

Great Black-backed Gull

Larus marinus

Vermont's largest and most stately gull, the Great Black-backed Gull is a recent addition to the state's breeding avifauna. Primarily a coastal species, this gull breeds along shorelines from Labrador to North Carolina, as well as in the Great Lakes region. The species also nests in Iceland, Greenland, and much of northern Europe (Good 1998). There were no breeding records of the Great Black-backed Gull in Vermont until 1983, when a nest was found on Lake Champlain's Young Island, near Grand Isle (Kibbe and Laughlin 1985). The species has nested on Lake Champlain's Four Brothers Islands in New York since 1975 (Richmond 2008).

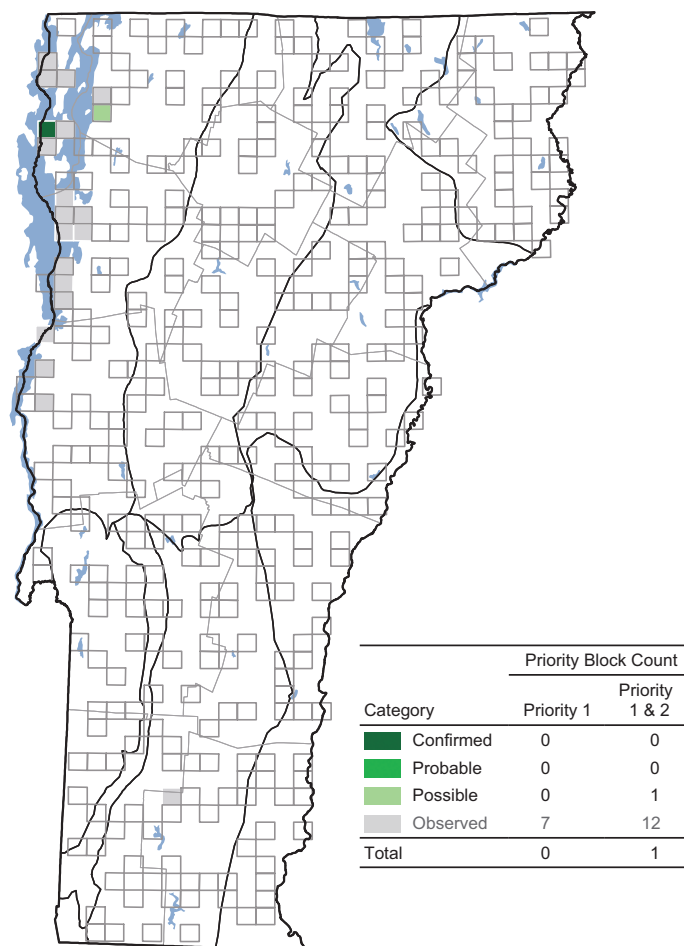
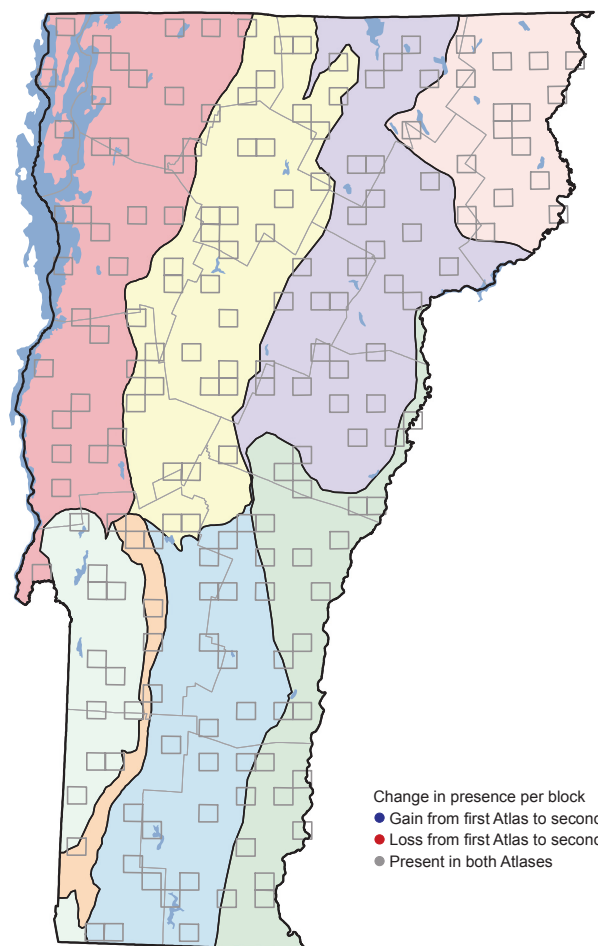
The Great Black-backed Gull, the most solitary and territorial of gulls that breed in mixed-species colonies, nests on the ground, often among shoreline rocks. The nest is conspicuous and constructed from local plant materials. On freshwater lakes, one or two pairs will occupy an island that supports thousands of other gulls, but nesting populations are often more dense on coastal islands. Borror and Holmes (1990) reported nearly 3000 nesting pairs on Maine's Isles of Shoals in 1989. On Lake Champlain, nest initiation occurs between late April and early May (D. E. Capen unpubl. data). During the non-breeding season, especially in winter, Great Black-backed Gulls are much more common around Lake Champlain than during the early summer. This species is an opportunistic scavenger and predator and regularly preys on the eggs and young of other birds—waterfowl, cormorants, other gull species, and terns—often nesting nearby in the same colonies.

