

Ring-necked Pheasant

Phasianus colchicus



Among upland game bird species in Vermont, the Ring-necked Pheasant, with its spectacularly colored males and contrastingly drab females, is second only to the Wild Turkey in size. This pheasant, native to Asia, has been widely introduced in Europe and across North America, but in Vermont approaches its northern longitudinal limit. Birds originating from captive stocks have been found irregularly in the wild in the state since the 1890s, when initial releases of large numbers of birds provided greater opportunities for hunting (Foote 1946).

Pheasant nests are typically built on the ground in crop fields, overgrown meadows, or brushy areas, and hence the species is found in agricultural areas, either currently in use or recently abandoned (Giudice and Ratti 2001). Breeding was not confirmed during the first atlas (Fichtel 1985). During the second atlas, three breeding confirmations were based on observations of precocial young encountered from 22 May to 8 September. The male's distinctive call makes the species likely to be detected.

Ring-necked Pheasants are sparsely distributed in Vermont and ordinarily found at elevations below 760 meters (2500 feet). Pheasants were most often found in the relatively open lands in the southern end of the Champlain Valley, where breeding was confirmed in two blocks. A secondary center of occurrence was recorded in the Northeastern Highlands.

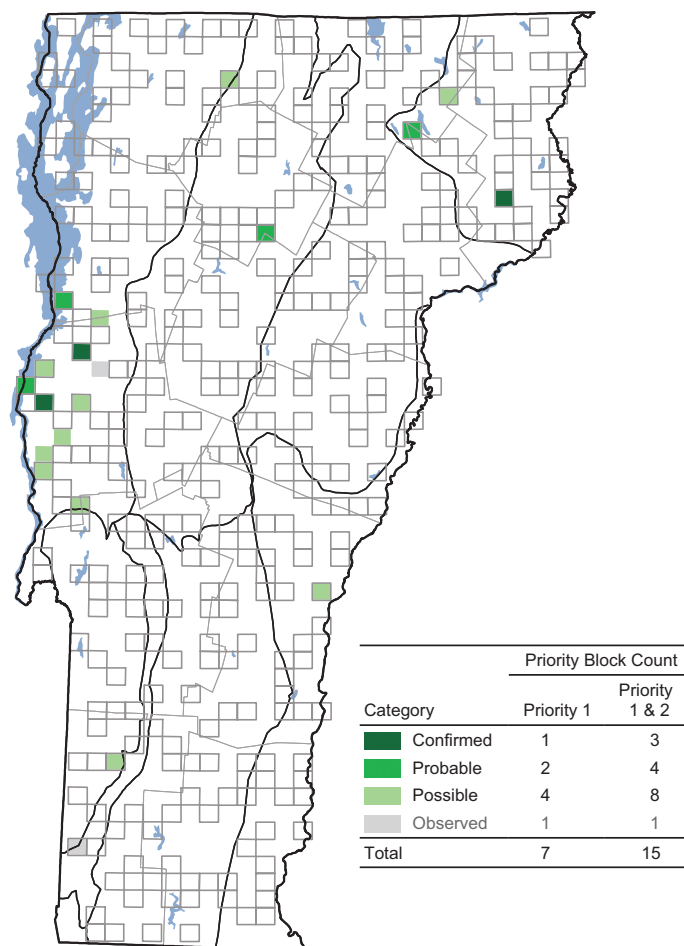
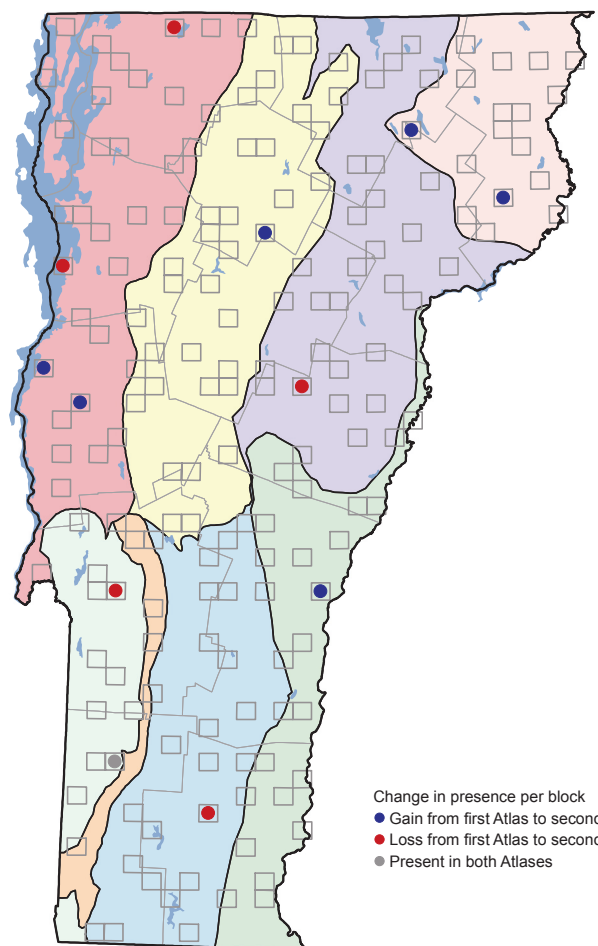
Ring-necked Pheasants were found in more blocks during the second atlas compared to the first atlas, but the numbers of occupied blocks were too low to indicate changes in distribution. Releases of substantial numbers of captive birds into the wild began in the 1890s (Foote 1946, Fichtel 1985) and advertisements for private hunting preserves in Vermont can still be found on the Internet (G. A. Clark pers. obs.). State-sponsored releases ended in 1971 (Fichtel 1985). The scattered distribution of this species around the state is presumably related to sites where pheasants have been released or have escaped from captivity in recent years. On rare occasions released pheasants travel remarkably long distances: Foote (1946) reported that one banded bird released in Shelburne in

