

Wild Turkey

Meleagris gallopavo



The reintroduction of the Wild Turkey to Vermont from a western New York population is one of the best success stories of the wildlife management profession. From a mere 31 birds released in southern Vermont in 1969 and 1970, supplemented by several other releases in subsequent years, the population has expanded far beyond expectations. Historically found only in Vermont's four southernmost counties (Laughlin 1985), the Wild Turkey now occurs in most of the state. It was extirpated from New England by the mid-1800s (Forbush 1912). The historic range of the Wild Turkey encompassed most of the eastern United States west to Arizona, New Mexico, and southern Mexico. Through the aid of reintroductions, the Wild Turkey has reclaimed most of its vacated range and has been established in new territory in the American West. Introductions have also succeeded in south-central Canada, Hawaii, New Zealand, and Germany (Eaton 1992).

Across its native range in the United States, the Wild Turkey occupies an array of habitats ranging from arid shrub to moist southern bottomlands and northern boreal forests. Often considered a forest bird, turkeys in the Northeast use a mosaic of habitats, including shrub and open land. The nest, a simple depression in the ground, often in a brushy area, may be in a hayfield or against the base of a tree or log. Vermont nests were found between 2 May and 13 July ($N = 14$). Unfledged young were found between 10 June and 31 July ($N = 12$) and fledglings, which comprised the majority of the confirmations ($N = 236$), were seen from 25 May through 6 September. The expansion of the Wild Turkey's distribution, like that of the Canada Goose, has not gone without notice. Local residents are a good source of information about whether flocks have moved into an area.

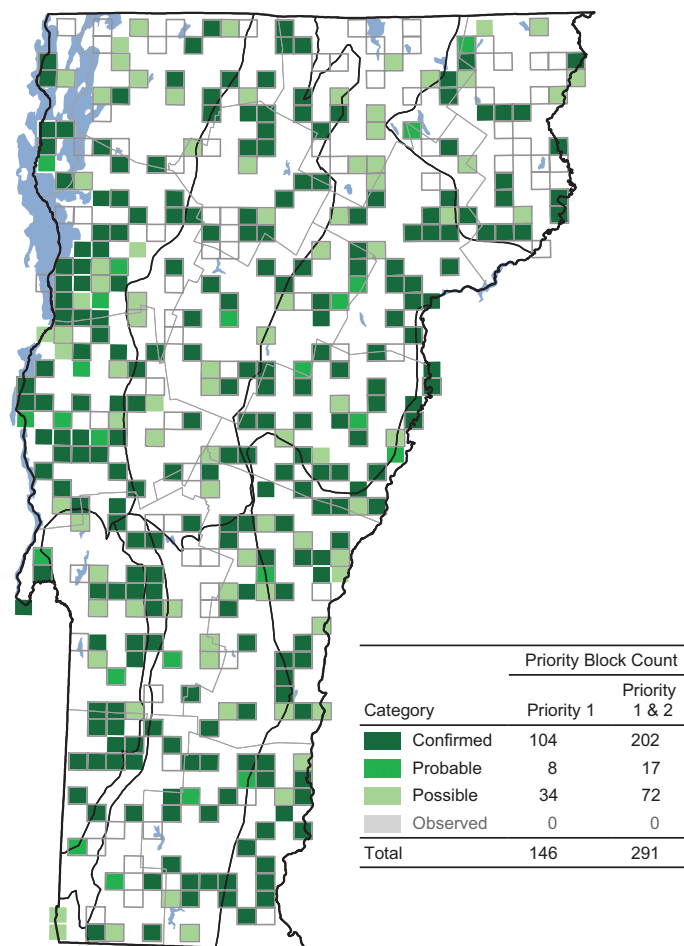
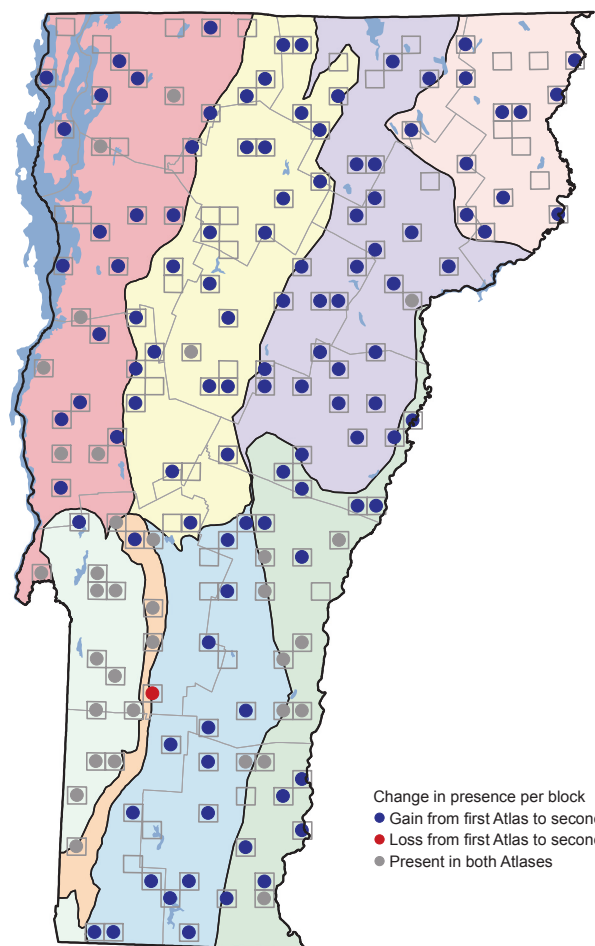
The results of the second atlas showed that the Wild Turkey has strengthened its hold on the southern half of Vermont and expanded its range into most of the northern half. There were a few blocks in the Green Mountains and the boreal regions of northeastern Vermont where Wild Turkeys were not found. Although agricultural

