

Brown Thrasher

Toxostoma rufum



Perched high in a tree, the Brown Thrasher characteristically repeats each phrase of its complex song twice, and a given phrase may not be uttered again for over an hour. It is far more difficult to detect when not singing, when it spends most of its time skulking in the dense thickets where it nests and feeds. Like other species of early successional habitats, thrasher populations probably increased in response to agricultural clearing during the nineteenth century—and especially to farm abandonment in the early twentieth century. Thrashers occur farther north and east than many other species in their habitat (such as the Eastern Towhee and Prairie Warbler), but Vermont is still near the edge of a range that extends from Montana and Texas, eastward to New Brunswick and Florida (Cavitt and Haas 2000).

Typical breeding habitat in the Northeast consists of shrub-dominated areas, including old fields, pine barrens, and power-line rights-of-way. It occurs less often in clear-cuts and similar habitats that are dominated by saplings instead of shrubs. Where the species does occur, it tends to reach lower densities than that of other songbirds in the same habitat, perhaps because it is intensely territorial. Thrashers typically arrive in Vermont by the end of April and have been observed nest building between mid-May and early July (the later dates are likely renests after failure). Incubation and nestling periods average 12 days each (Cavitt and Haas 2000). Fledglings can be very vocal, and were the most frequent form of breeding confirmation during the atlas, with most detected during July.

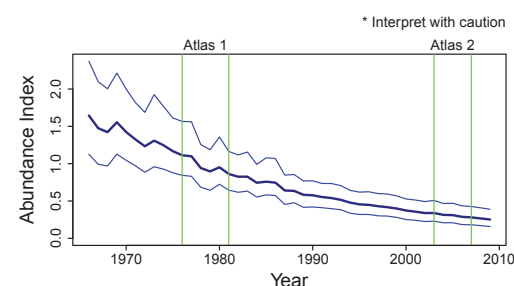
The Brown Thrasher is found throughout Vermont, although it was rare in the Green Mountains and Northeastern Highlands, and relatively uncommon in the Taconic Mountains. In contrast, it occurred in three-quarters of priority blocks in the Champlain Valley, and half of the blocks in the Northern and Southern Vermont piedmonts and the Vermont and Connecticut valleys. Although this distribution is similar to that recorded during the first atlas, the species was detected in only half as many blocks during the second atlas. These losses were

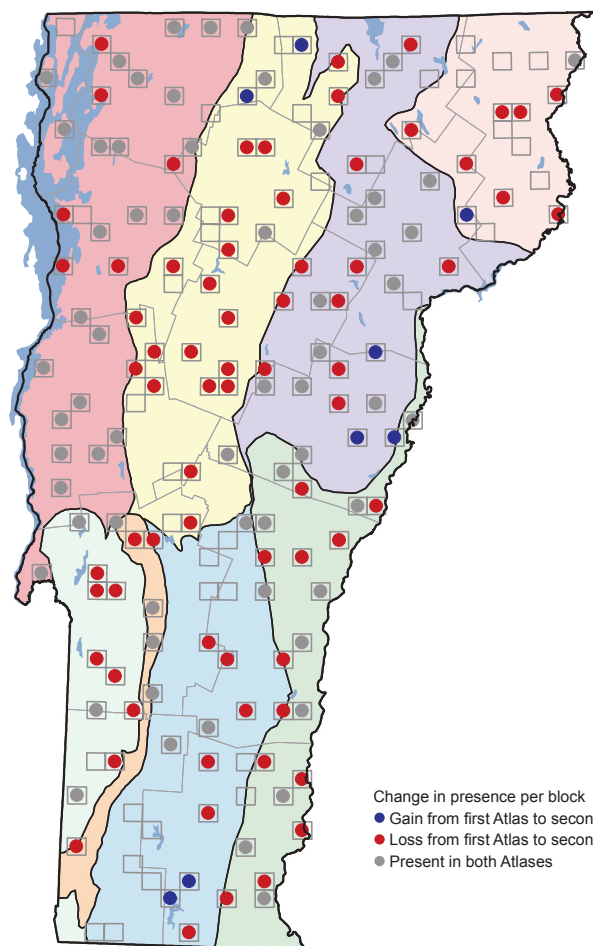
not distributed evenly, being greatest at higher elevations (where the proportion of blocks occupied was relatively low in the first atlas) and fewest in the lowlands. The species' distribution probably mirrors the availability of shrubland habitats, which tend to be more prevalent at lower elevations where agriculture—and hence edges and post-agricultural shrublands—is more common.

