

Sora

Porzana carolina

North America's most widely distributed rail, the Sora has a distinctive, easily heard *whinny* cascading down the musical scale. It breeds from the northeastern United States and the Canadian Maritime Provinces westward to the Northwest Territories, and western populations range southward to the Mexican border. Soras winter in a narrow band along both southern U.S. coasts, southward through Central America into northernmost South America. The species is a game bird in thirty-one states (although not Vermont) and two Canadian provinces. Bag limits are generous (25 per day, for example), but hunting pressure is light, even on the wintering grounds (Melvin and Gibbs 1996).

The Sora occurs in emergent freshwater wetlands, including those with cattails, sedges and bulrushes, throughout much of its continental range. Although considered by some authorities to prefer denser cattails with greater interspersions of water (Walkinshaw 1940, Pospichal and Marshall 1954, Glahn 1974), this selectivity is not supported by more recent studies (Johnson and Dinsmore 1986, Melvin and Gibbs 1996). Soras are less likely to be found in small marshes than Virginia Rails (Brown and Dinsmore 1986). Birds return to Vermont in late April and may be lured into view in large marshes during May through the use of taped calls. Nests are often situated near the edge of cattail stands on the shoreward side, over water of variable depth (Melvin and Gibbs 1996). Dummy nests are often constructed (Pospichal and Marshall 1954). Only one nest with eggs was found during the atlas, on 3 July. Fledglings were found between 4 and 20 July (N = 4). Wetland margins and adjacent uplands may be used for brood rearing. After July, Soras become much quieter and more difficult to detect; the species is rarely reported after mid-September.

In the first atlas, the Sora was found only in Vermont's major marsh systems (Kibbe 1985). During the second atlas, occupied blocks were again heavily concentrated in the Champlain Valley and around Lake Memphremagog. Although missed in 4 blocks where it was reported twenty-five years earlier, a 50 percent increase in state-

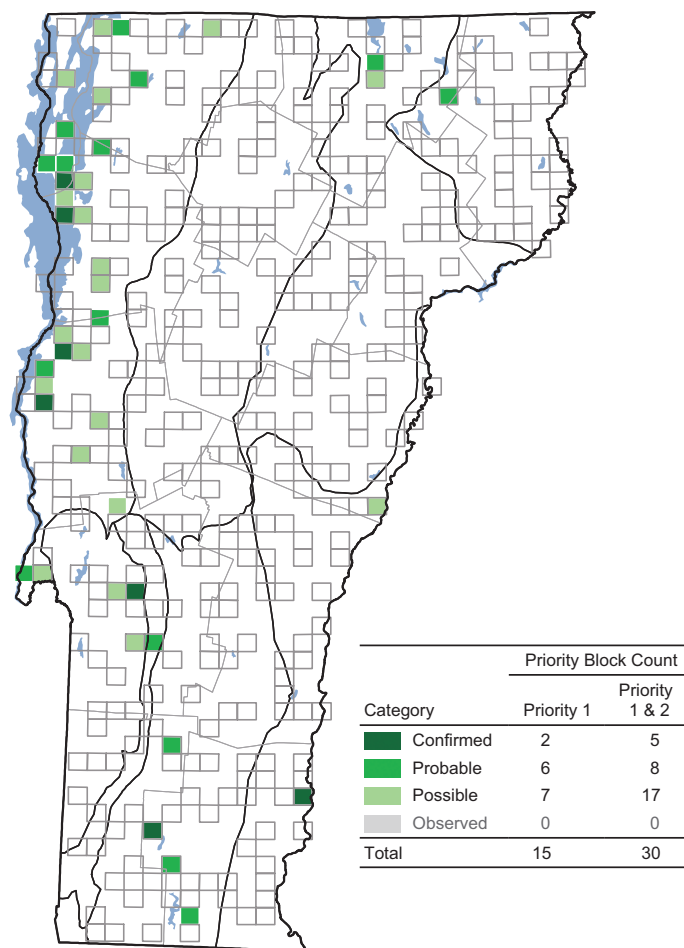
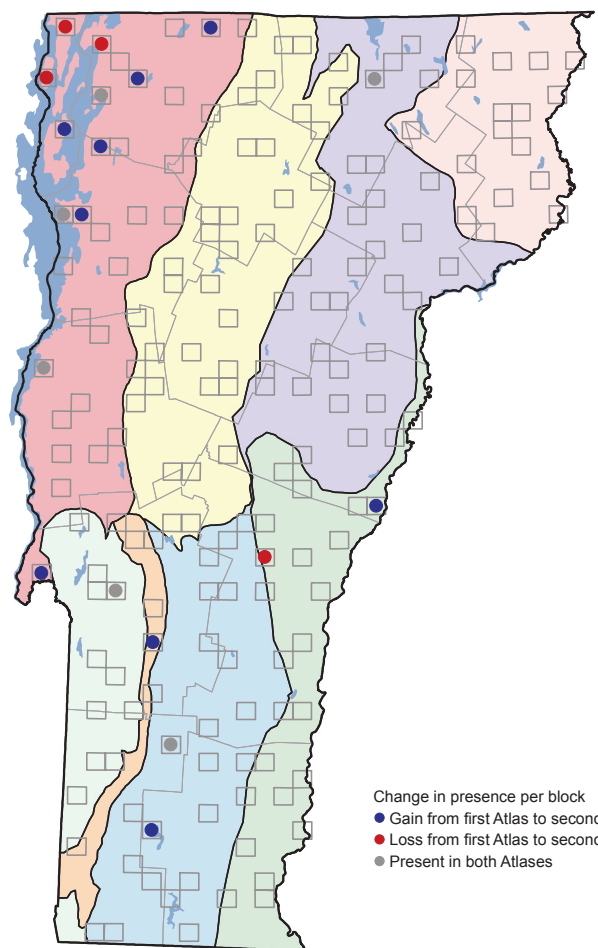


