

Green Heron

Butorides virescens



The Green Heron, although a small and stealthy member of the family, is far more likely to be encountered by anglers and boaters than several of its relatives (such as the Least and American Bitterns). Green Herons generally pose motionless at the edge of streams and lakes, awaiting the approach of small fish, frogs, and aquatic insects. One particularly novel feeding behavior, appropriately referred to as “baiting,” involves the dropping of objects such as twigs, feathers, and worms, to attract fish within striking distance (Davis and Kushlan 1994). The Green Heron occurs throughout the eastern United States northward into southern Canada and westward to Colorado. It also breeds in a narrow band along the West Coast to southern British Columbia. The species’ range extends southward through Central America into northern South America. Although Vermont is near the northern edge of the breeding range, there is no evidence to suggest it was ever rare here (Norse and Fichtel 1985).

Generally not inhabitants of freshwater marshes, Green Herons are usually seen at the margins of beaver ponds and streams. They prefer to feed along the edge of dense cover. Rather than skulking back into the vegetation as a Least Bittern would, they are more likely to flush noisily when approached beyond their comfort zone. Green Herons are quite eclectic in their choice of nesting sites. They usually breed solitarily in trees or shrubs with protective overhanging branches, but may alternatively nest in mixed or single-species colonies. Nests may be over water or some distance from it. The male initiates nest building but the female does most of the construction. Both share the 20-day incubation chores. Vermont’s six clutch dates range from 23 May to 24 June; all clutches had 5 to 6 eggs (Norse and Fichtel 1985). Nestlings (N = 3) have been recorded from 8 June to 20 August. Fledglings, which comprised the most commonly used confirmation code, have been seen from 20 June through the end of July (N = 10).

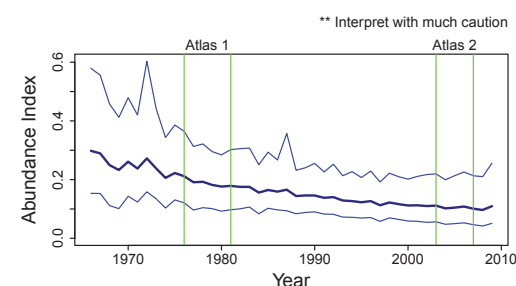
Green Herons occur throughout Vermont, but are most frequently encountered in the Champlain Valley, the Connecticut River Valley, and along other major

