

Lincoln's Sparrow

Melospiza lincolnii

The Lincoln's Sparrow, a bird of boreal shrub thickets, ranges across Canada, barely dipping into the United States in the East, and reaching the southern extent of its eastern range in Vermont. In the West it nests along the Rocky Mountains south to New Mexico. Wherever it occurs, Lincoln's Sparrow is noted for its reclusive nature, both on the breeding grounds and during migration.

Finicky about its nesting habitat, the Lincoln's Sparrow prefers wet willow thickets with dense herbaceous cover. Bogs, blueberry barrens, fields with scattered spruce, and beaver meadows are good habitats in which to look for them, although they may use drier sites at higher elevations (Bent 1968, Peck and James 1987). In Vermont, this sparrow arrives and sets up territories in early May. Individual birds are unobtrusive, singing from low, often hidden perches and ceasing their singing completely once incubation has started (Ammon 1995), which means that males may have already stopped singing by the time many atlas blocks were visited. Nests are particularly difficult to find, although a female's "rodent run" (scurrying through the grass like a mouse) or other agitated behavior can offer clues that one is near (Nichols 1985, Ammon 1995). The second atlas yielded the first nest recorded in Vermont, found on 9 June in Wolcott. Nestlings were found in Cabot and near West Burke on 22 June and 24 June, respectively. Fledglings (N = 7) were found from 25 June through 20 July. Due to the Lincoln's Sparrow's secretive habits and the influx of transients from northern breeding areas, departure dates for the state's breeders are poorly known, but the species is rarely reported after October.

Vermont's population of Lincoln's Sparrow is restricted to the northeastern part of the state, with a few records in Orange County and a small satellite population in the Southern Green Mountains. Vermont supports an estimated 1200 of the 40 million Lincoln's Sparrows in North America (RMBO 2007). Lincoln's Sparrows are generally lacking from the higher elevations of the Green Mountains where wetlands and other open habitat are

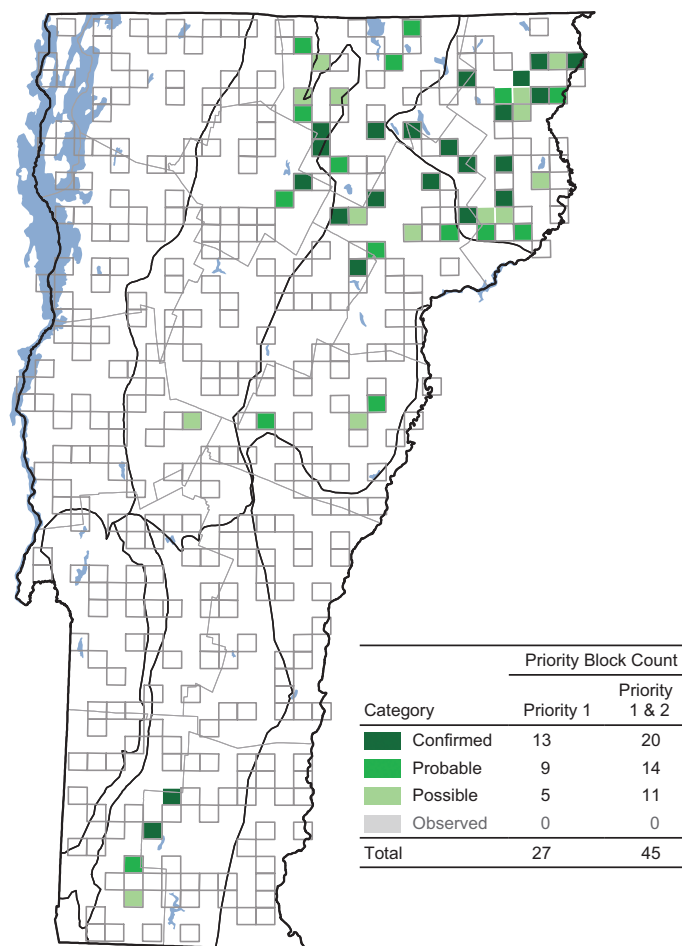
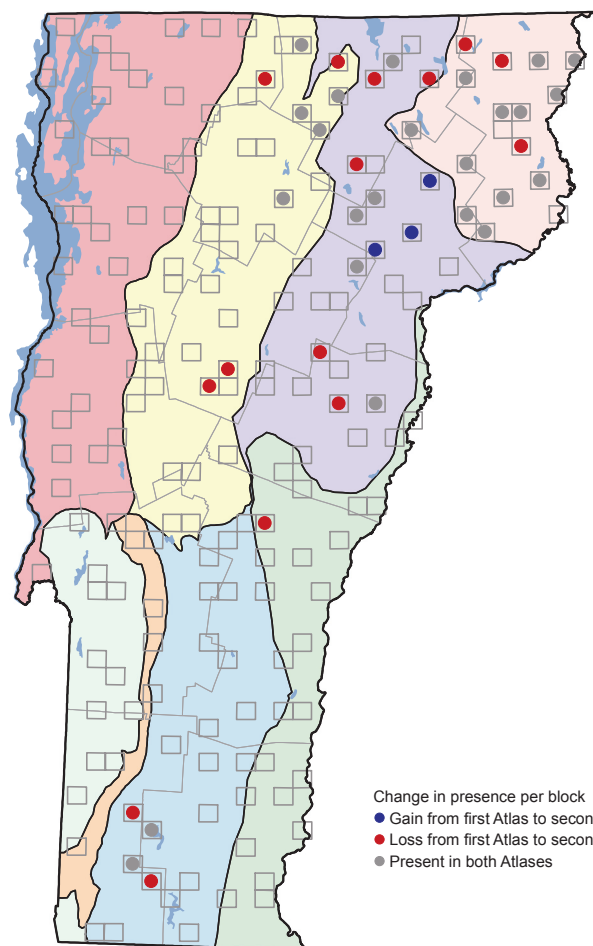


