

House Sparrow

Passer domesticus



Europeans brought fifty pairs of House Sparrows to the United States in 1853; many other introductions followed (Lowther and Cink 2006). Although now generally considered a pest, those early introductions were closely tended, and the species has maintained an association with humans ever since. The population grew with unexpected rapidity and people began calling for their eradication as early as the 1880s. By 1943 the continent-wide population had swollen to 150 million (Lowther and Cink 2006), and the birds were blamed for everything but the weather. Although non-migratory, the House Sparrow is an excellent disperser and thrives in proximity to humans. It drives Eastern Bluebirds, Purple Martins, and Tree Swallows from nest boxes, monopolizes feeders, fouls grain elevators, and steals grain from fields, silos, and feed troughs. The House Sparrow is most abundant in the central United States, where cereal grains and livestock are widespread (Sauer et al. 2008, NAS 2010), but the bird occurs as far north as Churchill on Hudson Bay all the way to southern South America. In Vermont, the species was introduced to St. Johnsbury in 1874 and within a short time was established throughout the state (Merriam and Barrows 1889). On frigid Christmas Bird Counts in northern Vermont, where dozens might huddle in relative warmth among the barn rafters, the House Sparrow is often the most abundant bird.

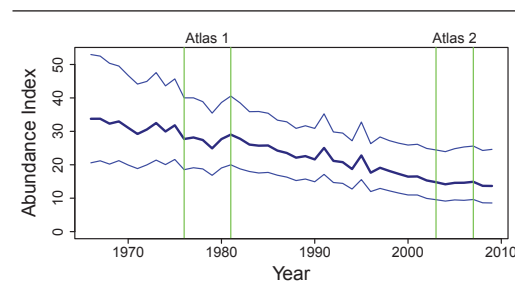
Although a member of the weaver finch family, House Sparrows are surprisingly slovenly nest constructors, erecting football-sized, domed nests in trees or on barn rafters, or stuffing them into nest boxes or building crevices. Nests are often reused. The House Sparrow has one of the longest and most prolific breeding seasons of any species that nests in the state, often raising two or three broods of 4 to 5 young each year. Nest building can start in the fall, since birds may overwinter in the nests; during the atlas, evidence of nest building was noted from late March through late July. Nests with eggs ($N = 7$) were found from 1 May through 7 July, and nestlings ($N = 46$) were recorded from 16 May through 8 August. Fledglings were seen from 25 May through 28 August ($N = 61$); this

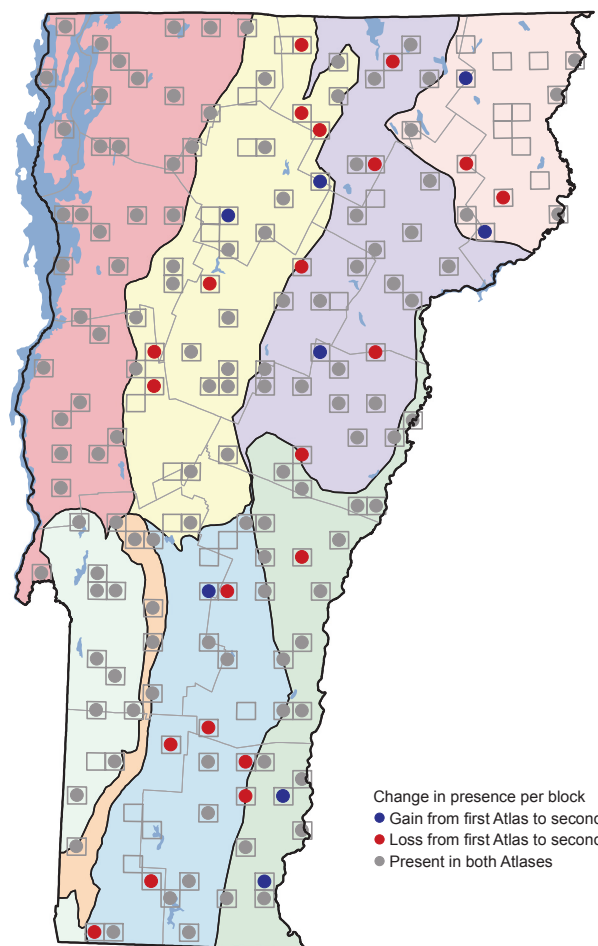
was by far the most common confirmation criterion. When present in an atlas block, the noisy broods are easily discovered traveling by road.

