

Common Moorhen

Gallinula chloropus

The Common Moorhen has a curious breeding range in North America. Predominately a southern species with a widespread distribution in the Caribbean and South America, it expanded northward in the twentieth century, and now breeds in a widely scattered region across the eastern two-thirds of the United States and northward into Canada in the vicinity of the Great Lakes (Bannor and Kiviat 2002). In the United States, the species remains most abundant along the Gulf Coast, in Florida, and in the Great Lakes region (Sauer et al. 2008). Vermont lies on the northeastern periphery of the North American distribution, which Bannor and Kiviat (2002) characterize as changeable and sometimes ephemeral. Populations are also found in Europe, Africa, and Asia.

In Vermont, Common Moorhens are found in emergent deepwater marshes bordering open water (Kibbe 1985). They return in early May to nest. The young are precocial, and observations of nestlings are rare; the second Vermont atlas documented only one nest with young, on 31 May. The remaining 7 breeding confirmations were of young out of the nest, reported from 25 June to 25 July. Young remain with the parents well into the fall and do not attain full growth until 10 weeks of age. Common Moorhens are far easier to see than many other members of the rail family, but are more retiring than the American Coot. As with many other marshbirds, standardized protocols have been developed and are now recommended for effectively surveying Common Moorhen (Conway 2007).

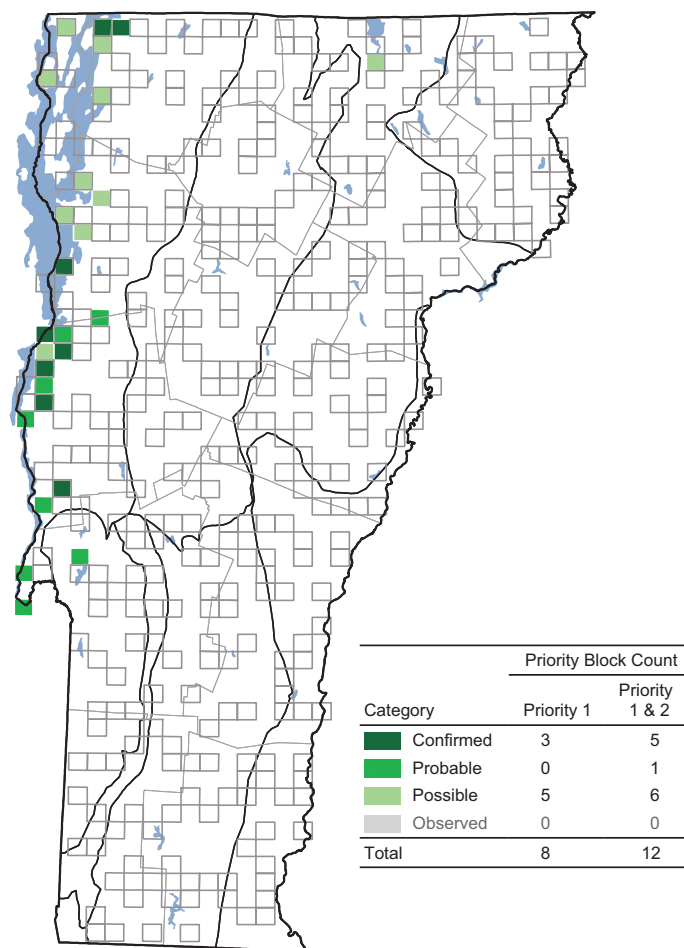
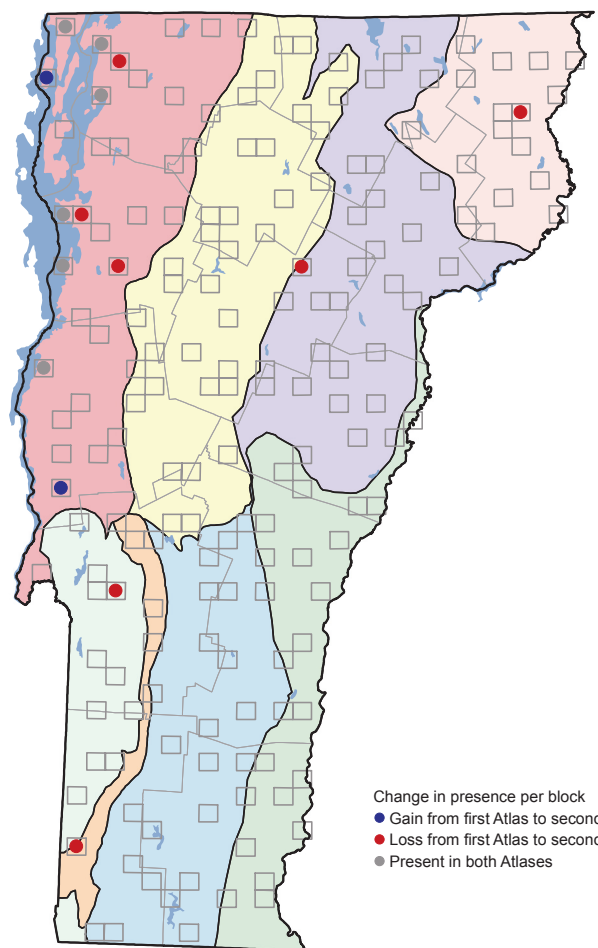
The second atlas shows the Common Moorhen to be restricted to the emergent marshlands of the Champlain Valley (except for one record at the southern end of Lake Memphremagog), perhaps because those marshlands are more extensive than marshlands elsewhere in the state. Although there were 38 percent fewer priority blocks occupied by the Common Moorhen, there appears to have been little change in its statewide distribution. Moorhens were found in 25 blocks, and the only breeding location that appears to have been lost was in Bennington County, where breeding was previously confirmed in 2 adjacent



