affect populations. Matthews et al. (2007) predicted that Wilson's Snipe may be extirpated from the eastern United States, based on expected changes in habitat and other environmental variables. Their models, however, were based principally on temperature and forest criteria that have not been shown to be a factor in this species' reproductive success. Tem-





Category	Priority Block Count: Priority 1	Priority 1 & 2
Confirmed	22	36
Probable	61	104
Possible	22	61
Observed	0	2
Total	105	201

CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	25	25	+ 0	+ 0
Northeastern Highlands	9	10	+ 1	+ 11
Northern Green Mountains	14	17	+ 3	+ 21
Northern Vermont Piedmont	19	26	+ 7	+ 37
Southern Green Mountains	4	7	+ 3	+ 75
Southern Vermont Piedmont	6	10	+ 4	+ 67
Taconic Mountains	4	5	+ 1	+ 25
Vermont Valley	5	5	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	86	105	+ 19	+ 22

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	69	25
Northeastern Highlands	43	8
Northern Green Mountains	46	15
Northern Vermont Piedmont	81	26
Southern Green Mountains	30	8
Southern Vermont Piedmont	47	9
Taconic Mountains	38	4
Vermont Valley	87	3

perature increases are unlikely to reduce precipitation in the Northeast or substantially change vegetation in currently occupied wetlands. Wilson's Snipe is a game bird with generous bag limits (8 per day). It was estimated that 120,000 snipe were harvested in 2007 (Richkus et al. 2008). Hunting pressure in Vermont is slight, but harvest in areas where the species winters may contribute substantially to the overall mortality of the species.

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