

American Woodcock

Scolopax minor



The American Woodcock, or “timberdoodle” as it was once commonly called, is a fascinating conglomeration of unlikely behaviors and morphological stray parts. Although technically a shorebird and a game bird, it is not found along shorelines and is a target species for only 3 percent of hunters in Vermont. Woodcock breed throughout the eastern United States from northern Florida into the Maritime Provinces, westward to the edge of the Great Plains. They winter principally in the Gulf Coast states but may remain as far north as New Jersey in suitable habitat if favorable weather conditions persist. Their preferred habitat is alder swamps where they can probe for worms and other invertebrates. Sensing a worm, they open the tip of their prehensile bill and grasp it. Unfrozen, moist ground is an obvious requisite for such behavior.

Although the ground may be only partially thawed at the time, with snowdrifts just beginning to melt away, the American Woodcock returns to Vermont in early March. There is no time of year when this species is more conspicuous. Male woodcock commence their displays at dusk, seeking out an open, snow-free field where they carry out one of the most elaborate display performances of any of Vermont’s breeding birds. The male utters a nasal *peent* repeatedly, then launches himself into the air, rising high above his display ground. As he descends rapidly, he repeatedly produces a twittering sound by vibrating his outer wing feathers. Following several minutes of aerial display, the male returns to the ground where *peents* are again uttered.

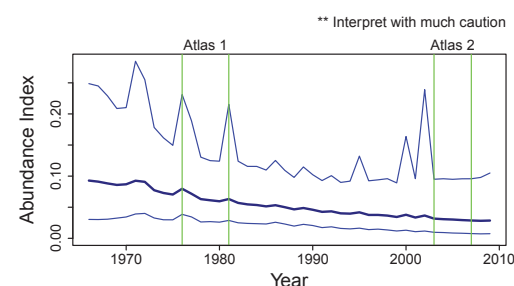
Woodcock occupy moist habitats in the early stages of vegetative succession such as abandoned fields, young forests, and forest edges. Females build a ground nest and lay their clutch of 4 eggs in fields undergoing secondary succession. Nests with eggs were found from 15 April to 1 July. The young are precocial and offer the observer the best opportunity to confirm breeding. Fledged young were encountered 27 April to 1 August. Woodcock are extremely early breeders, display only briefly at dawn, dusk, or on clear, moonlit nights, and are camouflage experts. For atlasers who limit their fieldwork to June or

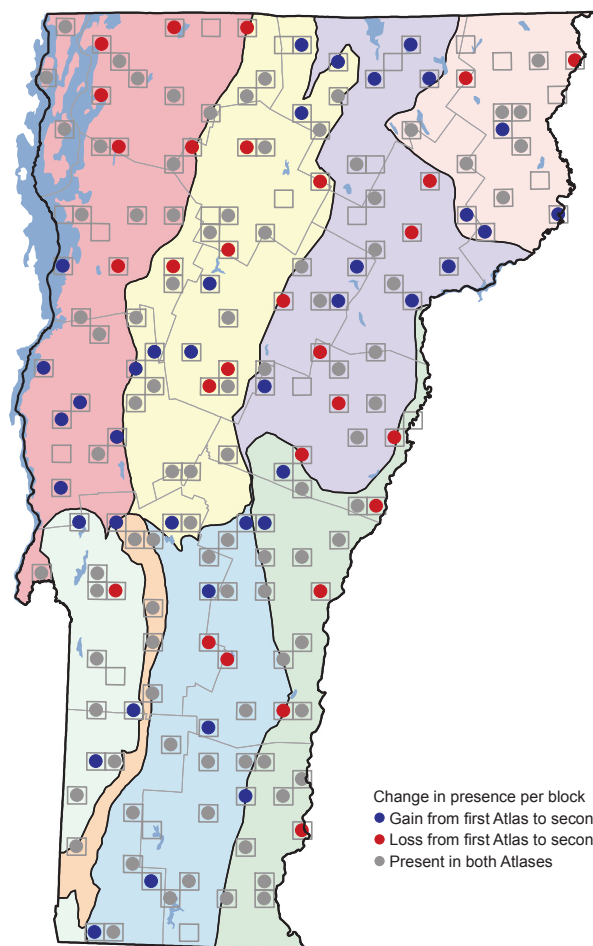
July, the chances of encountering the species are remote. It is likely that both atlas efforts underestimated the number of blocks occupied by American Woodcock.

