

Common Grackle

Quiscalus quiscula



An early sign of spring, Common Grackles announce their presence in Vermont in late February and early March with a raucous chorus of squawks, squeaks, and chucks. A showy bird with glossy iridescent plumage setting off a yellow iris, the grackle is abundant throughout Vermont. With an estimated continental population of 97 million, it also is an abundant species in North America (Rich et al. 2004). Most accounts suggest that Common Grackle populations expanded dramatically with forest clearing for agriculture in the eastern United States (Peer and Bollinger 1997). Their range has also expanded in the western United States, presumably in response to shelterbelt development in agricultural areas. These increases in population and range have led to conflicts with farmers; in many regions, grackles are considered a serious agricultural pest, particularly with respect to corn crops (Stone and Mott 1973).

Common Grackles are generalists during the breeding season, using a wide range of habitats. Most individuals are associated with some form of forest opening, including agricultural fields, wetlands, and developed or residential areas. Over the course of their annual cycle, grackles feed on a variety of food items, with about 75 percent of their diet devoted to plant material. Typically monogamous, the species nests semi-colonially, frequently in conifers, with “colony” sizes ranging from 10 to 18 nests (Peek and James 1987).

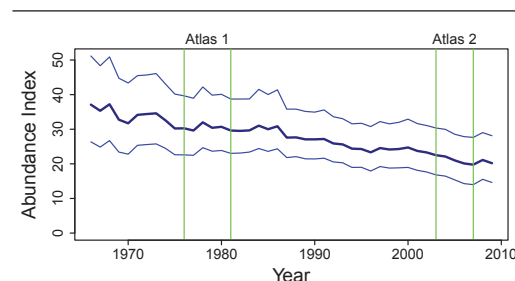
Common Grackles have an extended nesting period. During the second atlas, nest building was documented as early as 10 April, and recently fledged young were observed as late as 31 July. Late nests were likely a result of renesting, as Common Grackles are generally single-brooded (Peer and Bollinger 1997). Nests with eggs were found between 5 May and 2 June ($N = 6$). More than 90 percent of observations in priority blocks were confirmations, and two-thirds of these confirmations were fledglings associated with adults.

