

Rock Pigeon

Columba livia



Appearing in a variety of colors, the Rock Pigeon is a fixture of urban and agricultural areas throughout Vermont. North American birds are descended from a wild species first domesticated in Europe millennia ago and have been on this continent almost as long as people of European descent. The first recorded instance of the species in North America is from Nova Scotia in 1606, with additional introductions in Massachusetts and Virginia in ensuing decades (Schorger 1952). From these areas and others, pigeons eventually spread throughout temperate and much of tropical North America, although they generally have been limited to areas in close proximity to human settlement (Johnston 1992).

Pigeons build loose and somewhat sloppy nests on horizontal surfaces. Typical sites include bridge supports, eaves of buildings and, under natural conditions, cliffs. Breeding at such natural sites is rare in Vermont, but may occasionally occur in river gorges or notches in the mountains. Rock Pigeon is one of the earliest species to nest in Vermont, perhaps in part because of warmer microclimates in cities. Earliest by far was a nest found in Burlington on 25 January, during the second atlas, with half-grown young; this unusual occurrence was likely facilitated by the location being partially underground and shielded from the elements. Excepting this winter record, nest building was documented as early as mid-March during the atlas, and anecdotal reports indicate nesting into October (T. Murin pers. comm.). With an incubation period of 18 to 19 days and nestling period of 25 to 32 days, it is reasonable to surmise that some pigeon pairs could raise four or five broods in a given season.

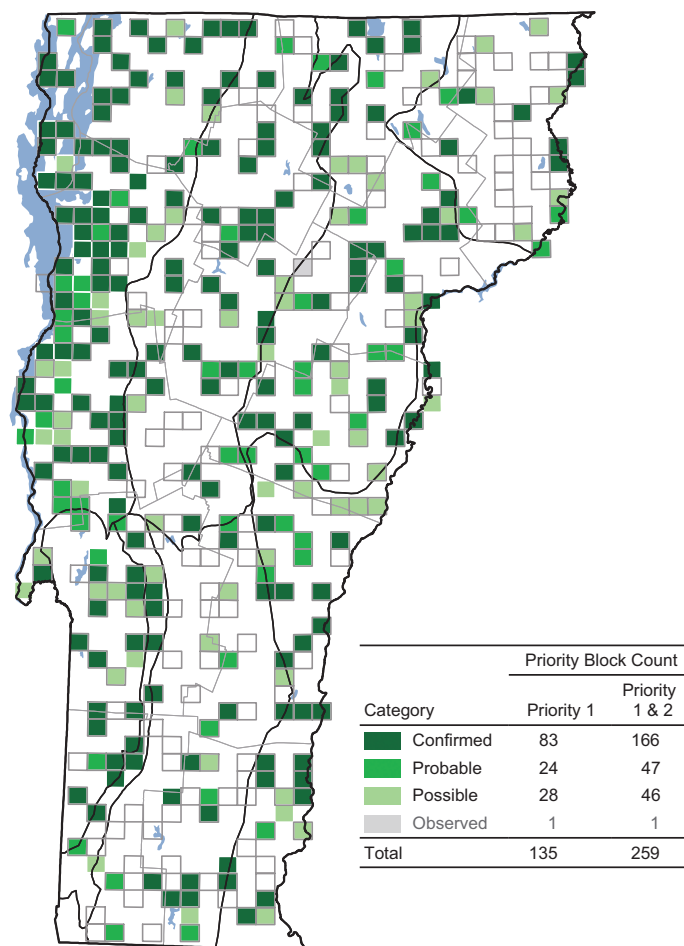
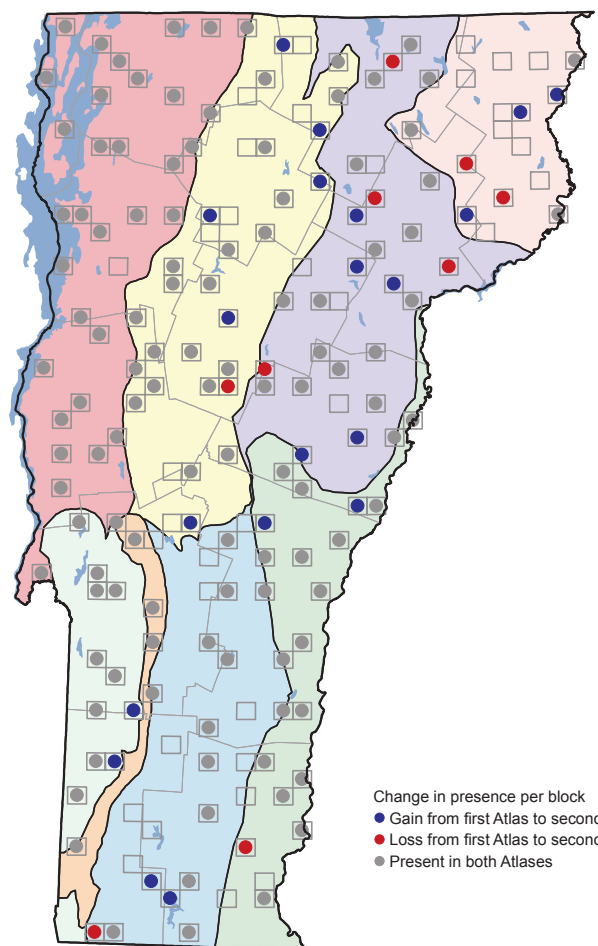
In Vermont, the Rock Pigeon is found in all physiographic regions, although the species is slightly less pervasive in the Green Mountains and Northeastern Highlands. In urban and agricultural areas it can be found almost everywhere, and in largely forested regions it rarely, if ever, occurs away from urban or agricultural habitats. Its distribution in the state has not changed significantly since the first atlas.

There has been some speculation on how Rock Pigeon

populations might have changed in Vermont prior to the first atlas (Kibbe 1985). It seems likely that the gradual reforestation of the state during most of the twentieth century would have reduced the area of suitable habitat for the species, but any such change would have occurred prior to extensive data collection via Breeding Bird Surveys, Christmas Bird Counts, and atlases. From 1982 to 2007, populations were stable for Bird Conservation Region 13, which includes Vermont's Champlain Valley, and increased significantly (3.1 percent annually) for BCR 14. Significant declines—3.1 percent per year—occurred in populations along the Atlantic coast from Maine to Virginia (BCR 30; Sauer et al. 2011). The latter trend is also manifest in a loss from atlas blocks in the vicinity of Chesapeake Bay (Ellison 2010).

A declining population may be the result of a loss of agricultural land, improved sanitation, or pigeon control in urban areas. The first two factors may be behind the steeper declines in European Starling and House Sparrow populations, two other non-native human commensals. Because the Rock Pigeon is not native to North America, declines are not considered of conservation concern. In any case, it is highly unlikely that this fixture of urban parks and old barns will ever disappear from Vermont or North America.

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CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	32	32	+ 0	+ 0
Northeastern Highlands	5	6	+ 1	+ 20
Northern Green Mountains	21	26	+ 5	+ 24
Northern Vermont Piedmont	21	22	+ 1	+ 5
Southern Green Mountains	14	15	+ 1	+ 7
Southern Vermont Piedmont	17	18	+ 1	+ 6
Taconic Mountains	9	11	+ 2	+ 22
Vermont Valley	5	5	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	124	135	+ 11	+ 9

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	97	27
Northeastern Highlands	45	7
Northern Green Mountains	64	16
Northern Vermont Piedmont	76	19
Southern Green Mountains	39	8
Southern Vermont Piedmont	80	12
Taconic Mountains	85	7
Vermont Valley	87	3