

Sandhill Crane

Grus canadensis



The Sandhill Crane is perhaps most noted for its spring migration, when thousands of birds concentrate along the Platte River in central Nebraska, making it hard to envision the species as a member of Vermont's breeding avifauna. These stately birds historically bred in tundra, taiga, and prairie wetlands from eastern Siberia south and east through the northern Rocky Mountains and upper Great Lakes, with additional non-migratory subspecies in Florida, Mississippi, and Cuba. Beginning in the late 1980s, however, the population in the Great Lakes region expanded its range gradually to the south and east, eventually colonizing New England.

Typical breeding habitat in the eastern portion of the range includes marshes and bogs embedded in a forest matrix, as well as wetlands in more extensive grasslands (Tacha et al. 1992). Recent records from the northeastern United States have followed the same pattern, where habitats used also include cattail or sedge marshes near large lakes (Maine) and shrubby pond margins (Vermont). In the Midwest, the species arrives in March and lays eggs in April. Chicks hatch after 30 days, spend the next several months with their parents, and migrate south as a family group (Tacha et al. 1992).

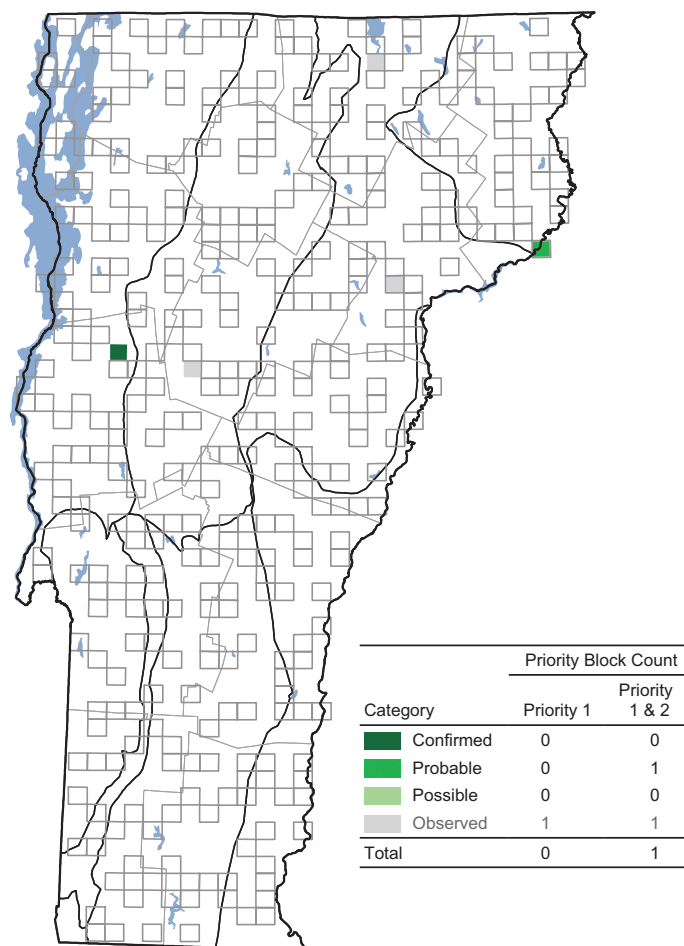
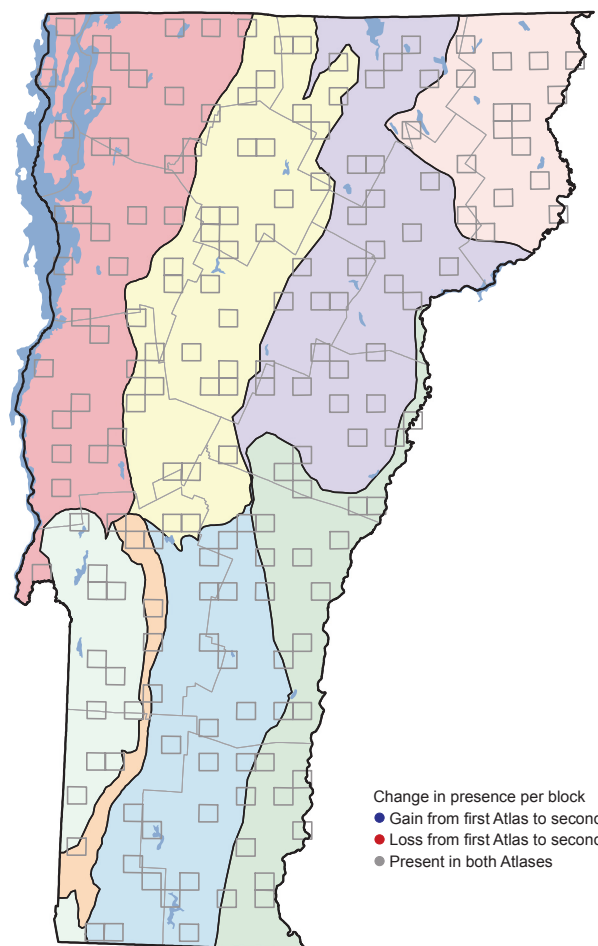
Vermont's first official record of Sandhill Crane is a specimen from Essex County in 1882 (Vermont Bird Records Committee unpubl. data). It was another eighty years before the species was recorded again, this time in the Champlain Valley, in September and October 1961. The third record came in 1976, and for the next fifteen years there was, on average, one report every two years. In the 1990s sightings became almost annual, but the majority of records occurred during spring or fall migration. Then, in April 2005, a pair was found nesting in the town of Bristol. The site was carefully monitored; though egg fragments were found later in the season, young did not survive. The adults returned in 2006 and produced a chick that was observed in mid-June, but it too did not appear to survive. Success finally came in 2007, when a fledged chick was observed with its parents into early August. Although all the excitement centered on Bristol,

