

Common Loon

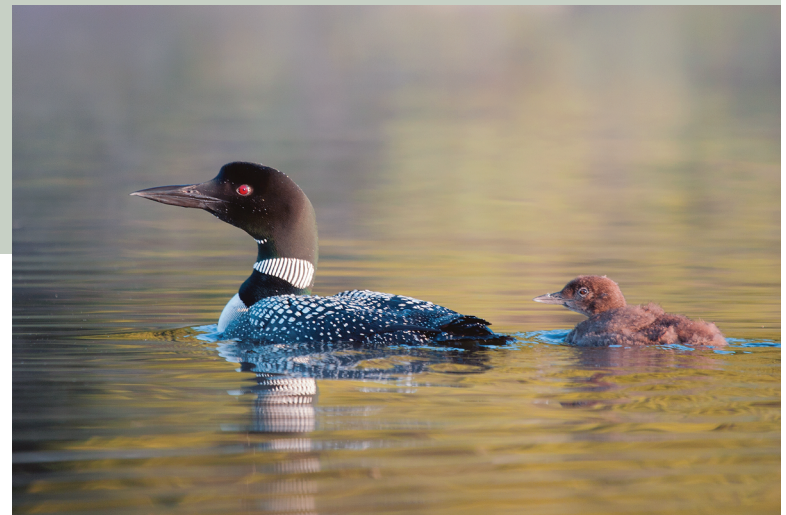
Gavia immer

The haunting voice of the Common Loon and its striking black and white plumage are emblematic of northern lakes. The Common Loon ranges throughout Alaska and Canada south into the northern United States and east to Greenland, Iceland, and northern Europe (Evers et al. 2010). Vermont, which lies at the southern edge of this bird's breeding range, hosts an expanding population.

Common Loon territories range from 9 to 161 hectares (22 to 398 acres; Hanson and Buck 2009). Nests are placed close to the water on islands and along marshes, where mammalian predation is less likely to occur. Less frequently, nesting will occur along upland shorelines. Loons also nest on artificial nesting rafts. A clutch is generally one or two eggs, and the average incubation period is 28 days. The earliest documented nest in Vermont was initiated on 10 May, and the latest observed hatch was 10 August. Both adults rear the young through late September to November before migrating to the New England coast in advance of their offspring. Although loons can breed at four years of age, they generally do not do so until they are, on average, seven years old (Evers 2007).

Since the early 1980s, the distribution of the Common Loon in Vermont has expanded; primarily in the Northeastern Highlands, Northern Piedmont, and central and Southern Green Mountains. Individuals were observed in other regions of the state during both atlases, but at much lower concentrations. The Vermont Loon Recovery Project has been monitoring the state's population since 1978. Numbers of nesting pairs peaked at 19 in 1982 and then, for unknown reasons, dropped sharply to 7 pairs in 1983. Between 1989 and 1994, the breeding population gradually increased and stabilized at 14 to 16 breeding pairs. Then, during the subsequent fifteen years, the population increased to a high of 66 nesting and 90 territorial pairs in 2009.

Throughout the northeastern United States, the Common Loon population has increased since the 1970s (Evers 2007). The second Ontario atlas found a slight increase (Cadman et al. 2007), while occupied blocks in New York increased by 43 percent (McGowan and Cor-

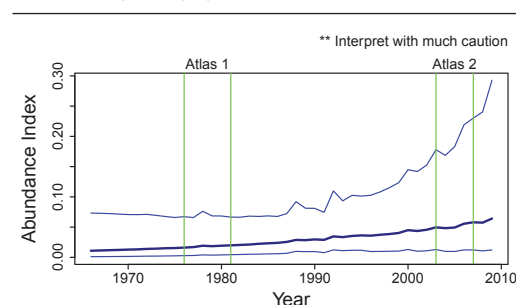


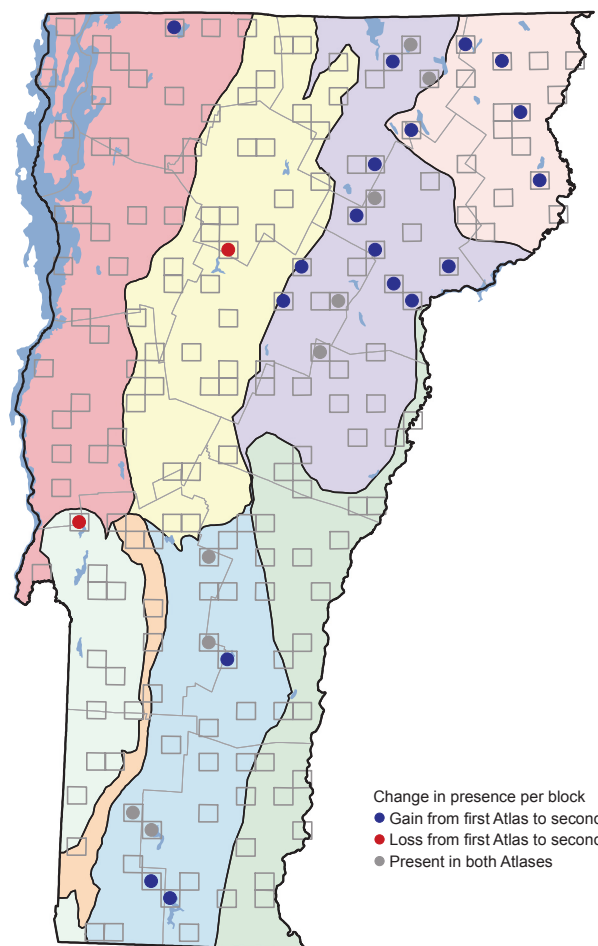
win 2008). Current adult loon populations appear to be stable in Maine and New Hampshire, but productivity in New Hampshire has been declining slightly since 2004 (Evers 2007, Loon Preservation Committee 2005, 2009).

