

Song Sparrow

Melospiza melodia

The Song Sparrow is both one of the most familiar birds in North America and one of the most extensively studied (Arcese et al. 2002). Its voice livens backyards all across Vermont and sweetens every meadow. The species breeds across North America from the Aleutian Islands to Newfoundland, throughout the west, north-central, and eastern United States, south to Georgia, Baja, and central Mexico (AOU 1998, Arcese et al. 2002). Thompson (1842) listed the Song Sparrow as occurring in Vermont but did not assess its abundance. Cutting (1884) called it an “abundant summer resident.” This edge-loving sparrow presumably increased in numbers where forests were cleared during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Most of the individuals that breed in northern New England winter in the Southeast (Davis and Arcese 1999, Murin and Pfeiffer 2002).

The Song Sparrow breeds in settings that range from undeveloped to rural to suburban. Nests are built on the ground or in bushes in forest margins, hedgerows, marshes, and scrubby fields, often near water (Baichich and Harrison 1997), and at elevations below 760 meters (2500 feet; McDermott 1994). During the second atlas, nest building was observed from 1 May to 21 July ($N = 27$). Twenty-eight nests with eggs were found from 10 May to 15 August. Nestlings were located from 24 May to 2 August ($N = 24$); fledglings found from 27 May to 23 August ($N = 129$). The Song Sparrow is a well-known and conspicuous bird, as well as a persistent singer; if present in an atlas block, it would be difficult to miss.

There was almost no change in distribution for the Song Sparrow between the first and second Vermont atlases. It maintained its distinction as one of the most widespread species in the state, with one of the highest confirmation rates (96 percent). Second atlases in the nearby states of Maryland (Ellison 2010), Pennsylvania (Wilson et al. 2012), and New York (McGowan and Corwin 2008) showed changes of less than 1 percent. The second Ontario atlas likewise showed little change (Rising 2007).

