

Canada Goose

Branta canadensis



Many Vermonters can remember when Canada Goose sightings meant either winter was over, or fall was upon us. Then flocks only passed through Vermont en route to or from northern breeding areas, which span a wide range of habitats from temperate to low arctic. This is no longer the case, however, as many populations have lost their migratory habit and become established as permanent, year-round residents (Mowbray et al. 2002). Birdwatchers are also having to take a closer look at the Canada Goose now that the once single species has been split into two distinct species: *Branta canadensis* (Canada Goose) and *Branta hutchinsii* (Cackling Goose); the latter an exclusively Arctic breeder.

Prior to Vermont Fish and Game's establishment in 1956 of a breeding population at Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area, there were no geese nesting in the state (Kibbe 1985). Similar releases were conducted elsewhere along the East Coast, and the species adapted readily to farm ponds, beaver ponds, and golf courses. By the 1990s, populations had grown to the point that hunting seasons were established to achieve some level of population control. Ironically, while these populations were expanding, northern populations were experiencing a drastic decline; except for a brief season on local birds, hunting was closed for five years. The local breeders took full advantage of this respite, and now outnumber migratory birds in the Atlantic Flyway (Mowbray et al. 2002).

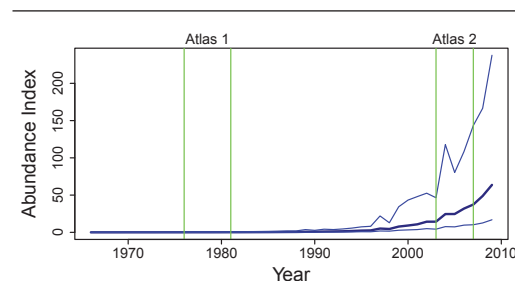
Canada Geese in Vermont begin nesting in April. Island sites lacking predators are ideal, but they will nest on shorelines, gravel bars, or even atop beaver houses (Mowbray et al. 2002). Nest sites may be elevated but are more frequently on the ground. By early May most Canada Geese are incubating. The earliest hatching date in the state is 8 May, and nests with eggs have been found as late as the fourth week of June. The young take two months to reach adult size and begin to fly. Although Canada Geese rest and nest on or near water, they feed in upland habitats such as winter wheat and harvested cornfields, golf courses, and lawns.

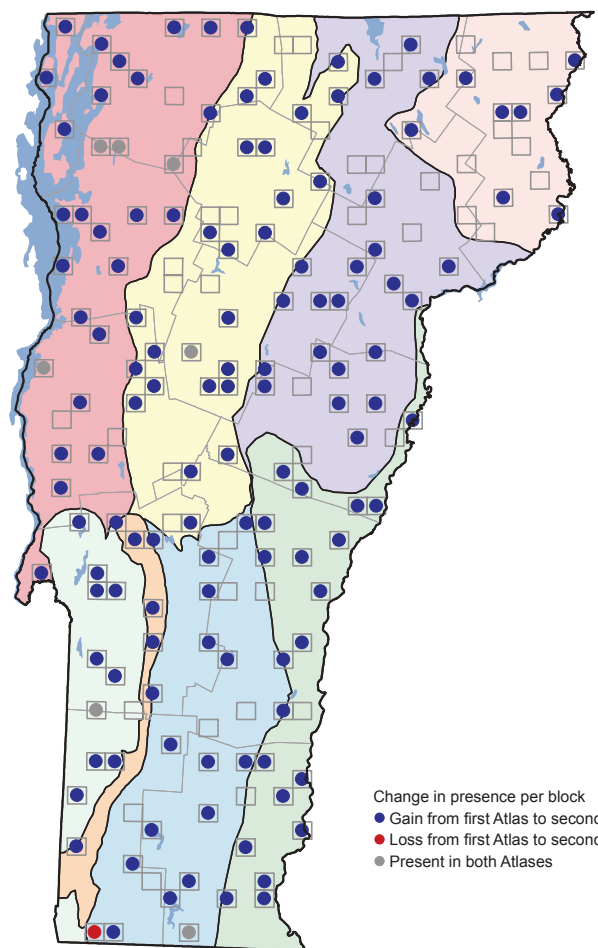
Vermont had very few Canada Geese breeding when

