Red-tailed Hawk

Buteo jamaicensis

This largest of Vermont's nesting buteos is also one of the most common hawks in the state. The Red-tailed Hawk breeds throughout most of the mainland of the United States and Canada, wherever there are suitable trees for nesting. Historical records indicate that the species has been present in Vermont since at least the early nineteenth century (Thompson 1842). The number of Red-tailed Hawks was likely reduced during the late nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, when several species of large hawks were shot or trapped in substantial numbers (Bagg and Eliot 1937, Ellison 1985), reflecting a common bias of the time against predators capable of taking wild game or poultry. A notable number of Red-tailed Hawks winter in Vermont, particularly at lower elevations. Although data from the state are limited, the currently prevailing interpretation is that many wintering Red-tailed Hawks at Vermont's latitude are near their breeding territories (Preston and Beane 2009). The species as a whole has a widespread winter distribution in the eastern United States as far north as southern Vermont.

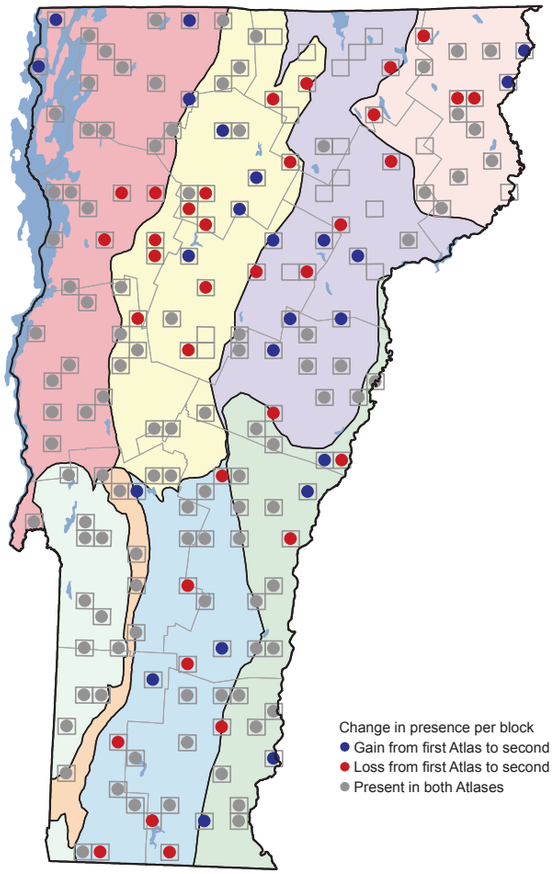
Nests are most commonly placed high in tall trees near woodland edges bordering open fields or brushy areas. Exposed perches must be available, from which birds watch for prey (Preston and Beane 2009). In the second Vermont atlas, nest building was observed at three different nests between 3 April and 11 May. Egg dates for two nests were noted from 7 May to 20 July. Nestlings were found in 13 nests from 29 May to 13 July, while recently fledged young from 21 other nests were encountered from 10 May to 20 August. Red-tailed Hawks are relatively conspicuous birds, easily identified by the adult's rufous-colored tail and readily found during atlas fieldwork. Fledglings are quite noisy over a number of weeks when calling for parents to bring food.

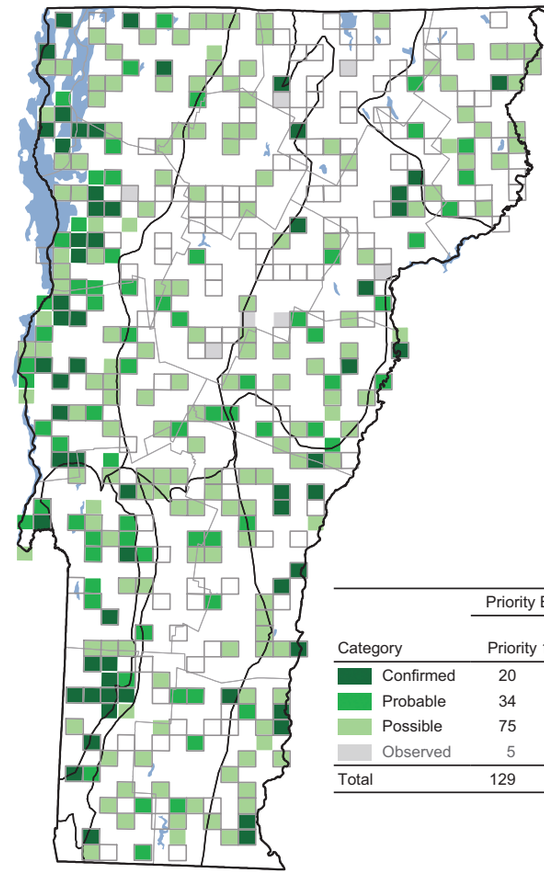
The Red-tailed Hawk breeds throughout the state but is less common in heavily forested areas, including the Northern Green Mountains, the Southern Green Mountains, and the Northeastern Highlands. The atlas data indicate a slight decline of 8 percent statewide since the first atlas. Two regions with the greatest declines since the first atlas were the Northern Green Mountains and the Southern Green Mountains, where regrowth of former agricultural lands might have been responsible.

Breeding Bird Survey data show a significant increase in the numbers of Red-tailed Hawks in eastern North America from 1982 to 2007 (Sauer et al. 2011). In Vermont and other New England states, too few red-taileds were found on BBS routes to indicate clear trends. Comparisons of first and second atlases show a mixed picture. Increases were found in Maryland (26 percent; Ellison 2010) and Pennsylvania (13 percent; Wilson et al. 2012). New York's second atlas showed a 6 percent increase statewide, with the only declines appearing in the highly forested areas of the Adirondack Mountains (McGowan and Corwin 2008). Interestingly, the Red-tailed Hawk expanded into New York City (Crocoll 2008). In the second Ontario atlas, the species showed a decreasing trend in the probability of observation in the northern part of its range (Szuba 2007).

Overall, the Red-tailed Hawk appears to be doing well, with at least stable populations (Farmer et al. 2008, Preston and Beane 2009). In general, this species has benefited from clearings for agriculture and logging, and can nest even in urban locations (Crocoll 2008, Preston and Beane 2009). The Vermont atlas suggests that the Red-tailed Hawk is stable throughout areas where suitable habitat can be found. Decreases at higher elevations in parts of Vermont and in the Adirondack region might be associated with the succession of open fields and brushy areas to forested habitat. Continued loss of agriculture and reduction in logging activities might reduce Red-tailed Hawk populations in the future, in Vermont and elsewhere in the Northeast.

GEORGE A. CLARK, JR.





Category	Priority Block Count: Priority 1	Priority 1 & 2
Confirmed	20	52
Probable	34	58
Possible	75	145
Observed	5	5
Total	129	255

CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	29	30	+ 1	+ 3
Northeastern Highlands	13	11	- 2	- 15
Northern Green Mountains	26	19	- 7	- 27
Northern Vermont Piedmont	15	15	+ 0	+ 0
Southern Green Mountains	24	19	- 5	- 21
Southern Vermont Piedmont	17	19	+ 2	+ 12
Taconic Mountains	11	11	+ 0	+ 0
Vermont Valley	5	5	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	140	129	- 11	- 8

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	93	27
Northeastern Highlands	59	9
Northern Green Mountains	52	13
Northern Vermont Piedmont	52	13
Southern Green Mountains	64	14
Southern Vermont Piedmont	85	13
Taconic Mountains	95	8
Vermont Valley	87	3