sparse. There are no records associated with the alpine regions of the state.

Although still widely distributed in northeastern Vermont, a 31 percent decrease in Lincoln's Sparrow occurrence was evident in the Priority 1 blocks. Decreases occurred in both the southern satellite population and in the Northern Vermont Piedmont and Northeastern Highlands. Lincoln's Sparrows are found too infrequently on Breeding Bird Survey routes to produce robust state-level data. On a broader scale, however, U.S. populations have increased significantly by 2.1 percent each year from 1982 to 2007; the species showed a non-significant decrease in Canada (Sauer et al. 2011).

The second atlas in New York found a 13 percent decrease in occurrence but a slight range expansion. Peterson (2008) concluded that observer ability and timing of New York's effort could negatively affect the results for such a secretive and sparsely distributed species with highly specific habitat preferences. In Ontario, the second atlas documented a 46 percent increase for the entire province, with the largest increases found in the north (Zimerling 2008), although BBS data show no significant changes in counts from 1982 to 2007 (Sauer et al. 2011).

Maturation of forests bordering streamside willow thickets may be one cause for the species' decline in Vermont. In the absence of focused, species-specific surveys, however, apparent changes in the numbers of a very reclusive bird may always be subject to question. The Lincoln's Sparrow appears unlikely to desert the state in the near future, provided lumbering and beaver activities continue to create potential breeding areas, even as the forests of Vermont continue to mature. Given the rela-



CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Northeastern Highlands	15	12	- 3	- 20
Northern Green Mountains	9	5	- 4	- 44
Northern Vermont Piedmont	10	8	- 2	- 20
Southern Green Mountains	4	2	- 2	- 50
Southern Vermont Piedmont	1	0	- 1	- 100
Taconic Mountains	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Vermont Valley	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	39	27	- 12	- 31

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	0	0
Northeastern Highlands	45	38
Northern Green Mountains	13	20
Northern Vermont Piedmont	24	36
Southern Green Mountains	5	7
Southern Vermont Piedmont	0	0
Taconic Mountains	0	0
Vermont Valley	0	0

tively small number of birds in the state, however, local populations should be protected wherever possible by maintaining their habitat in an early successional stage, particularly in the southern portion of the state.

DOUGLAS P. KIBBE