Despite the possibility that this species may have been underestimated, woodcock were distributed across all of Vermont during the first atlas. During the second atlas, woodcock were found in 7 percent more blocks, though there is no discernible pattern to the increase. A small (4 percent) increase was also noted in New York (McGowan and Corwin 2008), but in Pennsylvania a 6 percent decrease was found (Wilson et al. 2012). To accurately survey for woodcock, targeted singing-ground surveys are conducted because of the bird’s crepuscular, early-season breeding displays. Surveys by USFWS have indicated population declines in eastern portions of the species’ range since the 1960s, but there has been no significant decrease in that region since 1998 (Cooper et al. 2008). A severe decline in the Midwest, where conversion of early succession forest to mature cover is considered limiting, is a continuing concern (Potter et al. 2007). A similar long-term decrease has been observed in Canada’s populations (Sandilands 2007).

Partners in Flight has listed American Woodcock as a species of “high regional concern.” In the future, the Vermont population may decline if the transition of early

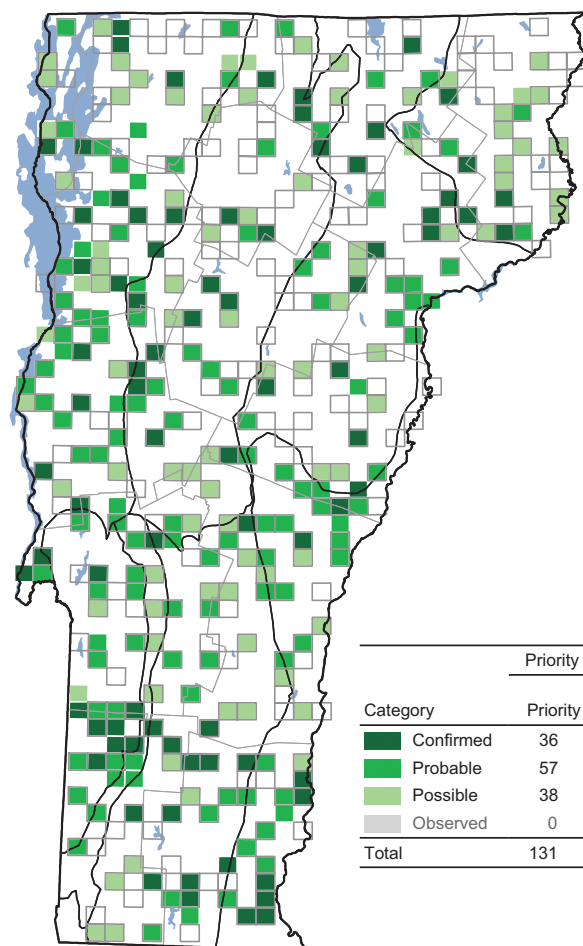
RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME





CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	23	22	- 1	- 4
Northeastern Highlands	9	11	+ 2	+ 22
Northern Green Mountains	24	26	+ 2	+ 8
Northern Vermont Piedmont	18	19	+ 1	+ 6
Southern Green Mountains	19	22	+ 3	+ 16
Southern Vermont Piedmont	18	17	- 1	- 6
Taconic Mountains	7	9	+ 2	+ 29
Vermont Valley	4	5	+ 1	+ 25
Totals	122	131	+ 9	+ 7



Category	Priority Block Count	
	Priority 1	Priority 1 & 2
Confirmed	36	68
Probable	57	97
Possible	38	77
Observed	0	0
Total	131	242

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	67	20
Northeastern Highlands	54	8
Northern Green Mountains	63	17
Northern Vermont Piedmont	55	15
Southern Green Mountains	75	17
Southern Vermont Piedmont	77	13
Taconic Mountains	76	7
Vermont Valley	87	3

succession forest to mature forestland continues. The species appears to be in no immediate danger of extirpation, but its current presence on Vermont's Species of Greatest Conservation Need list reflects region-wide concern for the species. Management that retains and expands forest openings and sets back succession of maturing forestlands is favorable to woodcock. Barring dramatic changes in land use and the continued presence of early successional habitats, the species is likely to remain common in Vermont.

DOUGLAS P. KIBBE