the first atlas was conducted in 1985, but in the ensuing twenty-five years the number of breeding records has greatly increased. Their spread has been truly statewide, and even remote blocks in the Northeast Kingdom have been colonized. In 2008 the statewide resident population was estimated at 10,000 (APHIS 2008). Milder winters in Vermont have allowed non-migratory individuals to commence reproductive activities far in advance of birds that migrate to the tundra to nest. This not only reduces the stress of a long migratory flight, but allows the young to fledge and mature earlier (Mowbray et al. 2002). The population of Canada Geese in Vermont will likely continue to grow. Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New York, which had healthy numbers of Canada Geese when their first atlases were conducted, found that the number of occupied blocks doubled, tripled, and quadrupled, respectively (McGowan and Corwin 2008, Ellison 2010, Wilson et al. 2012). A major factor contributing to the rapid population increase in these states is the greater than 75 percent reproductive success of Canada Geese in urban areas (Conover 1998).

There are negative implications of having so many geese on the landscape. Large numbers of geese gathering in open areas such as golf courses, school grounds, drinking-water reservoirs, and parks have created health

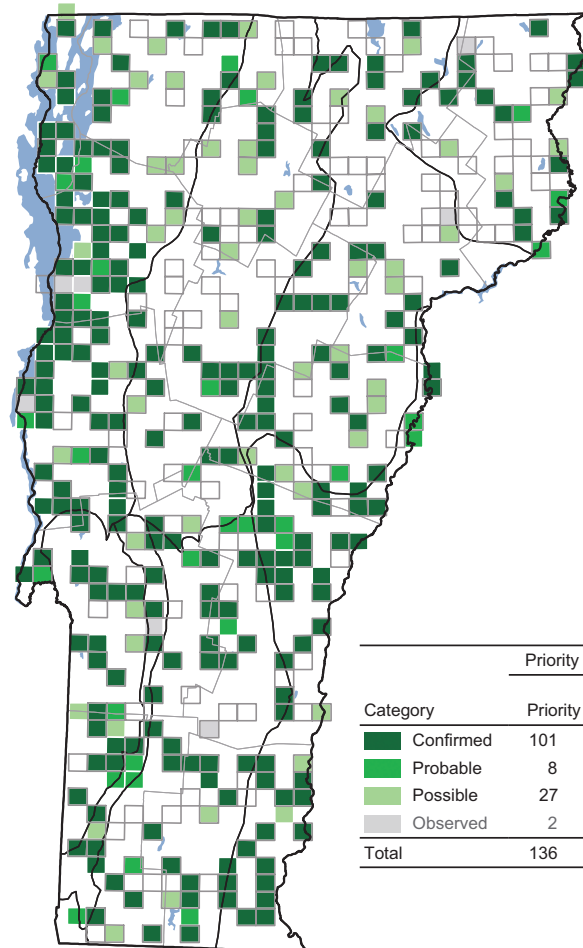
RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME





CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	4	29	+ 25	+ 625
Northeastern Highlands	0	8	+ 8	+ 800
Northern Green Mountains	1	25	+ 24	+2400
Northern Vermont Piedmont	0	21	+ 21	+2100
Southern Green Mountains	2	18	+ 16	+ 800
Southern Vermont Piedmont	0	20	+ 20	+2000
Taconic Mountains	1	10	+ 9	+ 900
Vermont Valley	0	5	+ 5	+ 500
Totals	8	136	+ 128	+1600



DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	90	25
Northeastern Highlands	56	8
Northern Green Mountains	60	14
Northern Vermont Piedmont	67	16
Southern Green Mountains	67	14
Southern Vermont Piedmont	90	13
Taconic Mountains	80	6
Vermont Valley	100	3

hazards and become a public nuisance in many regions. In many cities an entire business sector is now devoted to goose hazing and control. The USFWS has established a permit system to allow local residents in the lower forty-eight states to implement egg and nest destruction. Vermont held its first special hunting season on resident geese in 1998. Continued growth of Vermont's resident Canada Goose population is anticipated; additional control measures may be needed in some localities.

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