

# Gadwall

*Anas strepera*



First recorded nesting in Vermont in 1980 (Ellison 1985), the Gadwall has proved to be one of Vermont's rarest regularly breeding waterfowl species. Prior to 1939, this dabbling duck was unknown as a breeder in eastern North America (LeSchack et al. 1997). Although the Gadwall now breeds from coast to coast, it is principally a duck of the Prairie Pothole Region, where it is so abundant that its harvest numbers rank third in the country. Its primary breeding grounds are in the Dakotas and northward into Canada's prairie provinces. Outside of this core breeding area, Gadwalls may be locally common breeders, with some populations apparently originating from local stocking (Ellison 1985, McGowan 2008). In the East, it is an irregular breeder from the Maritime Provinces southward to North Carolina. Most Gadwalls winter along the Gulf Coast south through Mexico, although small numbers occur in other regions (LeSchack et al. 1997).

The Gadwall breeds in open lands with low grass or brushy vegetation and prefers islands and large marshes, such as those that occur in the Champlain Valley. Nests are placed in dense grass or brush, often some distance from water (up to 1.6 kilometers [1 mile]). Island-nesting birds may place their clutch of 8 to 12 eggs adjacent to the shore. Gadwall apparently delay nesting until the vegetation is sufficiently high to conceal their nest. Once the female begins the 26-day incubation period, the male joins other males to molt in the relative safety of a large marsh (LeSchack et al. 1997).

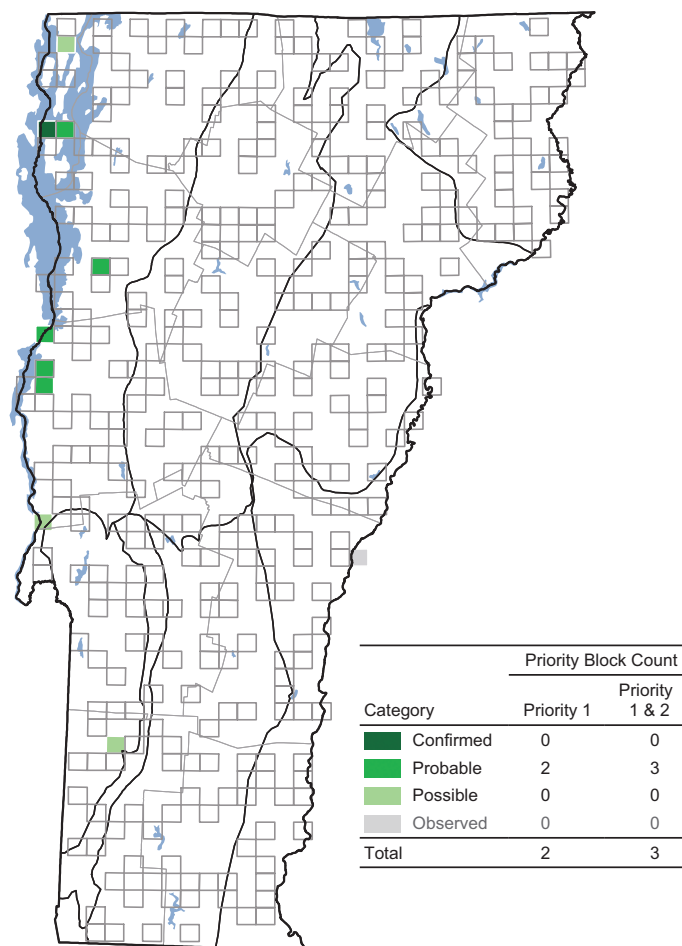
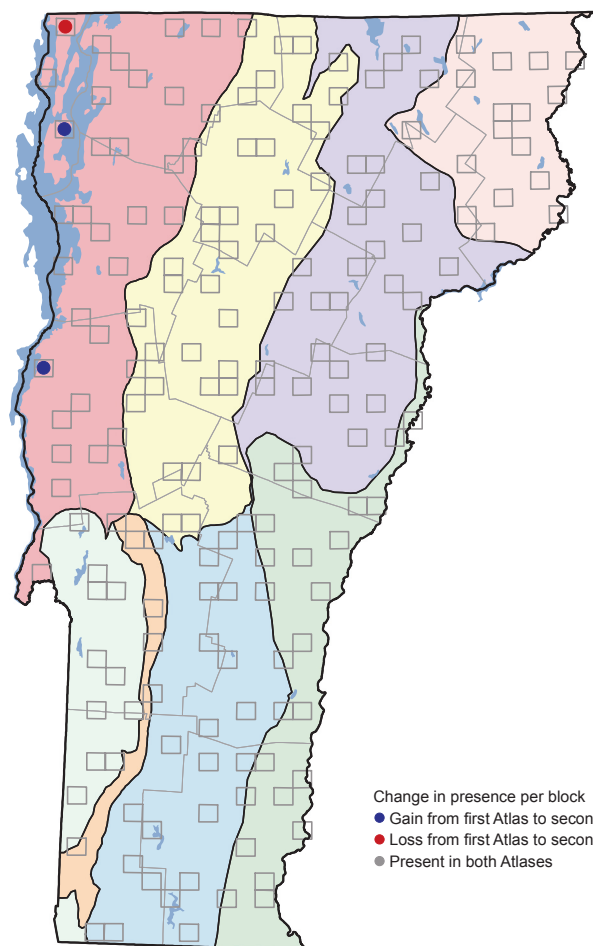
There were nine Gadwall records during the second atlas; only one was confirmed—a sighting of young birds on 18 July. As in the first atlas, all records were from the western portion of the state. All but one observation came from in the Champlain Valley; a PO record came from northern Bennington County. Between the first and second atlases, there were two dozen records of nests or young reported from Grand Isle, South Hero, Bixby Island, Nichol's Point / Nichol's Bay (Blackwood's Swamp), and Simm's Point—all in the Champlain Valley (Vermont Bird Records Committee).