House Sparrow occupied 9 percent fewer blocks during the second Vermont atlas. Losses were greatest in the Green Mountains and Northern Vermont Piedmont, areas now dominated by forest. The species had been more sparsely distributed in these regions historically, and as the number of active farms declined so did the House Sparrow. Similar trends were noted elsewhere. New York found a statewide decline of 8 percent in the second atlas, mostly in reforested regions, and the species remains virtually absent from the heavily forested Adirondack region (McGowan 2008). In Pennsylvania, the decrease in the second atlas was 2 percent (Wilson et al. 2012). Ontario found a decrease of 20 percent in probability of observation, although the House Sparrow continued to be ubiquitous in the southern regions of the province (Cadmán et al. 2007). House Sparrows are well surveyed by roadside Breeding Bird Survey routes. Between 1982 and 2007, their populations declined by 3.8 percent annually in eastern North America and by 2.3 percent in Vermont (Sauer et al. 2011).

If the number of farms in Vermont continues to decrease, then a further decline in the House Sparrow pop-

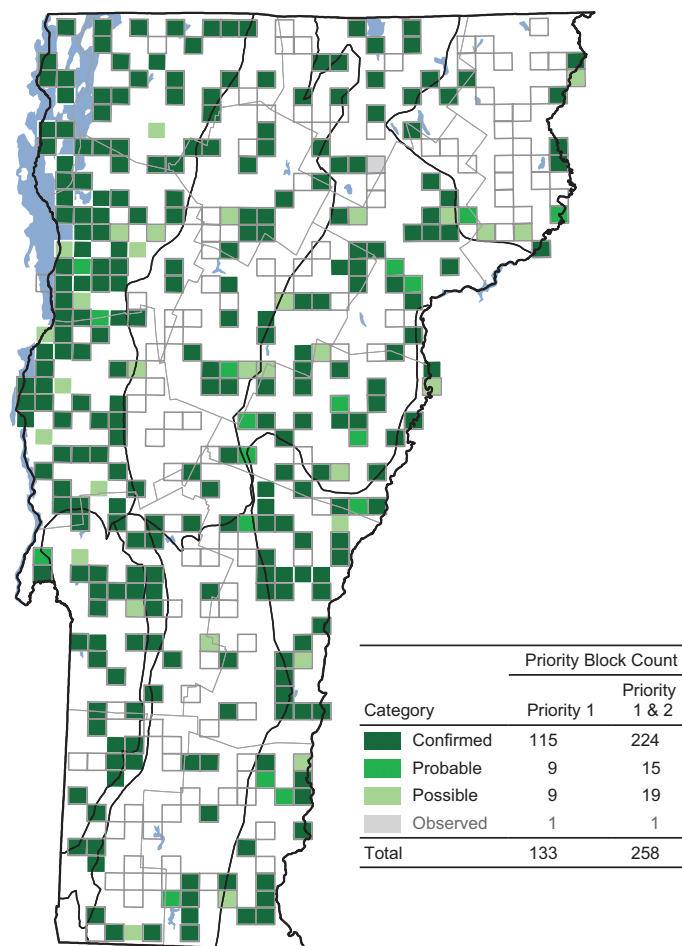
RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME





CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	33	33	+ 0	+ 0
Northeastern Highlands	7	7	+ 0	+ 0
Northern Green Mountains	25	21	- 4	- 16
Northern Vermont Piedmont	27	23	- 4	- 15
Southern Green Mountains	20	14	- 6	- 30
Southern Vermont Piedmont	19	20	+ 1	+ 5
Taconic Mountains	10	10	+ 0	+ 0
Vermont Valley	5	5	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	146	133	- 13	- 9



DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	98	28
Northeastern Highlands	35	5
Northern Green Mountains	52	13
Northern Vermont Piedmont	81	21
Southern Green Mountains	42	9
Southern Vermont Piedmont	90	14
Taconic Mountains	85	7
Vermont Valley	100	3

ulation may occur. The species is likely to continue to thrive, however, in close proximity to humans in both rural and urban environments, particularly where livestock are maintained. There is a price, however, to living in the city: Vermont's urban House Sparrows had lead levels 4.5 times that of birds in agricultural habitats (Chandler et al. 2004).

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