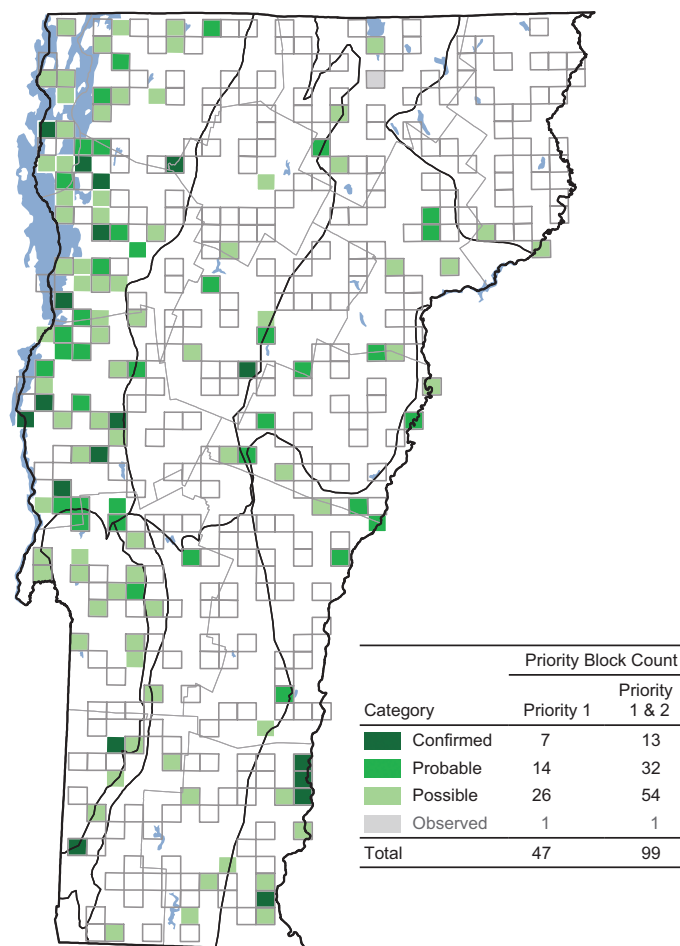
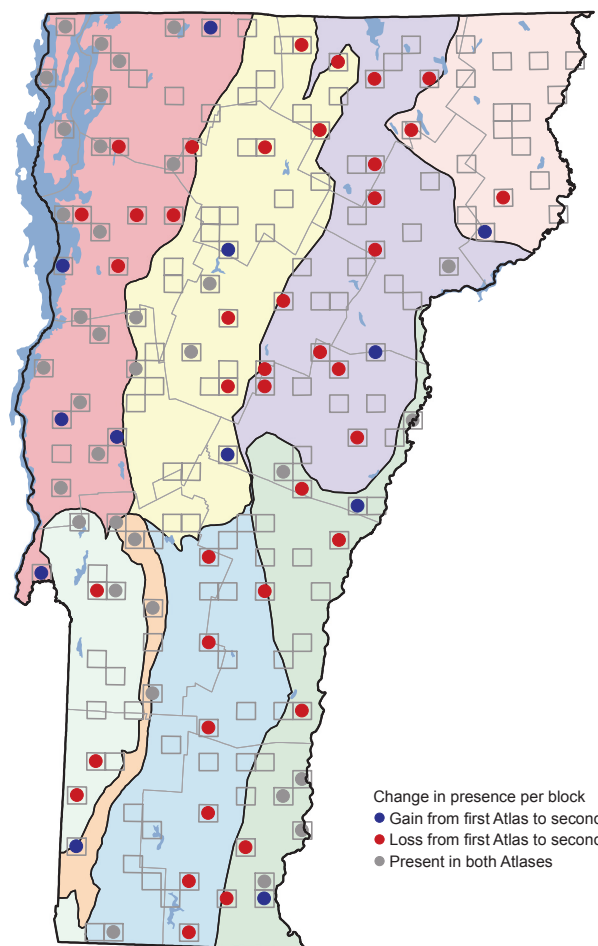
river systems in the state. The number of blocks where Green Heron were found declined by 37 percent between the first and second atlases. It is now nearly absent from the Green Mountains and the northeastern corner of the state. Only the Champlain Valley and the southern end of the Connecticut River Valley appear to have robust populations.

Breeding Bird Survey data indicate that the Green Heron has been declining in the Atlantic Northern Forest region (Bird Conservation Region 14) by 3.2 percent annually from 1982 to 2007 (Sauer et al. 2011). However, as is true of BBS data for nearly all wetland birds, there are deficiencies associated with roadside surveys that do not adequately detect waterbirds. The second Vermont atlas data are, however, consistent with the apparent regional decline, and similar trends have been noted in adjacent areas. In New York, a statewide decrease of 13 percent occurred, but within the Adirondacks occupancy decreased by more than 50 percent (McCrimmon 2008). In Pennsylvania, the decrease was 9 percent (Wilson et al. 2012), and Ontario’s atlas reported that although overall distribution did not change, a decrease of 29 percent occurred (Cadman et al. 2007).

Though the Green Heron is still widely distributed, it appears to be undergoing a rather steep population decline within the region for reasons that remain obscure.

RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME





CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	23	22	- 1	- 4
Northeastern Highlands	2	1	- 1	- 50
Northern Green Mountains	10	6	- 4	- 40
Northern Vermont Piedmont	12	2	- 10	- 83
Southern Green Mountains	9	2	- 7	- 78
Southern Vermont Piedmont	11	8	- 3	- 27
Taconic Mountains	5	2	- 3	- 60
Vermont Valley	3	4	+ 1	+ 33
Totals	75	47	- 28	- 37

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	57	42
Northeastern Highlands	5	2
Northern Green Mountains	13	9
Northern Vermont Piedmont	16	11
Southern Green Mountains	12	7
Southern Vermont Piedmont	37	15
Taconic Mountains	38	8
Vermont Valley	62	5

The decline itself appears to have gone unnoticed by state agencies or conservation groups. To date, the Green Heron has not been listed as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need in any of the northern New England states or New York. Estimating the population size of this species has proven difficult in the past (Davis and Kushlan 1994). Perhaps the results of Vermont's second atlas and those in other states will inspire more efforts to determine its status.

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