wide occurrence was notable. One record was obtained in the Connecticut River Valley, slightly extending the species' Vermont range.

The net increase of 5 priority blocks in the second atlas is substantial for such a locally rare species, yet it is difficult to confidently distinguish true changes in the distribution of this secretive bird from potential differences in observer effort. Recordings were generally not used during the first atlas, yet observers participating in the second atlas often used recorded vocalizations to find territorial birds, as recommended in USFWS survey protocol (Conway and Nadeau 2006, Conway 2007).

Pennsylvania recommended the use of a rail survey protocol (Lanzone et al. 2006) during its second atlas and found a 16 percent increase. Medler (2008) pointed out that during New York's second atlas, which recorded a 15 percent increase in block occupancy, 37 percent of the rail observations came from only 10 percent of those who reported Soras, and suggested that the efforts of a few dedicated surveyors may have biased results. Ontario found an increase of 33 percent in the south and 100 percent in north, probably due to the use of broadcasts (Tozer 2007). In the second Vermont atlas, at least 31 observers recorded Sora on a total of 42 blocks, 15 of which were Priority 1 blocks.

The Sora is listed as a Species of Special Concern in Vermont due to its apparent rarity and its limited habitat.



CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	6	9	+ 3	+ 50
Northeastern Highlands	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Northern Green Mountains	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Northern Vermont Piedmont	1	1	+ 0	+ 0
Southern Green Mountains	1	2	+ 1	+ 100
Southern Vermont Piedmont	1	1	+ 0	+ 0
Taconic Mountains	1	1	+ 0	+ 0
Vermont Valley	0	1	+ 1	+ 100
Totals	10	15	+ 5	+ 50

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	27	67
Northeastern Highlands	2	3
Northern Green Mountains	0	0
Northern Vermont Piedmont	1	3
Southern Green Mountains	5	10
Southern Vermont Piedmont	5	7
Taconic Mountains	9	7
Vermont Valley	12	3

At present, there is still much to learn about the breeding ecology and conservation status of this and other rail species in Vermont; further standardized survey efforts are recommended (Conway 2007, Nadeau et al. 2008).

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