areas are better suited for Wild Turkey populations during severe winters (Roberts et al. 1995), the spread northward in the state included large expanses of boreal forest and mountainous terrain. The turkey is now a common bird species in Vermont, distributed in most or all of each physiographic region.

The successful efforts to establish this large game bird in Vermont parallel achievements in neighboring Massachusetts, where birds now occur in the outskirts of Boston (eBird 2011), and in New York, where the number of atlas blocks with records increased by 133 percent. Substantial populations now occur across New York, including areas that were considered unsuitable for Wild Turkeys by many experts only a few decades ago (McGowan 2008). In Pennsylvania, where Wild Turkeys had not been extirpated, the increase was smaller (48 percent), but still substantial.

The Wild Turkey is a non-migratory game bird managed by the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife. Limited hunting (gobblers only) was first allowed in 1973, only four years after the initial reintroduction. A fall "either sex" season was opened two years later. In the spring, only bearded birds may be harvested, and hunters are required to cease hunting by noon to allow nesting females an opportunity to feed and breed without interruption. In recent years, the reported annual harvest has been approximately 5000 gobblers annually (VFWD 2007). The statewide population, estimated at 15,000 birds after the first atlas (Laughlin 1985), was recently estimated at 45,000 to 50,000 birds (VFWD 2008). Clearly, the current management practices are working well.

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CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	7	25	+ 18	+ 257
Northeastern Highlands	0	12	+ 12	+1200
Northern Green Mountains	1	26	+ 25	+2500
Northern Vermont Piedmont	1	27	+ 26	+2600
Southern Green Mountains	5	20	+ 15	+ 300
Southern Vermont Piedmont	7	20	+ 13	+ 186
Taconic Mountains	10	11	+ 1	+ 10
Vermont Valley	4	5	+ 1	+ 25
Totals	35	146	+ 111	+ 317

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	80	20
Northeastern Highlands	62	8
Northern Green Mountains	75	17
Northern Vermont Piedmont	81	18
Southern Green Mountains	76	15
Southern Vermont Piedmont	95	13
Taconic Mountains	90	7
Vermont Valley	87	2