Since Vermont's first documentation of breeding in 1983, numbers of nesting Great Black-backed Gulls have remained low. From the mid-1990s through the second atlas, Young Island regularly supported three breeding pairs. On the New York side of Lake Champlain, the species occupies all of the Four Brothers Islands: 8 nests were counted during gull censuses in 2000 and 2008 (D. E. Capen unpubl. data). Although not reported as confirmed on Four Brothers Island during the second New



York atlas (Richmond 2008), Great Black-backed Gulls were indeed nesting on these islands throughout the project (D. E. Capen unpubl. data). As in Vermont, the Great Black-backed Gull is an uncommon breeding species in upstate New York, where it was confirmed in only 4 blocks (Richmond 2008). In Ontario, the species was recorded in more than twice as many blocks during the second atlas (increasing from 15 to 38 blocks); despite a gradual population increase since 1976, however, their numbers remain low, with an all-time high of about 50 nesting pairs in eastern Lake Ontario recorded in 2002 (Weseloh 2007). Such small populations are inherently vulnerable; by 2007, only 1 pair remained following a disastrous outbreak of type E botulism (Weseloh 2007).

Although the Great Black-backed Gull continues to be very rare as a breeding species in Vermont, populations elsewhere are expanding. The North American breeding population is estimated to be about 160,000 birds (MANEM 2006). Kushlan et al. (2002) classified the species as not currently at risk across a range of 37 Bird Conservation Regions. In coastal BCRs 14 and 30, numbers of nesting Great Black-backed Gulls increased more than 100 percent from the 1970s through the 1990s, and the species was designated as "low concern" (MANEM 2006). Despite the growth of coastal populations, the Vermont, New York, and Ontario atlas projects confirm that the species remains rare on inland waters, and the recent botulism outbreak in the eastern Great Lakes illustrates its vulnerability. In Vermont, the future of the Great Black-backed Gull may well be linked to management of Young Island and the persistence of robust numbers of other colonial species. Significant population expansion seems



CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	0	0	+0	+0
Northeastern Highlands	0	0	+0	+0
Northern Green Mountains	0	0	+0	+0
Northern Vermont Piedmont	0	0	+0	+0
Southern Green Mountains	0	0	+0	+0
Southern Vermont Piedmont	0	0	+0	+0
Taconic Mountains	0	0	+0	+0
Vermont Valley	0	0	+0	+0
Totals	0	0	+0	+0

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	1	100
Northeastern Highlands	0	0
Northern Green Mountains	0	0
Northern Vermont Piedmont	0	0
Southern Green Mountains	0	0
Southern Vermont Piedmont	0	0
Taconic Mountains	0	0
Vermont Valley	0	0

unlikely, despite suitable nesting habitat on Lake Champlain, and the species does not currently warrant focused conservation attention.

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