

Black-crowned Night-Heron

Nycticorax nycticorax

The Black-crowned Night-Heron, a colonial waterbird found in the Champlain Valley and islands of Lake Champlain, nests in almost all of the lower forty-eight states, the prairies of Canada, and the coastal regions of Mexico, as well as on most other continents (Davis 1993). The congeneric Yellow-crowned Night-Heron resides mostly in the southeastern United States and Central America (Watts 1995). Both species are appropriately named as most of their feeding and courtship activities take place at dusk or during the night.

Black-crowned Night-Herons nest in a variety of environments near water. Like most colonial species, they prefer islands where mammalian predators are absent but may also nest near upland lakes and wetlands. They prefer to nest in trees but will sometimes use the emergent vegetation of freshwater and saltwater marshes. Nests usually are inconspicuous; in trees, stick nests are well concealed below the canopy. Typical of herons, three or four eggs constitute an average clutch (D. E. Capen pers. obs.). Most Black-crowned Night-Herons probably nest for the first time as two-year-olds and live as long as twenty-one years (Davis 1993).

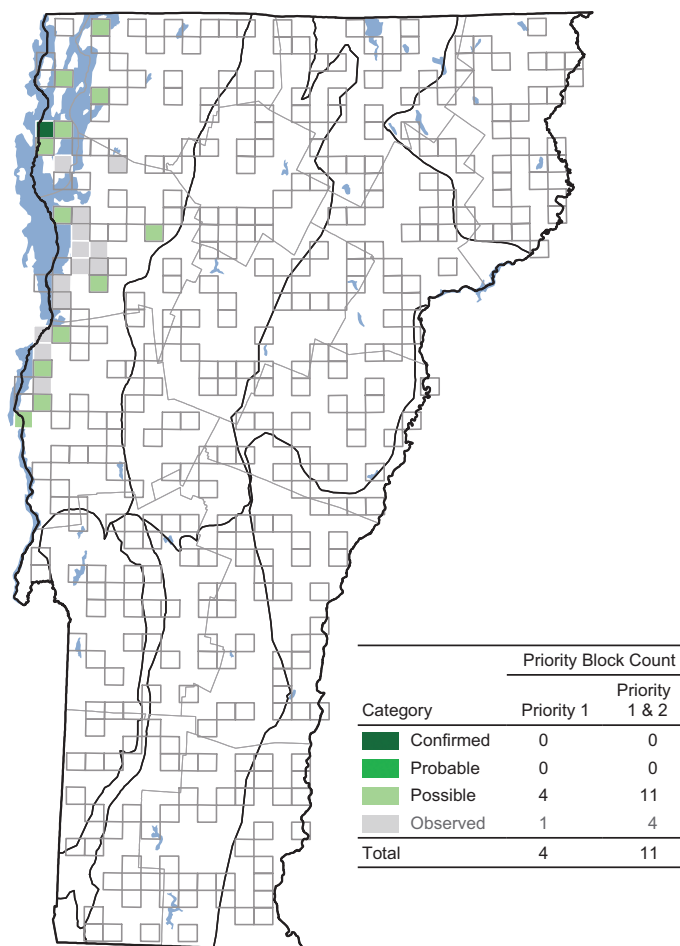
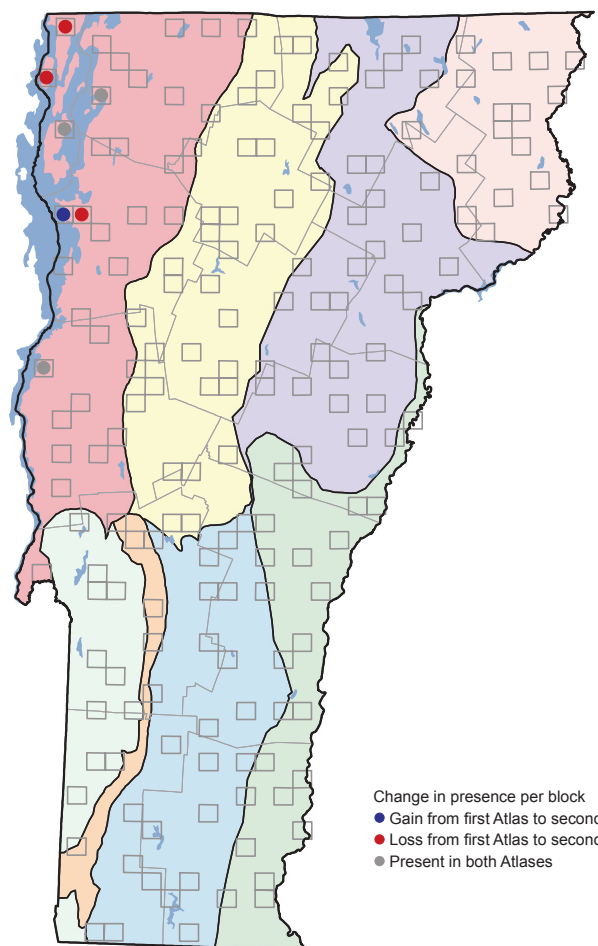
During both atlas projects in Vermont, Black-crowned Night-Herons were observed at a number of locations in the Champlain lowlands, but confirmation of breeding has been difficult, except on one island in Grand Isle County. Throughout the 1980s, Young Island typically hosted 25 to 35 nests—until trees on the island died as a result of an expanding population of Double-crested Cormorants (D. E. Capen unpubl. data). After abandoning Young Island in the early 1990s, night-herons attempted to nest on nearby Bixby Island for a year or two, but this privately owned island often was subject to human disturbance (D. E. Capen pers. obs.). Since then, the only consistent breeding location in the Champlain Valley has been Four Brothers Islands in New York. Here too, the herons have abandoned 3 of 4 islands because cormorants have killed trees and shrubs. One island has retained a dense scrub forest, composed mostly of buck-



thorn, where 150 to 180 pairs of Black-crowned Night-Herons have nested in recent years (D. E. Capen unpubl. data). The one CO record during the Vermont atlas was on Young Island in 2007, where a single nest was found in the island's largest tree. In the same tree, three nests were successful in 2008, but nesting was not attempted in 2009, perhaps because of competition by cormorants and efforts by state and federal biologists to disperse the cormorants.

Kushlan et al. (2002) assessed the North American population of Black-crowned Night-Heron at more than 50,000 pairs, but concluded that the population was declining and designated the species as a moderate conservation priority. A similar ranking was assigned by Hartley et al. (2007) for Bird Conservation Region 13. The New York atlas documented an overall increase in locations where this species nested and noted that a decline in the coastal lowlands was more than balanced by increases in upstate New York (McCrimmon 2008). Although the Ontario atlas found essentially no change in numbers of breeding locations, several colonies had been displaced by cormorants, and some of the largest colonies of Black-crowned Night-Herons had been dramatically reduced. A 2004 survey of colonies on Lakes Huron, Erie, and Ontario, plus the upper St. Lawrence River, found just over 2000 nests, considerably fewer than in previous decades, when some colonies had as many as 1500 to 2000 nests each (Weseloh 2007).

Kibbe (1985) suggested that additional fieldwork after the first atlas might well reveal more nesting sites for this species in Vermont, given the frequency of observations in the Champlain Valley. The conclusion from the second atlas might have been the same were it not for the intervening years, when no additional nesting sites were



CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	6	4	-2	-33
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	6	4	-2	-33

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	15	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

recorded. This species might return to Young Island if cormorant numbers are reduced, trees are re-established, and human disturbances are held to a minimum. A stable breeding population of Black-crowned Night-Heron should be an objective for management of this island.

DAVID E. CAPEN