

European Starling

Sturnus vulgaris

For almost a century, the European Starling has been subtly advertising the imminence of spring in Vermont. As early as February, its bill gradually turns from the dull gray of winter to the vivid yellow of the breeding season. After the species' introduction to New York City in the late 1800s, its population spread, in the next seventy years, over the entire continental United States and the southern tier of Canadian Provinces (AOU 1998). The earliest known record for Vermont is December 1913 in Bennington (Ellison 1985). According to Kessel (1953), the European Starling had become established in southern Vermont by the summer of 1918, and by 1921 had expanded its range into all but the northernmost areas; the species now occurs statewide. Some individuals migrate south for the winter (Cabe 1993), but large numbers remain (Murin and Pfeiffer 2002).

Starlings are common around human-altered landscapes, where houses and other buildings provide nesting locations, and food can be found on lawns and in discarded refuse. Nesting locations are quite varied, but the birds always require a cavity, such as a tree hollow or, more often, a building crevice or nest box, with open land in the vicinity of the nest. During the second Vermont atlas, nest building was observed from 15 April through 21 July (N = 51). Nestlings were found from 7 May to 22 July (N = 70). Most breeding confirmations were fledglings (N = 101), found from 14 May to 3 August. Starlings are noisy, easily observed, and readily identified; they were unlikely to be missed during atlas coverage.

The European Starling was found throughout the state during both atlases, with fewer records in the Northeastern Highlands and along the crest of the Green Mountains, where blocks have high elevations and extensive woodlands. The Northeastern Highlands had the lowest proportion of occupied blocks in both atlases and also showed the largest decline between atlas surveys. Although the European Starling was found in 4 percent fewer blocks during the second atlas, it is still among the most widespread and abundant species; on average, more

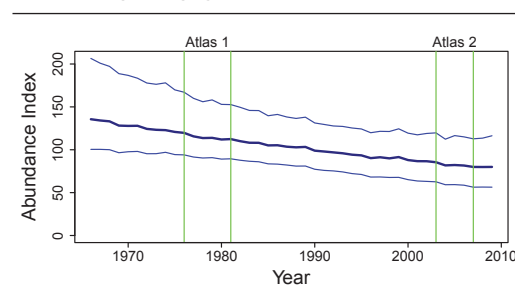


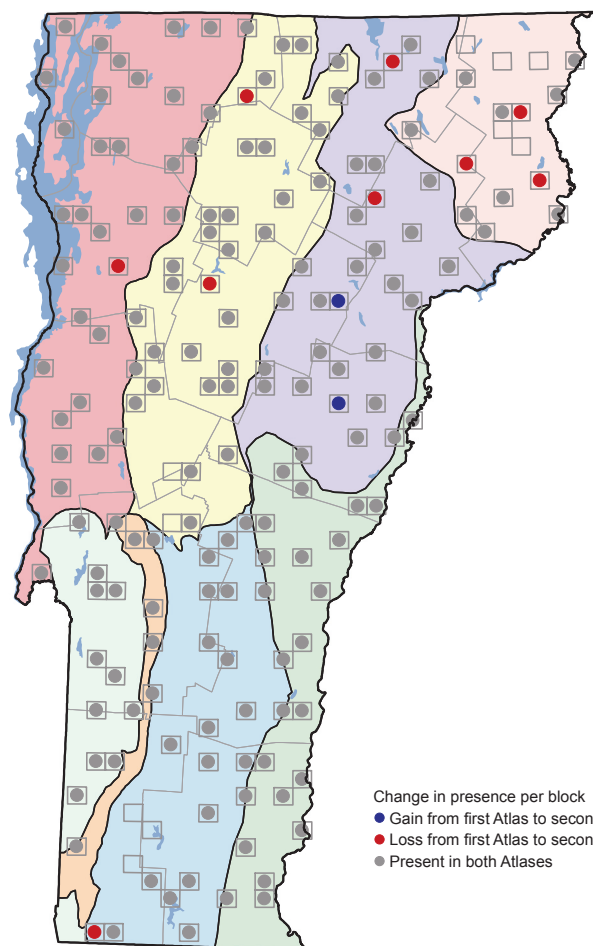
than 40 individuals are found on each Breeding Bird Survey route (Sauer et al. 2008).

