House Wren

Troglodytes aedon



The vigorous activity of House Wrens at nest boxes has long generated popular enthusiasm for this relatively plain-looking species (Gross 1948). But House Wrens also nest in natural tree cavities—presumably their sites of choice before humans began to provide attractive alternatives such as baskets, old boots, and wall-mounted cow skulls, along with the more usual birdhouses (Johnson 1998).

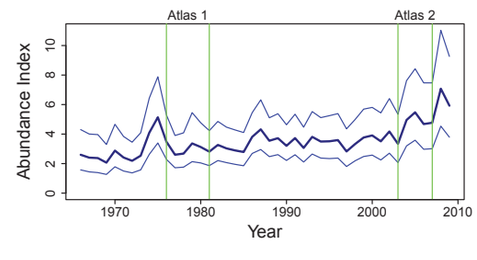
The breeding range of the House Wren spans the northern two-thirds of the continental United States and extends northward across the Canadian border (Johnson 1998). Thompson (1842) noted the presence of House Wrens in Vermont during the first half of the nineteenth century. The species underwent a decline in New England during the latter part of the nineteenth century, following the arrival of the introduced House Sparrow (Bagg and Eliot 1937). Vermont harbors the subspecies *Troglodytes aedon aedon*, which winters in the southeastern United States and Mexico (AOU 1998, Root 1988b, Johnson and Wise 2000). Other taxonomically distinct populations extend southward through Central and South America, and a listener familiar with the song of the House Wren in Vermont would recognize a similar sounding song in southern Brazil.

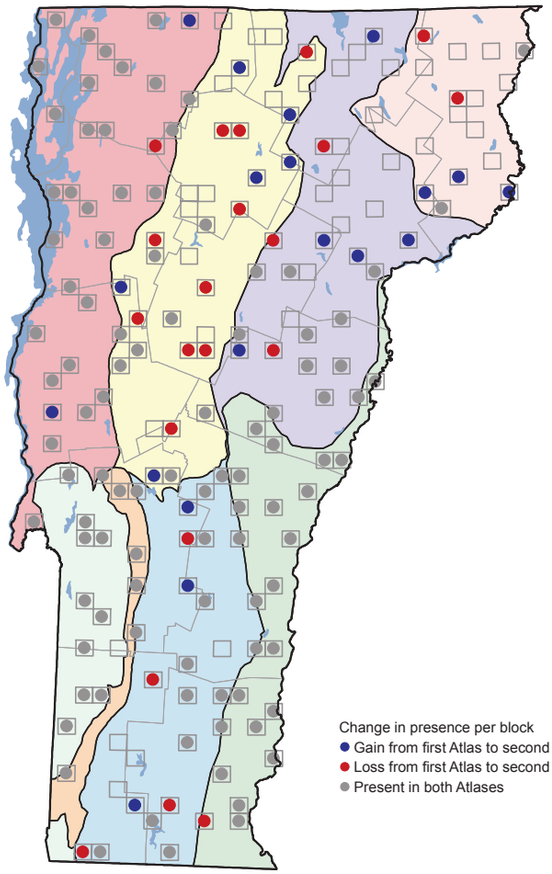
House Wrens ordinarily nest in edge situations, along woodland margins as well as in urban and suburban settings. Males stuff multiple cavities with substantial quantities of twigs, a behavior that requires their territories to be fairly close to brush or woodland. The habit of filling potential nest cavities likely deters other cavity-nesting species (Robbins 1994). A female selects one of the cavities altered by her mate, and continues constructing the nest until it is completed with a soft lining (Johnson 1998). During the second atlas, egg dates for 14 House Wren nests ranged from 17 May to 10 July. Nestlings were found from 4 June to 11 August (N = 31), and fledglings were observed from 17 May to 27 July (N = 35). The House Wren is a fairly conspicuous bird, particularly because of its distinctive, loud, and often-repeated song, and is likely to be found when present in an atlas block.