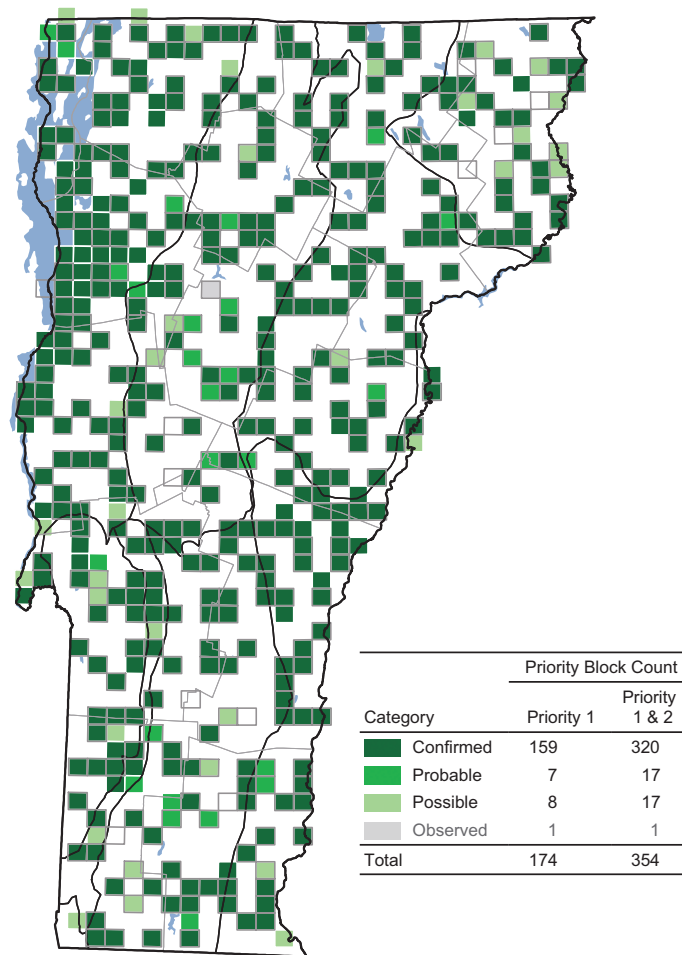
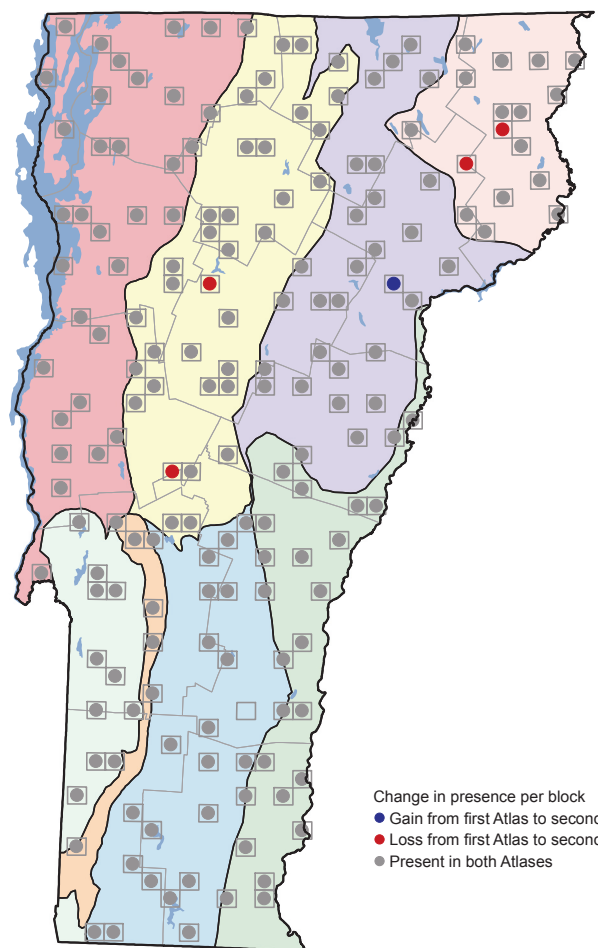
Common Grackles are distributed widely across Vermont. During the second atlas they revealed occupancy rates of more than 92 percent in all biophysical regions

except the Northeastern Highlands (89 percent). The state’s grackle populations appear to have peaked in the mid-1980s; from 1982 to 2007, the species has shown a significant 1.5 percent annual decline (Sauer et al. 2011). Data from the first and second atlases showed nearly identical statewide distributions, with the species disappearing from only 3 blocks in the second atlas. Although its ranking on the list of Vermont’s most widely distributed species dropped from 11th (tie) to 16th (tie), grackles remain one of the most abundant birds in the state.

Results from Vermont’s second atlas mirror trends revealed for Common Grackle populations in other atlas projects; distributions remained essentially stable in New York (McGowan and Corwin 2008), Pennsylvania (Wilson et al. 2012), Ontario (Cadman et al. 2007), and Maryland (Ellison 2010). Across the eastern and central Breeding Bird Survey regions, however, grackle populations have shown significant 1.8 and 1.0 percent annual population declines, respectively, from 1982 to 2007 (Sauer et al. 2008). Peer and Bollinger (1997) suggested that lethal population control measures associated with Midwestern agricultural crops have led to population declines. However, reforestation of former agricultural lands is likely an additional factor in the Northeast. Common Grackles are also an important vector of West Nile virus (Kilpatrick et al.

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	17	15	- 2	- 12
Northern Green Mountains	35	33	- 2	- 6
Northern Vermont Piedmont	29	30	+ 1	+ 3
Southern Green Mountains	26	26	+ 0	+ 0
Southern Vermont Piedmont	21	21	+ 0	+ 0
Taconic Mountains	11	11	+ 0	+ 0
Vermont Valley	5	5	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	177	174	- 3	- 2

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	100	21
Northeastern Highlands	89	9
Northern Green Mountains	95	18
Northern Vermont Piedmont	100	18
Southern Green Mountains	92	15
Southern Vermont Piedmont	100	11
Taconic Mountains	100	6
Vermont Valley	100	2

2007), although effects on their populations are unclear (LaDeau et al. 2008). Results from the third atlas will elucidate the response of Common Grackles to these myriad pressures.

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