

Prairie Warbler

Setophaga discolor

The name Prairie Warbler is a misnomer because the bird prefers open shrubby habitats and early seral stages of regenerating forest rather than prairies. Its breeding range is more limited than those of other Vermont birds that use similar habitats, and extends from the south-central United States only as far northward as southwestern Maine (Nolan et al. 1999). The Prairie Warbler is a recent colonist to Vermont, with the first records dating only to 1919; breeding was not confirmed until 1971.

The Prairie Warbler nests in early successional habitats dominated by small and usually scattered shrubs. It tends to be less common in the dense thickets preferred by other shrubland specialists like the Brown Thrasher and Eastern Towhee. In Vermont most breeding records come from abandoned agricultural lands, often in drier areas where the growth of extensive cover is relatively slow. Common plants in Prairie Warbler habitat include junipers, shrubby oaks, sumac, and young pines. The birds arrive in early May, but otherwise almost nothing is known of their breeding biology in Vermont. All CO records during the atlas were either of fledglings or of adults carrying food. Elsewhere in New England, the peak breeding period lasts from late May through late August. The species is one of the first warblers to head south in the fall.

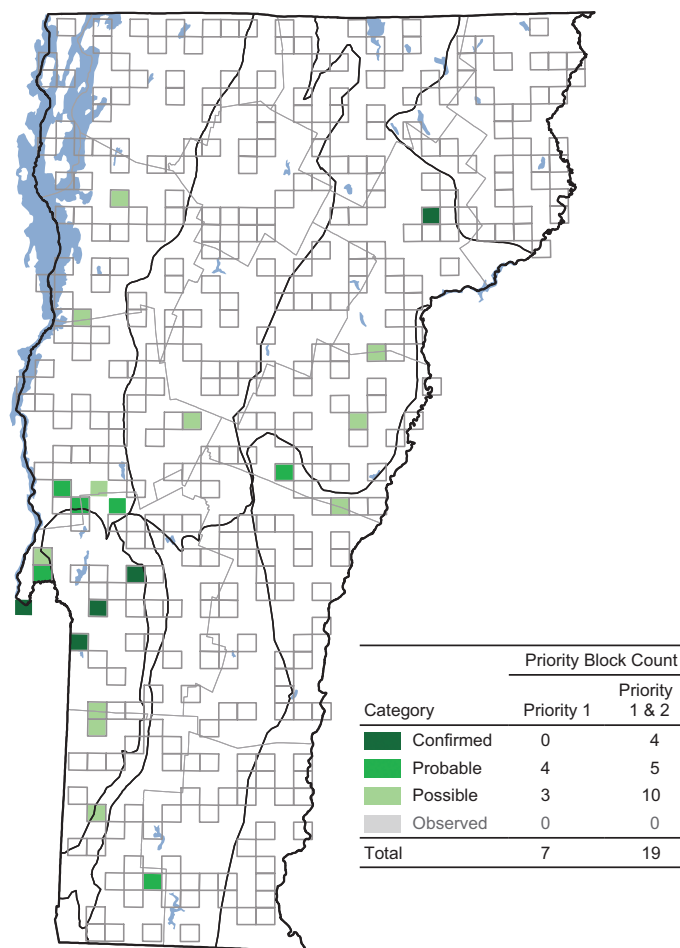
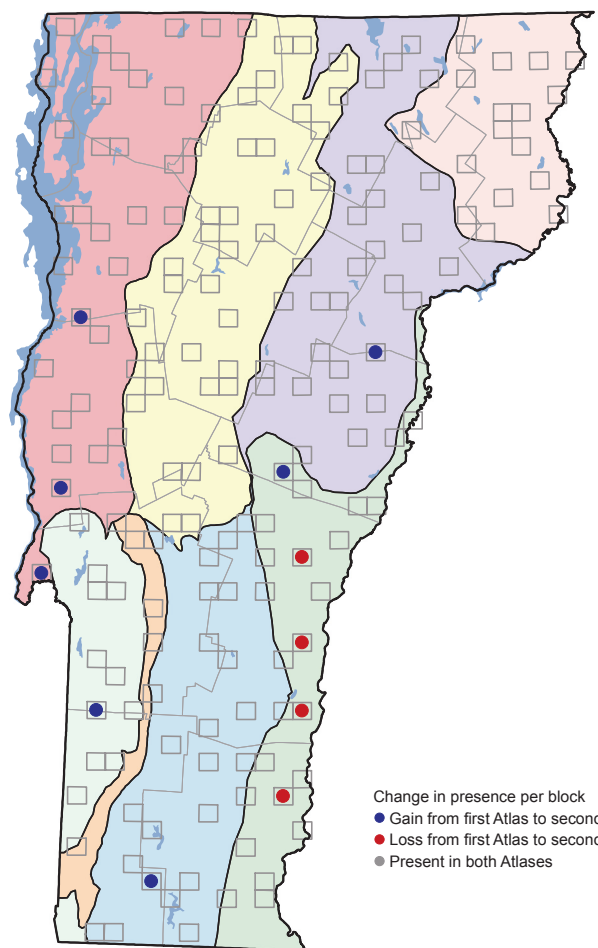
As befits a species that colonized Vermont relatively recently, the Prairie Warbler is far more restricted in range than many other shrubland species within the state. During the atlas it was detected in only 22 blocks, all but 2 of which were in the southern two-thirds of the state. Most records came from western Vermont, with 9 and 6 occupied blocks in the Champlain Valley and Taconic Mountains, respectively. An additional 5 blocks were occupied in the Northern Vermont Piedmont, all in Orange and Caledonia counties. Surprisingly, there is no overlap between their current distribution and that found during the first atlas. All 9 records in the first atlas came from the Southern Vermont Piedmont, generally in the Connecticut River Valley. The complete absence of the Prairie Warbler from this area in the second atlas, including



