

Red-winged Blackbird

Agelaius phoeniceus

The arrival of a Red-winged Blackbird on a bleak late-February morning is a much-anticipated sign of spring for Vermonters. The conspicuous flash of epaulettes and the guttural *konk-a-ree* song provide tangible hope for an end to the tenacious grip of winter. The Red-winged Blackbird ranges throughout North America south of the Arctic to Costa Rica and the West Indies (Yasukawa and Searcy 1995). Although generally migratory in Vermont, a few hardy individuals overwinter each year in the state's warmer regions.

The Red-winged Blackbird breeds in open habitats—in both wetlands and uplands—including emergent marshes, grasslands, pastures, and old fields. Their use of such habitats, combined with loud songs and conspicuous displays, makes breeding confirmation simple. In fact, 93 percent of Vermont atlas detections were of confirmed breeding. The Red-winged Blackbird exhibits a polygynous mating system; the average harem size is 5, but this number varies regionally, and up to 15 females may occupy a single male's territory (Yasukawa and Searcy 1995). This behavior inspired the polygyny threshold theory (Orians 1969).

In Vermont, nest building was documented from early May through early July, with egg and nestling dates peaking in mid-June, and fledgling dates peaking from late June to early July. The earliest documented nest-building activity was 8 May; the latest date for adults feeding fledglings was 4 August. Second broods are rare in Red-winged Blackbirds (Yasukawa and Searcy 1995).

Data from the second atlas showed the Red-winged Blackbird distributed relatively evenly across the state, with the species occupying over 95 percent of priority blocks. The Northeastern Highlands (83 percent) was the only biophysical region in which the Red-winged Blackbird did not reach an occupancy rate of at least 95 percent. The broad distribution of the species across all biophysical regions is a testament to the species' ability to use of a variety of open habitats.

The Red-winged Blackbird was reported in 3 fewer blocks in the second atlas, all in the Northeastern High-