Data from several other sources corroborate the decline seen in the Vermont atlas data. Breeding Bird Survey data show that Brown Thrasher populations in the Atlantic Northern Forest (Bird Conservation Region 14) have declined significantly and consistently by 4.5 percent per year between 1966 and 2007 (Sauer et al. 2011). Declines were also noted in the second atlases in Ontario (24 percent; Cadman et al. 2007) and New York (30 percent; McGowan and Corwin 2008), but not in those of Pennsylvania (Wilson et al. 2012) and Maryland (Ellison 2010).

Brown Thrasher population declines have prompted recognition of the species in state and regional conservation plans, and in Vermont it is now listed as a Species of Special Concern. As is the case for many species, maturation of early successional habitats is likely a major factor behind Brown Thrasher population declines. Disproportionate decreases in highland biophysical regions may reflect losses due to reforestation coupled with a rapid

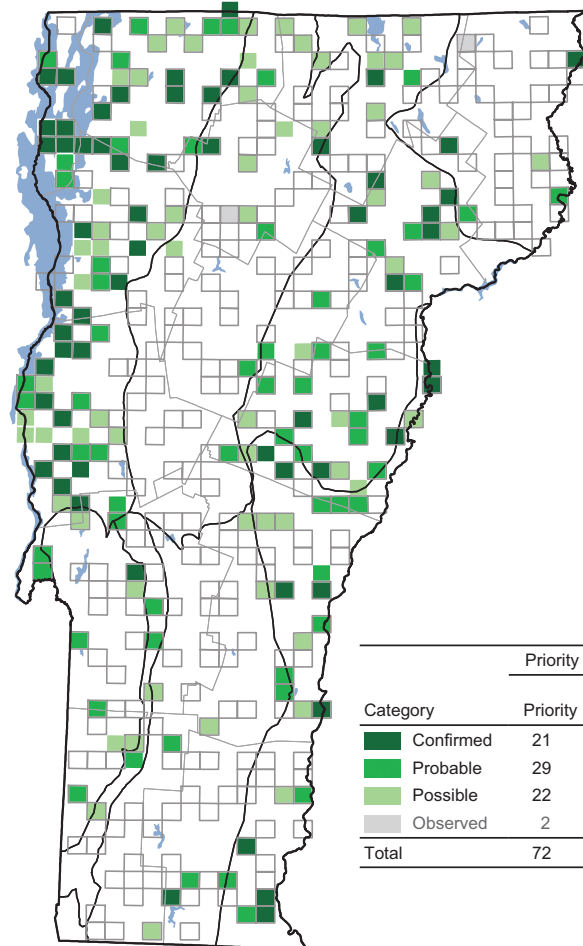
RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME





CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	30	24	- 6	- 20
Northeastern Highlands	8	2	- 6	- 75
Northern Green Mountains	24	6	- 18	- 75
Northern Vermont Piedmont	24	17	- 7	- 29
Southern Green Mountains	13	7	- 6	- 46
Southern Vermont Piedmont	21	10	- 11	- 52
Taconic Mountains	10	3	- 7	- 70
Vermont Valley	5	3	- 2	- 40
Totals	135	72	- 63	- 47



Category	Priority Block Count	
	Priority 1	Priority 1 & 2
Confirmed	21	52
Probable	29	54
Possible	22	44
Observed	2	2
Total	72	150

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	76	37
Northeastern Highlands	13	3
Northern Green Mountains	18	8
Northern Vermont Piedmont	53	23
Southern Green Mountains	17	7
Southern Vermont Piedmont	55	15
Taconic Mountains	28	4
Vermont Valley	50	3

decline in agriculture in marginal areas that supported few individuals to begin with. Before European settlement, shrublands may have been created and maintained in New England by beaver activity, Native American agriculture and, to a lesser extent, fire. However, populations of shrubland species in the mid to late twentieth century were probably higher than they were prior to extensive alteration of the New England landscape by European settlers (Litvaitis 1993). Under this hypothesis, continued management for early successional conditions (including creation of wildlife openings, prescribed burns,

and power-line maintenance) is likely to allow the Brown Thrasher to persist in Vermont for years to come, albeit at reduced densities.

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