For the most common species, census and roadside

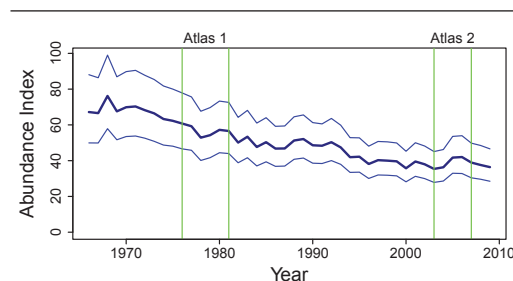


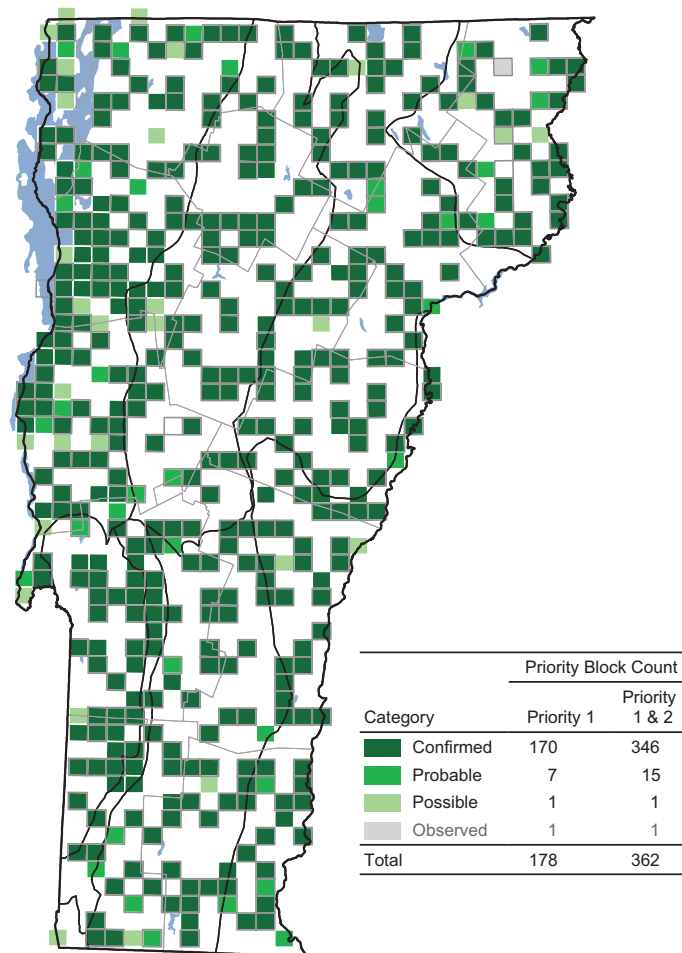
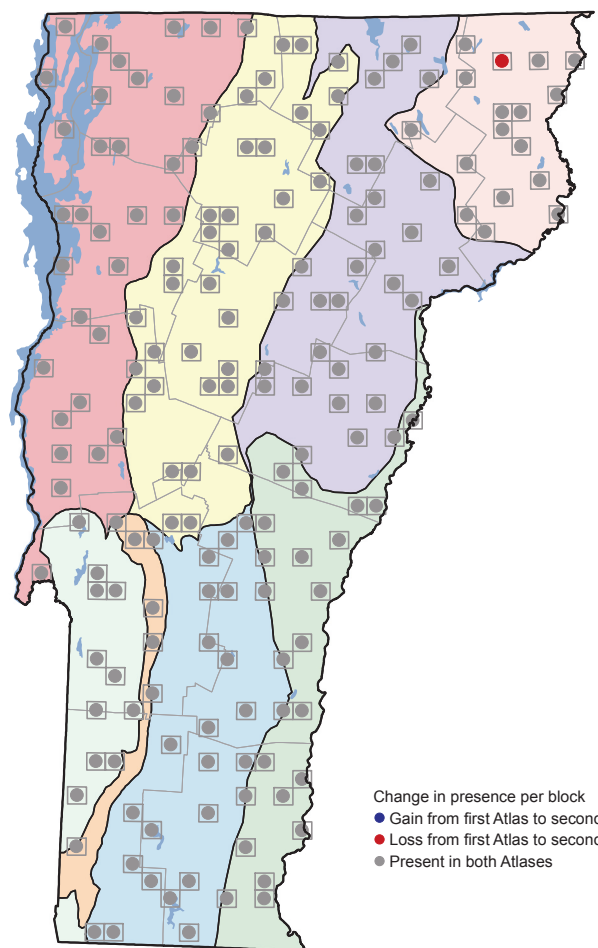
survey data are more likely to detect changes in populations than atlas data. Breeding Bird Survey data indicate a very slow, long-term decline in Song Sparrow populations over a large area. From 1966 to 1981 (before the end of the first atlas), populations declined significantly by 1.1 percent per year in eastern North America. Declines were less steep from 1982 to 2007, at 0.2 percent per year. Vermont was part of these declines, although the trend was not significant in the state (Sauer et al. 2011).

The slow regional declines in Song Sparrow abundance revealed in BBS data might be attributable to loss of early successional habitats through maturation of vegetation (Arcese et al. 2002). Regardless, the species remains very abundant in Vermont, and its long-term presence seems assured. Future development in currently forested regions would likely benefit this species. If populations continue to decline, however, the third Vermont atlas could show losses in areas with less suitable habitat, such as the forested highlands.

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RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME





CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	33	33	+ 0	+ 0
Northeastern Highlands	17	16	- 1	- 6
Northern Green Mountains	35	35	+ 0	+ 0
Northern Vermont Piedmont	30	30	+ 0	+ 0
Southern Green Mountains	27	27	+ 0	+ 0
Southern Vermont Piedmont	21	21	+ 0	+ 0
Taconic Mountains	11	11	+ 0	+ 0
Vermont Valley	5	5	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	179	178	- 1	- 1

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	100	20
Northeastern Highlands	94	10
Northern Green Mountains	98	18
Northern Vermont Piedmont	100	18
Southern Green Mountains	100	15
Southern Vermont Piedmont	100	11
Taconic Mountains	100	6
Vermont Valley	100	2