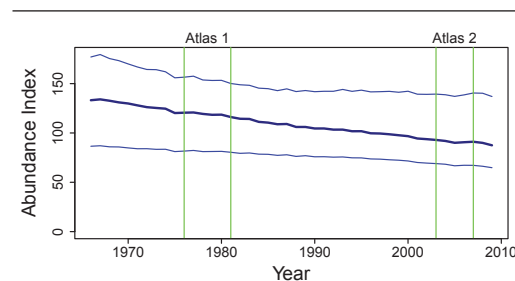


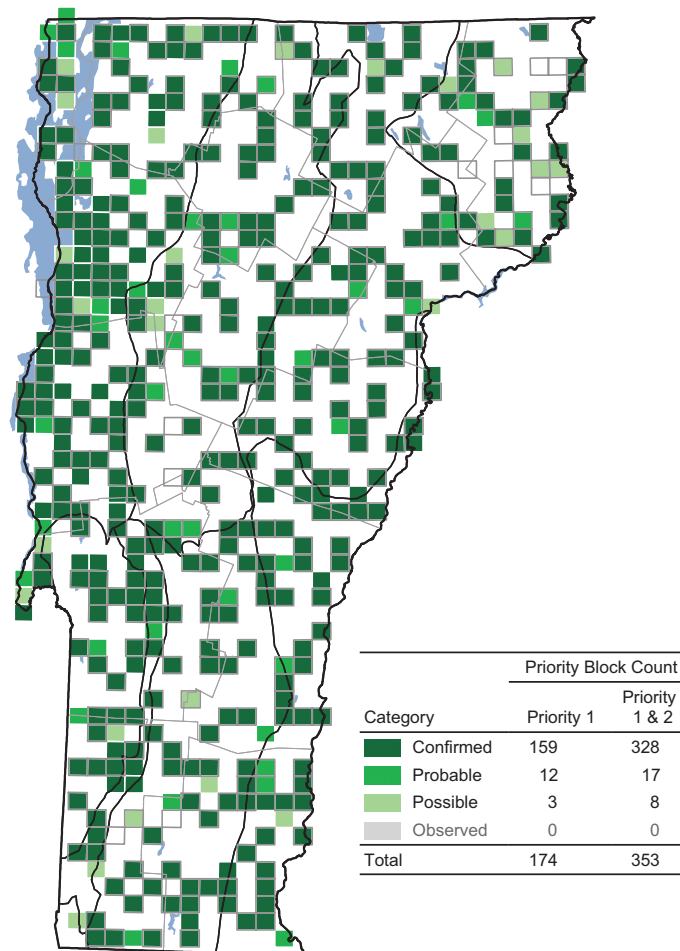
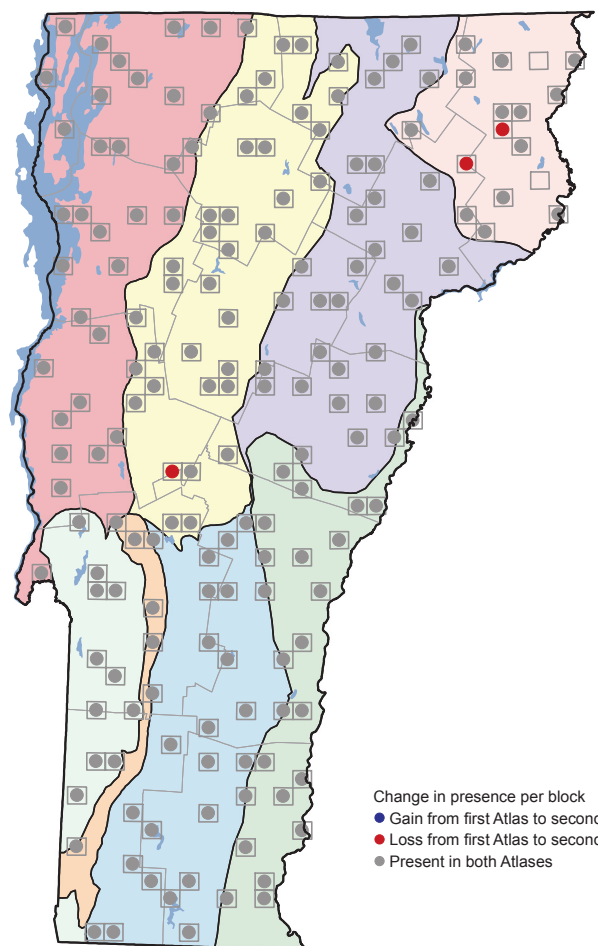
lands and the Northern Green Mountains. Based on occupancy of Priority 1 blocks, its ranking on the list of most widely distributed species in the state dropped from 11th (tie) to 16th (tie). Overall, however, the species remains abundant in Vermont.

Second atlases in New York and Pennsylvania recorded losses of 2 percent and 1 percent, respectively (McGowan and Corwin 2008, Wilson et al. 2012). In contrast, Maryland found a 2 percent increase in the species' distribution (Ellison 2010). Red-winged Blackbird populations have been relatively stable in Vermont from 1982 to 2007 (Sauer et al. 2011). Despite being one of the most common birds in North America, its population has shown a long-term decline of 1 percent annually across North America from 1982 to 2007 (Sauer et al. 2011). In Ontario, the second atlas found a 22 percent decrease in the probability of detecting Red-winged Blackbirds (Cadman et al. 2007).

Red-winged Blackbirds can cause damage to crops, particularly corn, sunflowers, and rice (Yasukawa and Searcy 1995). Farmers are allowed to use lethal control methods under amendments to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. However, there is little evidence that these measures

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	15	13	- 2	- 13
Northern Green Mountains	35	34	- 1	- 3
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	177	174	- 3	- 2

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	98	20
Northeastern Highlands	83	9
Northern Green Mountains	95	18
Northern Vermont Piedmont	100	18
Southern Green Mountains	96	15
Southern Vermont Piedmont	100	11
Taconic Mountains	100	6
Vermont Valley	100	2

have reduced either red-winged populations or rates of crop depredation. With an estimated North American population of 210 million, the Red-winged Blackbird is one of the most abundant species on the continent (Rich et al. 2004). The slight decrease in the species' distribution in Vermont may be due to forest maturation. However, the Red-winged Blackbird continues to be an abundant and widespread breeder in the state.

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