atlas sightings included a PR record in the northern Connecticut River Valley and two OB records in the Northern Vermont Piedmont. Given the dramatic expansion of the Sandhill Crane into New England since 2000, these records warrant continued investigation.

The Sandhill Crane's colonization of Vermont was not entirely unexpected. The population in the western Great Lakes states and Ontario increased in the late 1980s (Tacha et al. 1992, Ad hoc Eastern Population Sandhill Crane Committee 2010), and Pennsylvania's first breeding record came in 1993 (Hall 1994). Pennsylvania's second atlas documented cranes in 29 blocks (Wilson et al. 2012), while just to the north the New York atlas found the species in 9 blocks (McGowan and Corwin 2008). In Ontario, the probability of observing the species increased five-fold between the first and second atlases in the southern portion of the province (Cadman et al. 2007). New England's first breeding cranes were documented in central Maine in 2000 (Melvin 2002); now approximately 5 pairs breed in most years. In New Hampshire, a single male crane frequented the upper Connecticut River Valley from 1999 to 2009 but never attracted a mate. To the south, Massachusetts' first confirmed breeding came from the western part of the state in 2007.

Whether the recent breeding of Sandhill Cranes in New England is a range expansion or recolonization is uncertain (Melvin 2002). Historic records from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries suggest that the species was much more common along the northeast coast during the early stages of European colonization, although there are no unambiguous breeding records from this period.

Sandhill Cranes are a very recent addition to the Northeast's list of breeding birds and have not received conservation attention beyond the limited release of in-



CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	0	0	+0	+0
Northeastern Highlands	0	0	+0	+0
Northern Green Mountains	0	0	+0	+0
Northern Vermont Piedmont	0	0	+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	0	0	+0	+0

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	0	0
Northeastern Highlands	2	100
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

formation on nesting sites. Given the species' extensive continental range and increasing global and regional populations, additional conservation action seems unwarranted unless specific threats are identified.

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