

Great Horned Owl

Bubo virginianus

Sometimes called a hoot owl or cat owl, the Great Horned Owl is a large and powerful predator, easily recognized by its bright yellow eyes, prominent ear tufts, and white breast bib. Pairs defend a territory year-round, announcing their presence with deep, loud hoots that can be heard up to a mile away. Great Horned Owls breed from the tip of South America to the tree line in Canada and Alaska (Houston et al. 1998).

Great Horned Owls use a variety of habitats ranging from coniferous, deciduous, and mixed forests to agricultural areas and city parks (Houston et al. 1998). In Vermont, this owl is most often found in areas that offer a mosaic of habitat; in general, forest patches surrounded by open landscapes are preferred. Great Horned Owls are remarkably adaptable, and can tolerate habitat changes as long as nest sites are available (Houston et al. 1998). This plasticity is demonstrated in their use of wooded suburban and even urban areas, and their tendency to move into areas where disturbances have opened the forest.

Their nest sites are also variable, ranging from used nests of other birds to snags, cliffs, deserted buildings, or even the ground (Houston et al. 1998). In Vermont, Great Horned Owl nest locations have included used nests of Red-tailed Hawk and Great Blue Heron, tree stubs, and the underside of a railroad bridge (Laughlin 1985). The female broods the eggs, sometimes incubating while snow is falling. The male feeds the female on the nest during the incubation period and continues to bring food for her to feed to the young. As the nestlings age, both parents are kept busy supplying them with food. Great Horned Owls are excellent and attentive parents and care for their young for several months after fledging. During the atlas, six nests with young were reported from 12 April to 23 May, and six records of fledged young ranged from 13 June to 15 July.

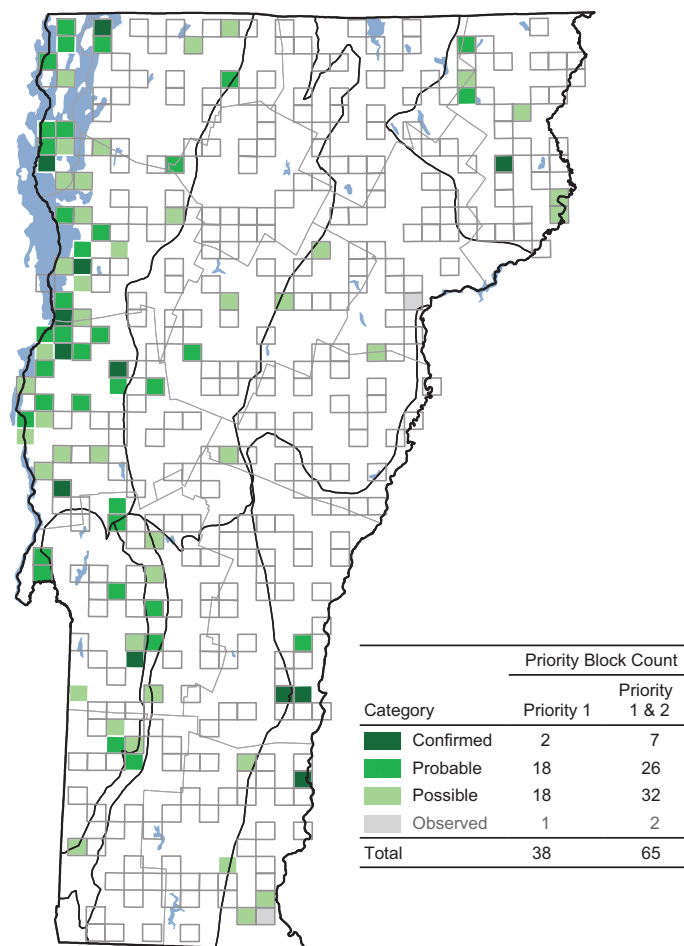
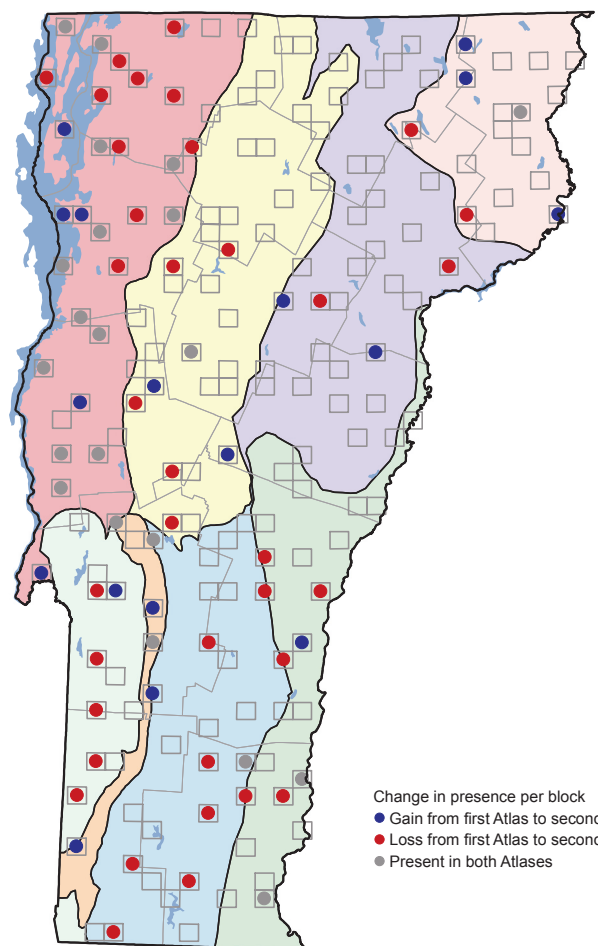
Though the Great Horned Owl continues to be the second most common owl species in Vermont, it was reported in only 18 percent of blocks surveyed during the second atlas—5 fewer blocks than in the first atlas. The



