

Field Sparrow

Spizella pusilla

A small and delicate bird, the Field Sparrow's rusty-brown plumage and light, unstreaked breast are accented by a pink bill and pink legs. The sweet, rising song is highly recognizable, reminiscent of a pennywhistle tooting ever-higher, quickening notes. Field Sparrows breed throughout the eastern United States, from southeastern Maine to Georgia and westward to southeastern Montana, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and southern Texas. They also breed in extreme southeastern Canada (Carey et al. 2008). Vermont is near the northern edge of this sparrow's breeding distribution.

The Field Sparrow is aptly named. The fields it prefers for breeding are those undergoing active succession. Brushy pastures with small woody vegetation and exposed perches for singing provide optimum habitat, but areas too close to suburban development are avoided (Carey et al. 2008). In Vermont, Field Sparrows appear to favor overgrowing meadows dominated by juniper. Lanyon (1981) found birds present in 1- to 2-year-old fields in New York, and noted their disappearance from those fields after 18 years. Two broods are generally raised each year, and nest placement differs predictably for each breeding attempt. First nests are placed on or near the ground, while second nests are situated as high as 2 meters (6 feet) in a small sapling or shrub (Carey et al. 2008). During the second atlas, six nests with eggs were found from 21 May to 6 June. Six nests with young were reported from 27 May through 15 July.

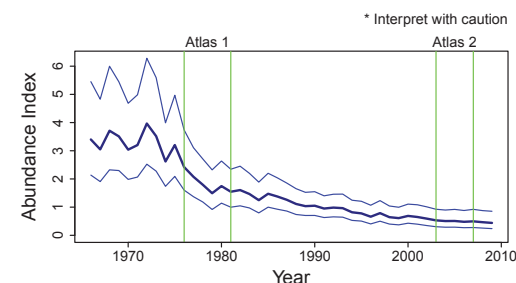
As a shrubland species, the Field Sparrow undoubtedly benefited from the removal of primal forests by European settlers. The bird was considered quite common in Vermont by early naturalists (e.g., Perkins and Howe 1901). During the first atlas, the Field Sparrow was widespread in eastern and western Vermont, with noticeably fewer records in central and northern areas, where forest cover was most extensive. Breeding was documented in 63 percent of Priority 1 blocks. The second atlas revealed a severe decline in the number of occupied blocks. Field Sparrows were found in only 38 percent of Priority 1 blocks, and losses were documented in every biophys-

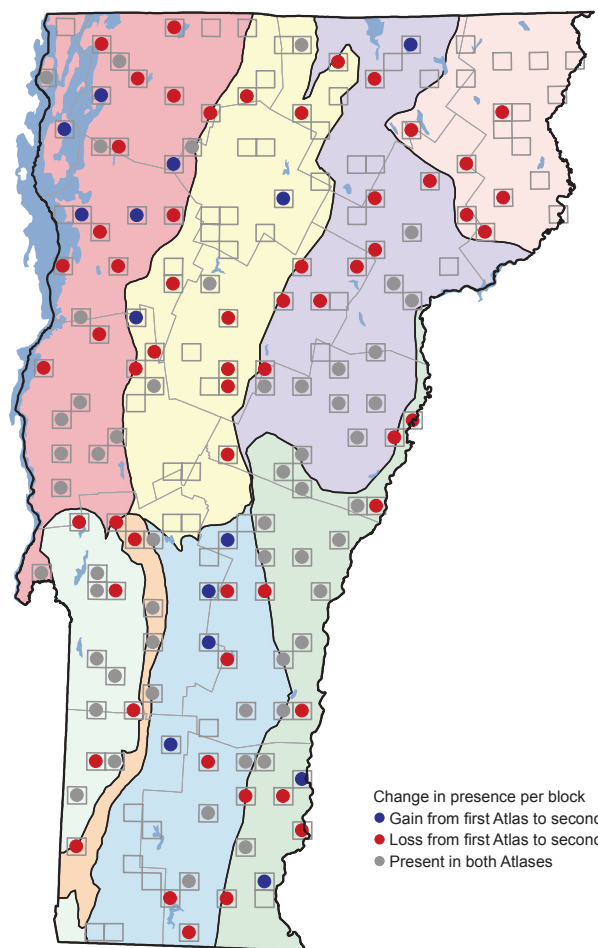


ical region. No birds were reported in the Northeastern Highlands. Breeding Bird Survey data from 1982 to 2007 show significant declining trends throughout eastern North America and across the species' entire range, including a significant annual decline of 4.6 percent in Vermont (Sauer et al. 2011). Second atlases in New York (McGowan and Corwin 2008) and Ontario (Cadman et al. 2007) showed Field Sparrows to be declining more steeply, at 16 and 33 percent per year, respectively, while Pennsylvania's second atlas revealed virtually no change (Wilson et al. 2012).