In the three northernmost New England states, starlings declined significantly in number by 2.7 percent per year from 1982 to 2007; in Vermont alone, the decline was 1.5 percent (Sauer et al. 2008, 2011). North American declines throughout the entire Breeding Bird Survey area were significant and over 1 percent per year from 1966 to 1981 and from 1982 to 2007 (Sauer et al. 2011). Second atlases show minimal changes in block occupancy; Maryland (Ellison 2010) and Pennsylvania (Wilson et al. 2012) showed 1 percent and 3 percent increases, respectively, while New York (Ardia 2008) showed a 2 percent decrease. Ontario had a similar distribution of occupied blocks in both atlases (Cadman et al. 2007).

Declining starling populations in northern New England might be associated with the decline of agriculture and gradual regrowth of fields. Since 1982 there has been a downward trend in starling numbers for North America as a whole (Sauer et al. 2008), although isolated regions have shown increases (Cabe 1993). Major declines have occurred in recent decades in parts of its native

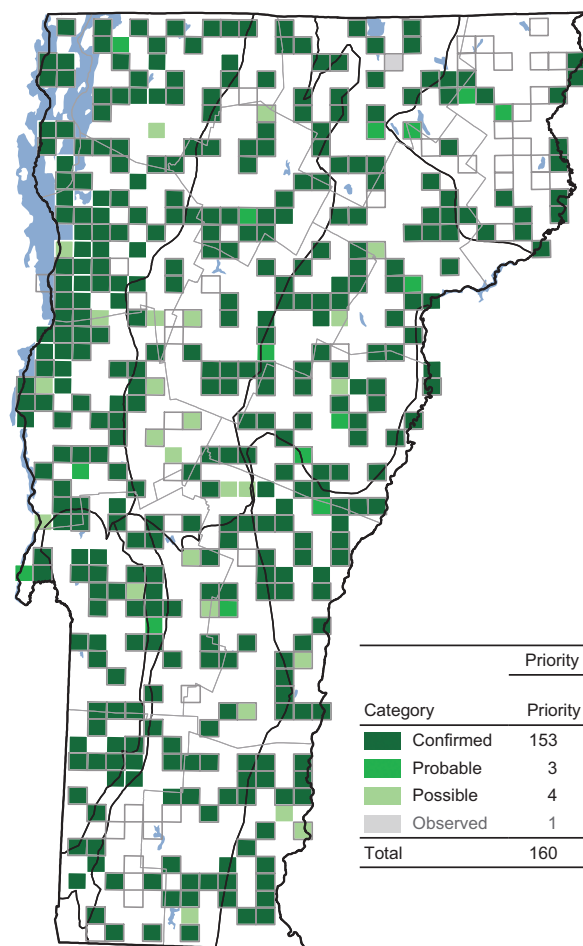
RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME





CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	33	32	- 1	- 3
Northeastern Highlands	12	9	- 3	- 25
Northern Green Mountains	33	31	- 2	- 6
Northern Vermont Piedmont	28	28	+ 0	+ 0
Southern Green Mountains	24	23	- 1	- 4
Southern Vermont Piedmont	21	21	+ 0	+ 0
Taconic Mountains	11	11	+ 0	+ 0
Vermont Valley	5	5	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	167	160	- 7	- 4



Category	Priority Block Count	
	Priority 1	Priority 1 & 2
Confirmed	153	307
Probable	3	8
Possible	4	11
Observed	1	1
Total	160	326

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	98	22
Northeastern Highlands	51	6
Northern Green Mountains	87	17
Northern Vermont Piedmont	95	19
Southern Green Mountains	83	14
Southern Vermont Piedmont	100	12
Taconic Mountains	100	6
Vermont Valley	100	2

range in Europe (Freeman et al. 2007). The European Starling is often considered an undesirable addition to North American birdlife because it is thought to outcompete native bird species for cavity nest sites (but see Koenig 2003), and flocks occasionally collide with aircraft (Linz et al. 2007). The species' bad reputation also stems from the economic damage it inflicts on the agricultural sector. Enormous flocks destroy fruit and grain crops, and help to spread disease among livestock. Large numbers of starlings have been eliminated through trapping and poi-

soning in some parts of North America, but it is doubtful that these local reductions have had any detectable effects on the overall population (Linz et al. 2007). We can anticipate that the European Starling will continue to be a familiar species in Vermont for many years to come.

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