Champlain Valley, with its open agricultural fields and scattered woodlands, remains the stronghold for the species, with more than half of the records occurring there. Minor declines were apparent in the Champlain Valley as well as in the southern half of the state. Atlases in nearby states have also documented declines; occurrence declined by 18 percent in New York (McGowan and Corwin 2008) and by 28 percent in Pennsylvania (Wilson et al. 2012). Christmas Bird Count data for Vermont indicate a slight decrease in the number of Great Horned Owls detected (NAS 2007). Ontario found decreases of approximately 40 percent in their southern regions, and though causes for the decline were not clear, differences in observer effort were ruled out (Sleep 2007).

Detecting this nocturnal species usually requires special effort and nighttime birding. It seems likely that the atlas map may under-represent the true distribution of the bird, as owl surveys may not have been conducted in every survey block. Yet a decrease in block occupancy of 33 percent—particularly amidst decreases in other atlases—may indicate that a population decline is real.

A bird that prefers fragmented habitat (Morrell and Yahner 1994), the Great Horned Owl is negatively affected by the maturation of forests. In the Pacific Northwest, the species has increased in areas where the forest has been opened by logging (Johnson 1993). In Vermont as well as in Ontario, Barred Owl has concurrently shown increases, suggesting that the growth of forest in previously agricultural or idle fields may be favoring this forest-dwelling species, to the detriment of Great Horned Owl.



CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	23	18	- 5	- 22
Northeastern Highlands	3	4	+ 1	+ 33
Northern Green Mountains	6	3	- 3	- 50
Northern Vermont Piedmont	2	2	+ 0	+ 0
Southern Green Mountains	10	3	- 7	- 70
Southern Vermont Piedmont	6	3	- 3	- 50
Taconic Mountains	5	1	- 4	- 80
Vermont Valley	2	4	+ 2	+ 100
Totals	57	38	- 19	- 33

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	49	55
Northeastern Highlands	16	9
Northern Green Mountains	6	6
Northern Vermont Piedmont	4	5
Southern Green Mountains	7	6
Southern Vermont Piedmont	10	6
Taconic Mountains	14	5
Vermont Valley	62	8

The Great Horned Owl is a widespread yet sparsely distributed species. Targeted, long-term monitoring would provide a more accurate index of its population trend in Vermont.

SARAH B. LAUGHLIN & ROBERT E. BUDLIGER