Declining trends for Field Sparrow, although alarming, are not surprising because of the decrease in the availability of the species' preferred early-successional shrub habitat. Vermont has listed the bird as a Species of Special Concern, citing long-term declines apparent in both atlas and BBS data. To reverse these downward trends, the state Wildlife Action Plan recommends the establishment and maintenance of at least one large management

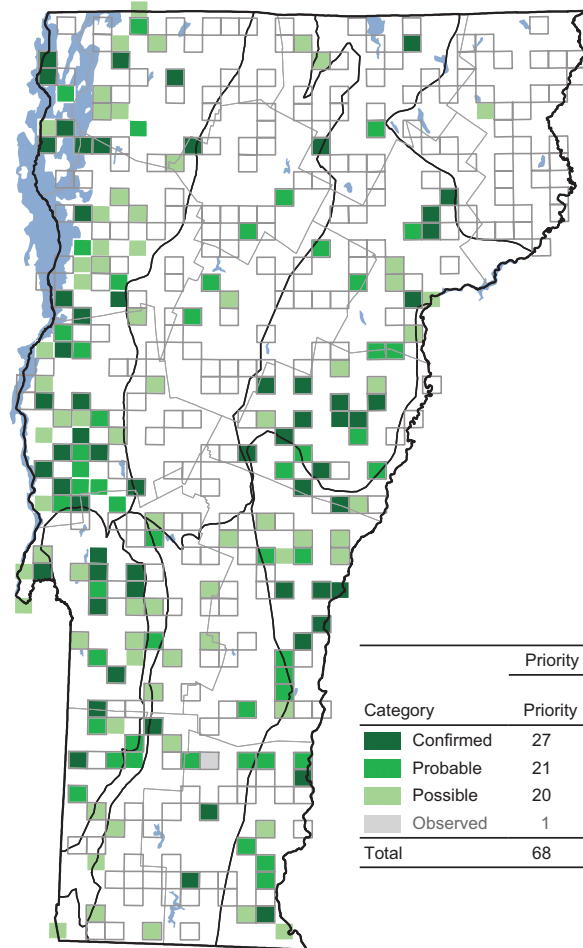
RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME





CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	24	17	- 7	- 29
Northeastern Highlands	6	0	- 6	- 100
Northern Green Mountains	13	5	- 8	- 62
Northern Vermont Piedmont	21	12	- 9	- 43
Southern Green Mountains	14	11	- 3	- 21
Southern Vermont Piedmont	18	14	- 4	- 22
Taconic Mountains	11	7	- 4	- 36
Vermont Valley	5	2	- 3	- 60
Totals	112	68	- 44	- 39



Category	Priority Block Count	
	Priority 1	Priority 1 & 2
Confirmed	27	53
Probable	21	41
Possible	20	45
Observed	1	1
Total	68	139

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	49	26
Northeastern Highlands	0	0
Northern Green Mountains	16	8
Northern Vermont Piedmont	44	21
Southern Green Mountains	33	14
Southern Vermont Piedmont	62	18
Taconic Mountains	76	12
Vermont Valley	37	2

area (greater than 1000 hectares [2470 acres]) dedicated to early successional species. The plan sets a population goal of 10,000 individuals. Other problems that the Field Sparrow faces include susceptibility to cold temperatures and cowbird parasitism (Carey et al. 2008).

The Field Sparrow is a strong disperser, and readily colonizes newly available habitat. Adults return to the same breeding areas, but their offspring typically breed elsewhere (Walkinshaw 1978, Carey et al. 2008). The transitional quality of this bird's preferred habitat contributes to the vulnerability of its populations. In Vermont, the

trend towards a more forested landscape will continue to be detrimental to Field Sparrows. The species will likely persist in the state, but in lower numbers than occurred 100 years ago.

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