

Swamp Sparrow

Melospiza georgiana

The slow, musical, single-syllable trill of the Swamp Sparrow—given day or night during the breeding season—differs dramatically from the guttural song of the Red-winged Blackbird, a species that often shares the same densely vegetated marshes. Unlike the highly visible blackbird, however, this sparrow's song is often the only indication of its presence. The Swamp Sparrow breeds in wetlands across Canada, from south of the tree line in the west-central Mackenzie basin east to Labrador, and south into the northeast and north-central United States, where its range extends west to the Dakotas and south in the mountains to Virginia (Mowbray 1997, AOU 1998). The species has been recorded in Vermont since the earliest ornithological observations of the nineteenth century (Thompson 1842).

Swamp Sparrows breed in freshwater marshes, bogs, wet meadows, and swamps at elevations up to 760 meters (2500 feet; Gavutis 1994). Nests are built low in dense vegetation, close to the water's surface, and often in areas with scattered saplings or woody snags (Mowbray 1997). During the second atlas, nest building was observed from 10 May to 16 June (N = 9). One nest with eggs was documented on 16 May. Nestlings were found from 27 May to 12 July (N = 4). Fledglings (N = 39) were noted from 9 June to 6 August. Although the species' loud and distinctive song makes it easy to detect, its nests are not easily reached without wading; most confirmations were of fledglings.

Although absent from many blocks because of a lack of suitable habitat, the Swamp Sparrow was nevertheless widespread throughout all biophysical regions of Vermont. Overall, it showed a 9 percent increase statewide from the first to the second atlas. The only biophysical region with a decline was the Southern Green Mountains, where the species was found in 4 fewer blocks (21 percent). Increases of more than 25 percent were seen in the Champlain and Vermont valleys.

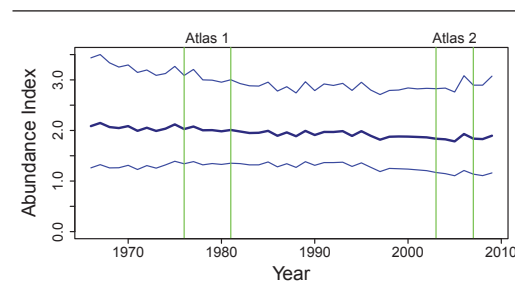
Breeding Bird Survey data show significant increases of 1.3 and 1.8 percent in Swamp Sparrow abundance in the Atlantic Northern Forest (Bird Conservation Region