blocks. The population along Lake Champlain is widespread, though there were fewer confirmations (in all blocks) of breeding in the state than during the first atlas (8 versus 17). There are periodic observations of Common Moorhen in the Connecticut River Valley. The species has never been recorded breeding there, though suitable habitat exists (D. Kibbe pers. obs.).

New York's second atlas found a substantial decrease in Common Moorhen along the St. Lawrence River and the Appalachian Plateau (Medler 2008). Purple loosestrife invasion of emergent cattail marshes was considered one factor in the moorhen's decline at the Montezuma NWR in New York (Sibley 1988). In Pennsylvania and Maryland, declines of 36 and 15 percent in the number of blocks occupied, respectively, were noted (Wilson et al. 2012, Ellison 2010). Ontario's second atlas showed a 35 percent decrease, making the Common Moorhen the only marshbird in the province to exhibit a decline (Timmermans 2007). The Common Moorhen is listed as a Species of Conservation Concern in New Hampshire, a Species of Special Concern in Massachusetts, and as endangered in Connecticut.

Although reasons for regional declines are unknown, at present the Common Moorhen and its wetland habitats in Vermont appear to be secure. There is potential for dense stands of invasive plant species such as *Phragmites* and purple loosestrife to change the structure of cattail marshes and negatively affect local populations (Sibley 1988, Kibbe in 2010). The species has been recently listed as a Species of Special Concern in Vermont because of the rarity of its habitat, its declining population in the state and elsewhere, and its small state population. Use of



CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	9	8	-1	-11
Northeastern Highlands	1	0	-1	-100
Northern Green Mountains	0	0	+0	+0
Northern Vermont Piedmont	1	0	-1	-100
Southern Green Mountains	0	0	+0	+0
Southern Vermont Piedmont	0	0	+0	+0
Taconic Mountains	1	0	-1	-100
Vermont Valley	1	0	-1	-100
Totals	13	8	-5	-38

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	16	100
Northeastern Highlands	0	0
Northern Green Mountains	0	0
Northern Vermont Piedmont	0	0
Southern Green Mountains	0	0
Southern Vermont Piedmont	0	0
Taconic Mountains	0	0
Vermont Valley	0	0

standardized survey protocols (Conway 2007) is recommended to closely monitor population changes on the major marsh systems where this species regularly occurs.

DOUGLAS P. KIBBE