

Short-eared Owl

Asio flammeus

The Short-eared Owl is a splendid flier whose range includes all the continents of the world except Australia and Antarctica. Vermont lies near the southern tip of the eastern North American breeding range (Wiggins et al. 2006); the species has been a rare migrant and casual resident here since at least the 1930s (Fortner et al. 1933).

The preferred habitats for Short-eared Owl, in summer or winter, are open areas—grasslands, fields, marshes, heathlands, and bogs—where it hunts for mice and voles day and night; meadow voles are its primary prey throughout most of North America (Wiggins et al. 2006). The butterfly-like flight and hovering while searching for prey are distinctive. Short-eared Owls are sensitive to habitat fragmentation, and require relatively large tracts of grassland. They nest on the ground, usually on a slightly higher mound of grass. Nests are well hidden and extremely difficult to locate.

Watching a male Short-eared Owl's sky-dancing courtship flight over the marshes of Dead Creek in Addison County was once among the finest experiences for a Vermont birder. The last confirmed breeding was during the first atlas, however; during the second atlas, only two PO records were documented, one in a Priority 2 block and the other in a non-priority block. Both records were in the Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area. On 17 April 2005 a single bird was seen hunting over fields on the south side of Route 17, about two miles west of the intersection with Route 22A. About a mile farther west, at least two, possibly three birds were seen on 21 April 2007. The two birds "were tolerant of each other in close proximity but no meaningful interactions were noted; there may have been a third bird" (T. Murin pers. comm.). Visits to the sites a week later and once again in June failed to relocate the birds. In this area, Short-eared Owls are typically found from late fall to early spring (T. Murin pers. comm.); it is possible that these birds could have been very late migrants. The lack of midsummer records is not likely an artifact of coverage; Dead Creek is a popular birding site and the species is difficult to overlook.

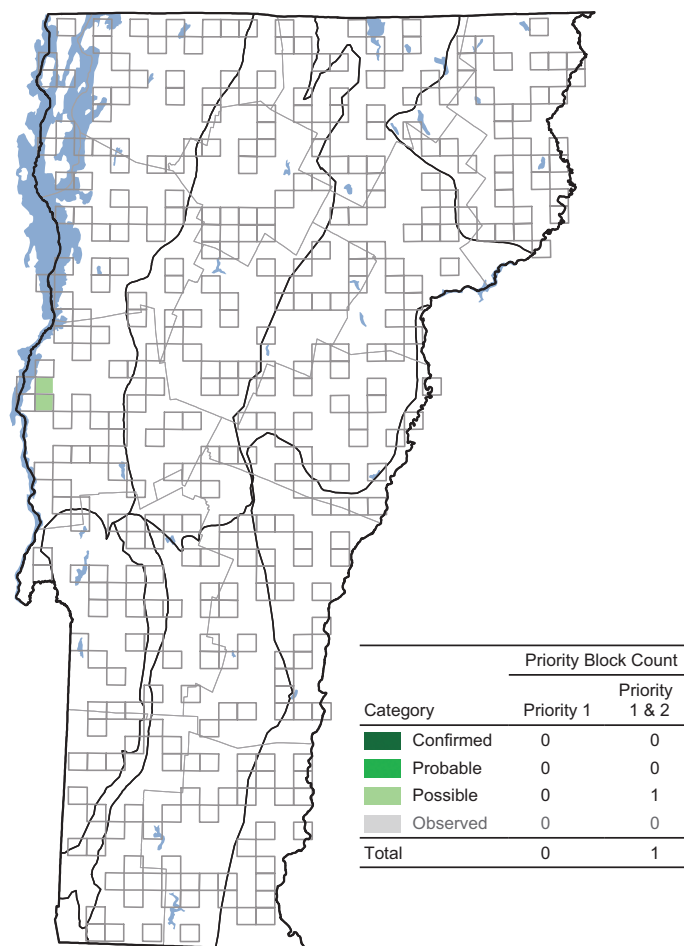
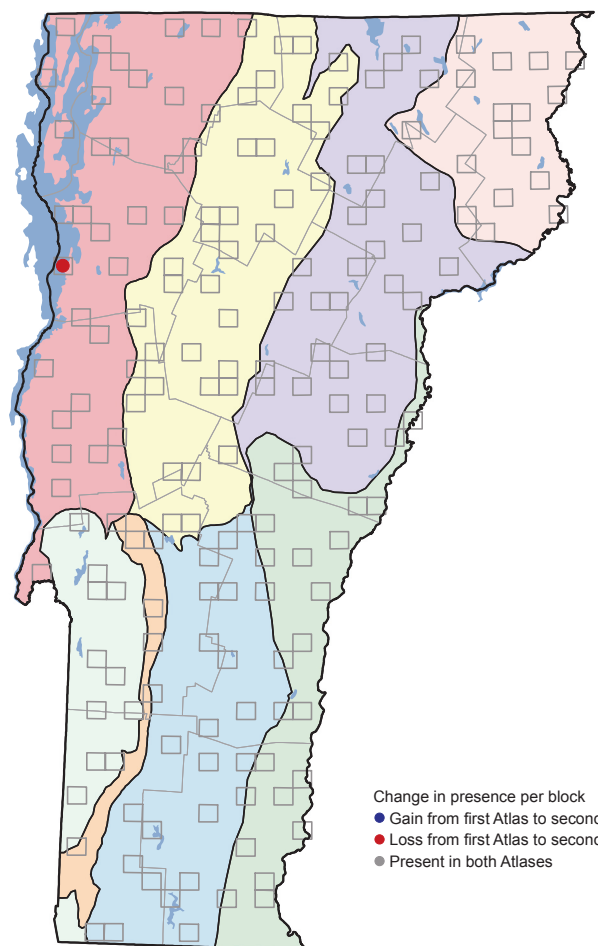
The Short-eared Owl's breeding range in the Northeast



has been dramatically reduced from its historical distribution, and the species appears to be declining throughout North America (Wiggins et al. 2006). In Ontario, where the species is localized and uncommon, there was virtually no change in the probability of their detection since the first atlas (Gahbauer 2007). New York's second atlas found the species in one-third fewer blocks (McGowan and Corwin 2008). Its status ranges from Species of Concern in Canada to endangered in New York. In Vermont, however, it was recently removed from the list of Species of Special Concern, since it no longer breeds in this state. The species is nomadic, and its populations fluctuate with the presence of prey, making it challenging to assess its status (Wiggins et al. 2006).

In Vermont, intensification of agricultural practices could be linked to the loss of Short-eared Owl as a breeder during the atlas. Earlier or more frequent haying, and conversion of hayfields to row crops could have effectively reduced hunting areas. Its ground nests are vulnerable to the increased predation pressure that is typical within fragmented habitats and near rural developments (Wiggins et al. 2006). Though the species shows little site fidelity (because it responds to shifts in its prey base), maintaining large, open tracts of grasslands would provide potential habitat, should it return to the state to breed. The nomadic nature of the Short-eared Owl makes long-term monitoring difficult, and many states, like Vermont, have histories of small, dwindling populations. Continued, specialized monitoring of the species throughout the year will be important to track its true status.

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CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	1	0	- 1	- 100
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	1	0	- 1	- 100

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	1	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