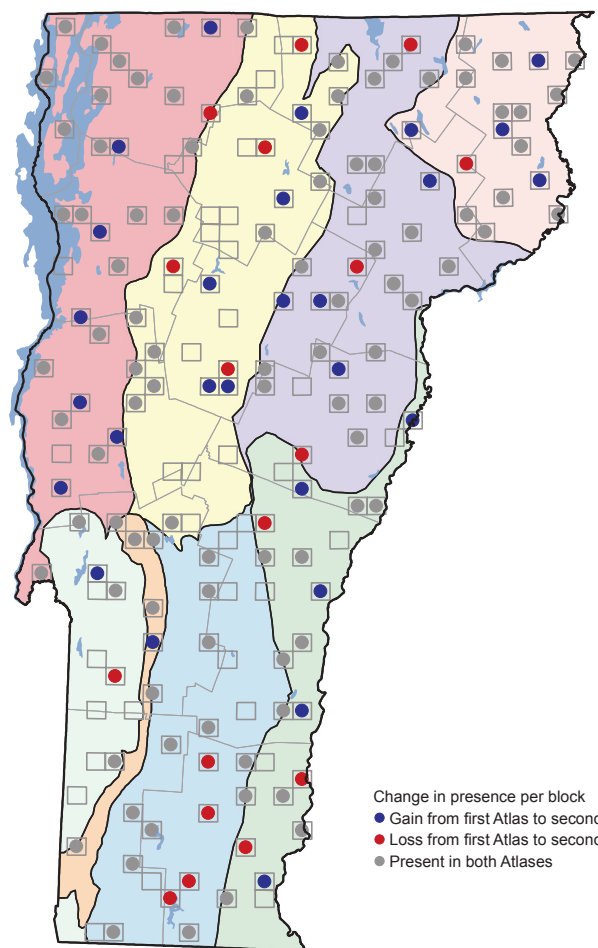


14) and the Lower Great Lakes / St. Lawrence Plain (Bird Conservation Region 13), respectively, from 1982 to 2007. BBS data from Vermont alone, however, showed no significant trends over the same period (Sauer et al. 2011). In the second atlases of Pennsylvania and New York, Swamp Sparrow occupancy increased by 32 and 6 percent, respectively (McGowan and Corwin 2008, Wilson et al. 2012). The second atlas for Ontario revealed an increase throughout the province (Rising 2007), while in Maryland, near the southern edge of the breeding range, occupancy declined by 10 percent (Ellison 2010). The situation in Maryland, however, is complicated by the presence of a distinct subspecies, the Coastal Plain Swamp Sparrow. Nevertheless, that 10 percent decrease contrasts with an increase of nearly 32 percent in Pennsylvania. Any explanation for that difference will require closer study.

Swamp Sparrows have benefited from the extensive legal protection afforded to wetlands. Although drainage

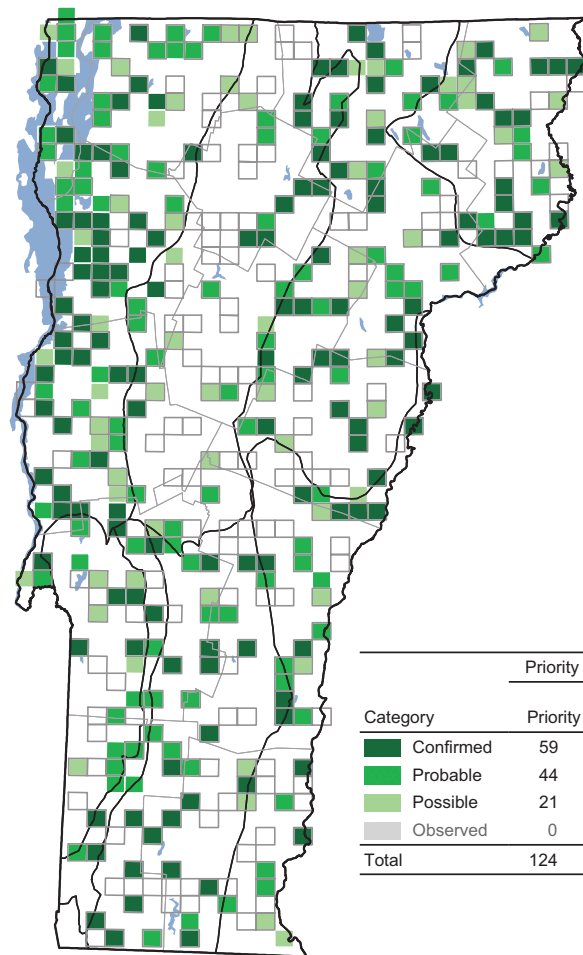
RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME





CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	23	29	+ 6	+ 26
Northeastern Highlands	13	16	+ 3	+ 23
Northern Green Mountains	16	17	+ 1	+ 6
Northern Vermont Piedmont	23	24	+ 1	+ 4
Southern Green Mountains	19	15	- 4	- 21
Southern Vermont Piedmont	12	14	+ 2	+ 17
Taconic Mountains	4	4	+ 0	+ 0
Vermont Valley	4	5	+ 1	+ 25
Totals	114	124	+ 10	+ 9



Category	Priority Block Count	
	Priority 1	Priority 1 & 2
Confirmed	59	129
Probable	44	83
Possible	21	41
Observed	0	0
Total	124	253

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	86	25
Northeastern Highlands	81	12
Northern Green Mountains	49	13
Northern Vermont Piedmont	76	20
Southern Green Mountains	66	15
Southern Vermont Piedmont	57	9
Taconic Mountains	52	4
Vermont Valley	87	3

of wetlands was heavily promoted and subsidized in the 1950s, 60s, and early 70s, by the late 1970s these efforts were curtailed. The 1985 Farm Bill penalized the conversion of wetlands to most crops. These changes have likely resulted in an increase in habitat for wetland-dependent species like Swamp Sparrow. Federal programs such as the Wetlands Reserve Program, established in 1990, provided landowners with incentives to protect and enhance wetland habitat, and species such as Swamp Sparrow have likely benefited from these programs as well. Nevertheless, a number of potential threats to Swamp Sparrow

habitat remain, including flooding, siltation, natural succession, and the spread of invasive plants such as *Phragmites* and purple loosestrife. Despite such risks, the wide distribution of the species in Vermont offers promise for its continued success.

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