

Northern Shoveler

Anas clypeata

A unique species of duck in North America, the Northern Shoveler uses its finely spaced lamellae and fringed tongue to strain invertebrates from the water column. It is an uncommon migrant and a very rare breeder in Vermont (Murin and Pfeiffer 2002). Although the current North American population is twice that of the long-term average (USFWS 2008a), most individuals nest well to the west, and there is no evidence that breeding occurs with any regularity in the state. Shovelers prefer a classic “hemi-marsh” (50 percent open water and 50 percent emergent vegetation), often breeding in sites with substantial submergent vegetation (Dubowy 1996).

Vermont’s first documented breeding record for Northern Shoveler was in North Hero in 1962 (Fuller and King 1964). The nest was depredated, and since that time there have been no additional confirmations. There was 1 PR record during the first atlas and 3 during the second. In New York’s second atlas, breeding was confirmed in 2 survey blocks in Clinton County on the west side of Lake Champlain (McGowan and Corwin 2008). Both New York and Ontario showed modest increases during their respective second atlases, although the species remained a rare to uncommon breeder. By contrast, both Maryland (Ellison 2010) and Pennsylvania (Wilson et al. 2012) completely lost their very small populations. Although insufficient breeding habitat does not seem to be the reason behind the Northern Shoveler’s near absence from Vermont, the state will likely remain unimportant to the species’ continental population.

ALLAN STRONG

Snowy Egret

Egretta thula

The Snowy Egret is known for the long plumes it sports during the breeding season, which were once more valued than gold as adornments on women’s hats. Protection of this species became one of the rallying cries for early conservation movements, including the Audubon Society. Snowy Egrets breed along the northeastern U.S. coast, southward into Mexico, and northwest along the Pacific Coast to Oregon. In the interior United States, breeding occurs in the Southeast, along the Mississippi Valley, in the Great Basin, and in scattered locations across the West. Nests are generally placed in trees or shrubs on islands or in swamps, although ground nests also have been reported (Parsons and Masters 2000). Inland colonies especially prefer islands, generally in association with other colonial nesting herons. Most Snowy Egrets are assumed to be two years of age when they first breed, and many non-breeders spend their first year on the wintering grounds rather than returning to their natal colony (Parsons and Master 2000).

The single nesting record in Vermont consists of two birds seen 4 June 1984 on Young Island (Grand Isle County). All other nesting records from the Northeast have been from coastal heronries. Although there have been no additional nesting reports in Vermont, there were more than a dozen sightings from 2000 to 2009 (eBird 2010). With the exception of an observation in Shelburne Bay during the second atlas and another at Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge on 9 July 2009, however, Vermont’s records have been late-summer sightings and probably reflect vagrancy by non-breeders.

A general decline in Snowy Egret populations has been noted since the 1970s (Parsons and Masters 2000, McCrimmon 2008). Reasons for the decline are unclear, but competition with Cattle Egrets (Burger 1978) could be a factor. Continuous monitoring of nesting colonies is necessary to establish population trends. The species is listed as threatened in Connecticut but is accorded special status by no other northeastern state. Monitoring of existing heronries could eventually reveal future efforts to breed in Vermont by this showy wader, but it is unlikely that the state will see another nesting record before the third atlas.

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