at sites that formerly supported relatively high densities, is inexplicable, especially since suitable habitat still appears to exist.

Despite the species' disappearance from the southern portion of the Connecticut River Valley, the Prairie Warbler has appeared elsewhere in the state, and thus stands out as one of only a few early successional species that actually increased in Vermont between atlases. Similar northward expansions have been observed in New Hampshire (P. Hunt unpubl. data) and New York (Smith 2008) over the past twenty years. On a broader scale, however, the Prairie Warbler is decreasing across most of its range. In eastern North America, Breeding Bird Survey data showed a significant annual 1.2 percent decline from 1982 to 2007, and in the New England / Mid-Atlantic Coast (Bird Conservation Region 30), declines have been 3.7 percent per year (Sauer et al. 2011). As a result, the species has been recognized as a conservation priority both at regional and national levels, and is a Species of Special Concern in Vermont.

Declines in the core of the Prairie Warbler's range are likely a result of habitat loss, much as has been proposed for other early successional birds. As a species that prefers more open shrublands, it is perhaps even more sensitive to forest maturation, and abandons old fields earlier than other species that share this habitat (Nolan 1978). It also tends to avoid edges, and is not found in relatively narrow power-line corridors (King et al. 2009a). Near the northern edge of its range, the Prairie Warbler may reach



CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	0	3	+ 3	+ 300
Northeastern Highlands	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Northern Green Mountains	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Northern Vermont Piedmont	0	1	+ 1	+ 100
Southern Green Mountains	0	1	+ 1	+ 100
Southern Vermont Piedmont	4	1	- 3	- 75
Taconic Mountains	0	1	+ 1	+ 100
Vermont Valley	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	4	7	+ 3	+ 75

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	8	32
Northeastern Highlands	0	0
Northern Green Mountains	1	5
Northern Vermont Piedmont	4	16
Southern Green Mountains	1	5
Southern Vermont Piedmont	5	11
Taconic Mountains	23	26
Vermont Valley	12	5

its highest densities in fire-adapted habitats such as pine barrens, which are exceedingly rare in Vermont (Thompson and Sorenson 2005). In the Albany Pine Bush (New York), habitat management for Karner blue butterfly, through a combination of mowing and prescribed burns, resulted in increased local populations of Prairie Warblers (N. Gifford pers. comm.). In areas where suitable habitat conditions are present (such as wider power-line corridors), such management should maintain Prairie Warbler populations at current levels in Vermont.

PAMELA HUNT