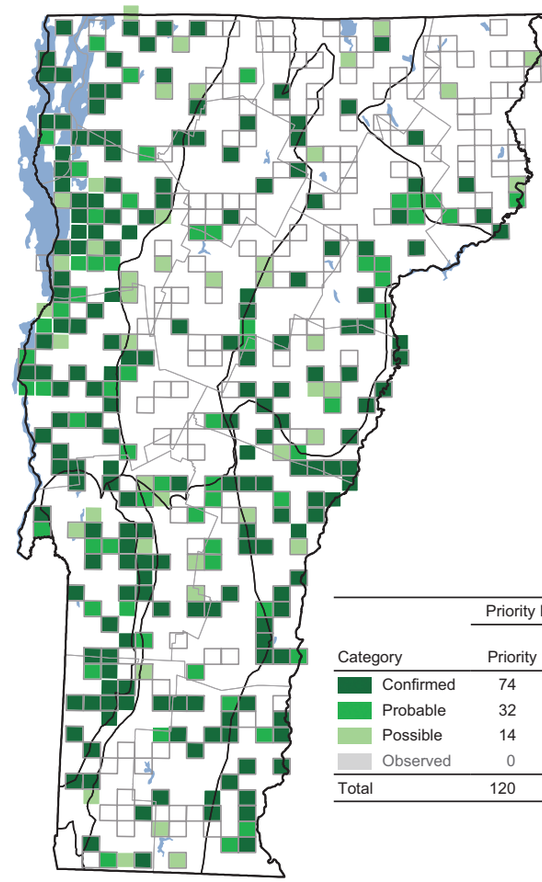
In Vermont, the House Wren most often occurs at elevations below 457 meters (1500 feet) and is less frequently observed in blocks at higher elevations (Ellison 1985). Biophysical regions with a relatively low proportion of blocks with House Wren include the Northern Green Mountains (41 percent) and the Northeastern Highlands (27 percent); these regions have both higher elevations and more extensive tracts of mature forest, which do not provide suitable habitat. Statewide, the number of occupied blocks showed a slight decline of 2 percent.

Breeding Bird Survey results showed a significant decrease of 2 percent per year from 1966 to 2007 for the three northern New England states combined, but no change for Vermont alone (Sauer et al. 2008). Such long-term data, however, can mask shorter-term fluctuations. From 2000 to 2007, the BBS shows a significant annual increase of 0.9 percent for the eastern United States and Canada (Sauer et al. 2011), while significant increases of nearly 12 percent per year occurred in the three north-

RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME







Category	Priority Block Count: Priority 1	Priority 1 & 2
Confirmed	74	163
Probable	32	52
Possible	14	30
Observed	0	0
Total	120	245

CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	30	31	+ 1	+ 3
Northeastern Highlands	4	5	+ 1	+ 25
Northern Green Mountains	18	14	- 4	- 22
Northern Vermont Piedmont	14	16	+ 2	+ 14
Southern Green Mountains	20	19	- 1	- 5
Southern Vermont Piedmont	21	20	- 1	- 5
Taconic Mountains	10	10	+ 0	+ 0
Vermont Valley	5	5	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	122	120	- 2	- 2

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	93	28
Northeastern Highlands	27	4
Northern Green Mountains	41	11
Northern Vermont Piedmont	56	15
Southern Green Mountains	67	16
Southern Vermont Piedmont	92	15
Taconic Mountains	95	8
Vermont Valley	100	3

ern New England states and in Vermont alone (Sauer et al. 2008). Short-term population fluctuations can be caused by severe conditions on the wintering grounds (Kendeigh 1971, Robbins 1994). West Nile virus may also cause rapid fluctuations in House Wren populations. After the virus's initial detection in the New World in 1999, BBS data show a dip in House Wren populations in the Northeast; their numbers recovered by 2005 (LaDeau et al. 2007). New York's second atlas showed a 3 percent decrease (McGowan and Corwin 2008), whereas Maryland documented an increase of 3 percent (Ellison 2010), and Ontario and Pennsylvania found no significant change (Wilson et al. 2012, Brewer 2007).

This species appears to be secure in Vermont, as might be expected for a bird associated with human habitations. All indications suggest that we will continue to enjoy the House Wren's "stuttering, gurgling song" so aptly described by Roger Tory Peterson (1947).

GEORGE A. CLARK, JR.