Following a decline in the mid-1900s due to drought,

Gadwalls underwent a continental population explosion in the 1980s and 1990s, and established small breeding populations along the mid-Atlantic Coast, into the Maritime Provinces, and along the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River (Erskine 1992, LeSchack et al. 1997). Although still relatively rare in the Northeast, Gadwalls are expanding and will probably continue to increase, particularly in areas where suitable emergent marsh habitat for broods occurs near nesting islands. In Vermont, breeding is likely to be limited to Lake Champlain, where suitable nesting habitat is most prevalent.

In New York, the scattered population appears to be stable with little increase in distribution since the 1970s. Bull's (1974) description of four breeding concentrations (Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge, Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge, Wilson Hill Wildlife Management Area, and Long Island) continues to hold true today, although some expansion of the population along the eastern end of Lake Ontario was noted (McGowan 2008). Perhaps more pertinent to Vermont is the continued occurrence of breeding records along the New York side of Lake Champlain, indicating regional persistence. In southeastern Ontario, with a population concentrated along the Great Lakes, the Gadwall increase was termed "explosive," more than doubling since the first atlas (Curry 2007).

Gadwalls are surprisingly tolerant of human activity, and several colonization attempts have occurred at sewage lagoons and stock ponds with emergent vegetation (Curry 2007, LeSchack et al. 1997). Numbers of Gadwalls may continue to increase in the Champlain Valley even though it is one of Vermont's most quickly developing regions. Suitable breeding habitat may be enhanced or increased by delaying mowing in the vicinity of potential breeding sites past mid-summer. True to Ellison's (1985)



#### CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

| Biophysical Region        | First Atlas | Second Atlas | Change     | % Change     |
|---------------------------|-------------|--------------|------------|--------------|
| Champlain Valley          | 1           | 2            | + 1        | + 100        |
| 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          |
| <b>Totals</b>             | <b>1</b>    | <b>2</b>     | <b>+ 1</b> | <b>+ 100</b> |

#### DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

| Biophysical Region        | % of region species occupies | % of all records for this species found in region |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Champlain Valley          | 4                            | 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                                                 |

prediction, Vermont's population has increased since the first atlas. The growth has been small, though, and the Gadwall remains one of the state's rarer waterfowl species.

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