

Red-breasted Merganser

Mergus serrator

Primarily a boreal and Arctic duck, the Red-breasted Merganser has a limited distribution in the lower forty-eight states. Its North American breeding range extends across Alaska and Canada from the Atlantic, Pacific, and Arctic oceans, diagonally southward to the northern Great Lakes states (Titman 1999). Isolated breeding occurs in central and coastal Maine as well as in New York. In Vermont, this species is more commonly seen during spring and fall migration, but two breeding events have been documented.

The Red-breasted Merganser places its nest on the ground close to water, often in dense vegetation. The only nest discovered in Vermont was placed in dense, tall grass beneath a low-hanging serviceberry limb on Rock Island in St. Albans Bay. Overhead cover is a frequent characteristic of nest sites (Titman 1999).

Red-breasted Merganser was first confirmed breeding in Vermont during the first atlas on Watson Pond in Washington County, a large man-made pond surrounded by open fields with forested habitat nearby (Fichtel 1985). Between the first and second atlases, there was one additional breeding confirmation of Red-breasted Merganser and five additional records in Grand Isle and North Hero in June and July (Vermont Bird Records Committee unpubl. data). During the second atlas, there were four PO and PR records, but no confirmed nesting. The data indicate an increase in summering individuals during the second atlas, but whether Vermont supports a breeding population is equivocal. In addition, female Red-breasted Mergansers are difficult to distinguish from females of the more widespread Common Merganser, possibly lending a degree of uncertainty to some records.

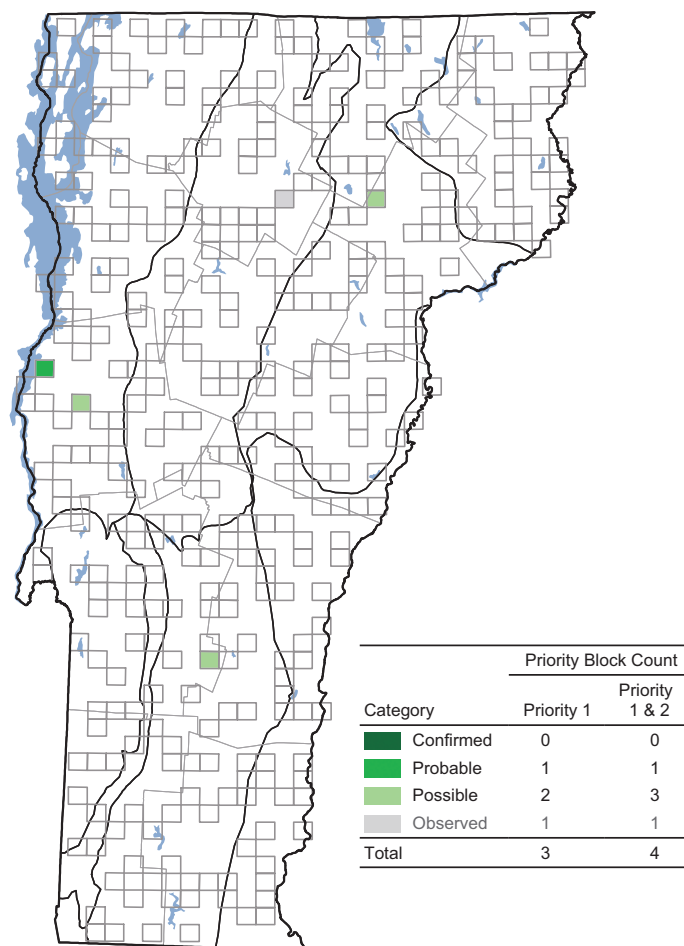
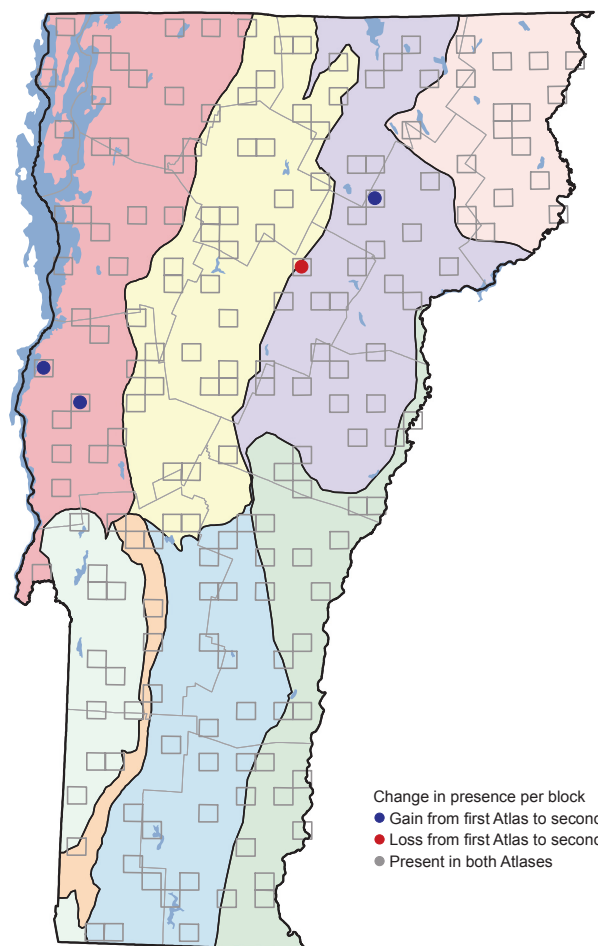
Population trends for the Red-breasted Merganser are difficult to assess. The USFWS eastern survey region (eastern Ontario, southern Quebec, New Brunswick, Labrador, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and Maine) pools data for all three merganser species. The likelihood that all three species show similar population trends is low. With that caveat, population estimates averaged 435,000 (from 398,000 to 468,000) during the second atlas survey pe-



riod, with a general decline since 2003 (USFWS 2008). Ontario's second atlas showed no significant change in Red-breasted Merganser occupancy since the first atlas, and found the bulk of the population along the north shores of the Great Lakes (Cadman et al. 2007). The second New York atlas documented an increase from 14 to 20 blocks, with two CO records: one on Long Island, and the other on eastern Lake Ontario. There was one PR record on Four Brothers Island in Lake Champlain (McGowan 2008). The species appears to have declined in Quebec from 1994 to 2003 (Bordage et al. 2003).

Although there are breeding populations within several hundred kilometers of Vermont's northern border, it is unlikely that Vermont will ever support a viable nesting population. Although Red-breasted Mergansers will nest along freshwater lakes and ponds, nesting populations are typically close to seacoasts (Titman 1999). The species is not a popular game bird, but potential threats to the population include by-catch in fishing nets and illegal shooting in rivers where salmonids spawn (Titman 1999). Increases in populations in neighboring states and provinces might lead to a few nesting occurrences in Vermont, but for the foreseeable future, the state will play a negligible role in the population dynamics of the Red-breasted Merganser.

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CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	0	2	+ 2	+ 200
Northeastern Highlands	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Northern Green Mountains	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Northern Vermont Piedmont	1	1	+ 0	+ 0
Southern Green Mountains	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Southern Vermont Piedmont	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Taconic Mountains	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Vermont Valley	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	1	3	+ 2	+ 200

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	2	50
Northeastern Highlands	0	0
Northern Green Mountains	0	0
Northern Vermont Piedmont	1	25
Southern Green Mountains	1	25
Southern Vermont Piedmont	0	0
Taconic Mountains	0	0
Vermont Valley	0	0