The Common Loon was removed from the Vermont Endangered and Threatened Species List in 2005, but remains a Species of Special Concern. The statewide population increase can largely be attributed to recovery efforts. Public outreach, a volunteer program that works closely with landowners, and coordination with hydrogroups to stabilize water levels during the nesting period have made concrete contributions to the species' success (Borden and Rimmer 1998, Hanson and Buck 2009). The Vermont Loon Recovery Project also protects and enhances nesting habitat by posting nest warning signs and buoys to reduce human disturbance and by providing artificial rafts.

The Common Loon faces regional as well as local threats. Outbreaks of type E botulism in the Great Lakes have killed tens of thousands of waterbirds annually since 2000, and two Northeast coastal oil spills since 1996 still threaten migrant and wintering populations (Evers 2007). The ingestion of lead fishing gear is the leading cause of

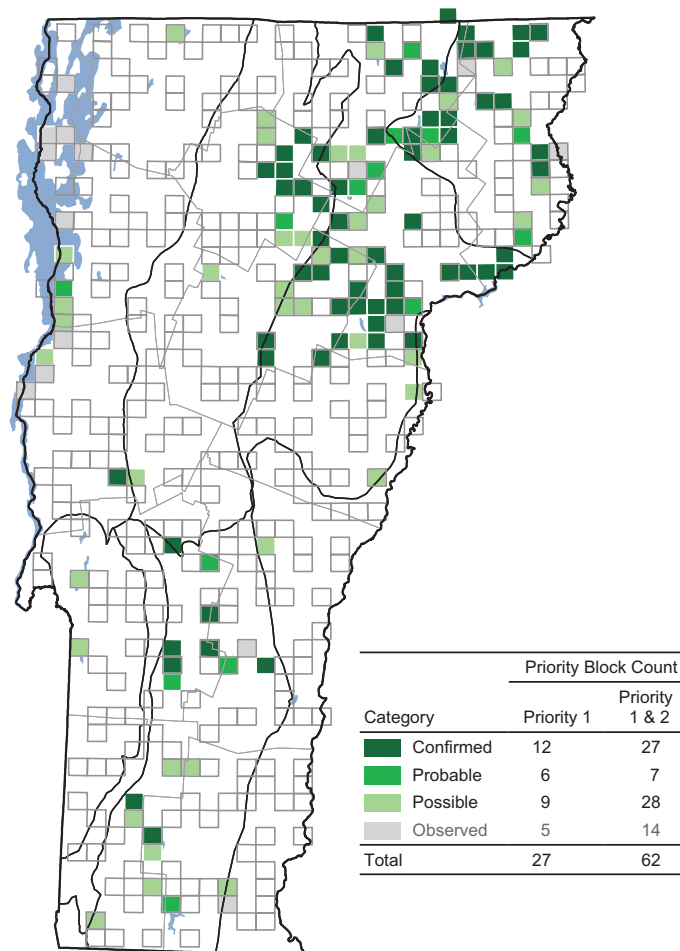
RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME





CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	0	1	+ 1	+ 100
Northeastern Highlands	0	5	+ 5	+ 500
Northern Green Mountains	1	0	- 1	- 100
Northern Vermont Piedmont	5	14	+ 9	+ 180
Southern Green Mountains	4	7	+ 3	+ 75
Southern Vermont Piedmont	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Taconic Mountains	1	0	- 1	- 100
Vermont Valley	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	11	27	+ 16	+ 145



DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	5	6
Northeastern Highlands	35	21
Northern Green Mountains	7	8
Northern Vermont Piedmont	38	40
Southern Green Mountains	21	19
Southern Vermont Piedmont	2	2
Taconic Mountains	9	3
Vermont Valley	0	0

adult loon mortality in New England (Sidor et al. 2003). A recent ban on the sale and use of lead sinkers weighing ½ ounce or less should further reduce adult mortality. Other threats include shoreline development, leeching of septic systems, run-off, mercury emissions, and the unintended release of exotic species.

Increasing numbers of territorial pairs as well as bodies of water with more consistent loon activity indicate the breeding population may continue to grow in Vermont. More than 50 percent of the birds, however, nest in locations that are at high risk to human disturbance and/

or habitat loss. Continued monitoring, management, and public education efforts are essential for these sites to remain productive (VFWD 2007).

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