the 1890s was later found over 145 kilometers (90 miles) away in Bennington and that another was found in Barre. A comparable extended wandering has been reported from Finland, where a bird moved 210 kilometers (130 miles; Giudice and Ratti 2001).

Breeding Bird Survey data for eastern North America and for the New England / Mid-Atlantic Coast (Bird Conservation Region 30) show that populations of this species have significantly declined in recent decades (Sauer et al. 2011). This pattern is reinforced by sharp declines, at smaller scales, found between the first and second breeding bird atlases in New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Ontario. Although many states (including New York, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire) have sponsored release programs, their aim was to provide put-and-take hunting rather than to establish self-sustaining populations (e.g., Nevers 1994).

Pheasants are vulnerable to severe winters (Foote 1946, Forbush 1927, Marcotte 1998), particularly because deep snows can lead to starvation for this ground-feeding species. Giudice and Ratti (2001) concluded that although pheasant populations often fluctuate with the weather, long-term trends are more commonly related to habitat changes. In Vermont, development and widespread regrowth of forests have eliminated open habitat, and agricultural areas are often used too intensively to be suitable for pheasants. In contrast, at Plum Island, Massachusetts, a sharp reduction in an established population of pheasants is suspected to have resulted at least in part from loss of genetic adaptation through interbreeding with released birds from captive stock (G. Gavutis pers. comm.).

Private releases of pheasants for hunting on preserves have enabled the species to survive in Vermont over the past fifty years. In view of the success in recent decades of the native Wild Turkey as a game bird, there may now



CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	2	2	+ 0	+ 0
Northeastern Highlands	0	2	+ 2	+ 200
Northern Green Mountains	0	1	+ 1	+ 100
Northern Vermont Piedmont	1	0	- 1	- 100
Southern Green Mountains	1	0	- 1	- 100
Southern Vermont Piedmont	0	1	+ 1	+ 100
Taconic Mountains	2	1	- 1	- 50
Vermont Valley	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	6	7	+ 1	+ 17

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	12	60
Northeastern Highlands	8	20
Northern Green Mountains	1	7
Northern Vermont Piedmont	0	0
Southern Green Mountains	0	0
Southern Vermont Piedmont	2	7
Taconic Mountains	4	7
Vermont Valley	0	0

be less incentive to stock foreign game birds. A continued presence of the Ring-necked Pheasant in Vermont in the immediate future depends on releases or escapes of captive birds into the wild. Over the long term, the probability that the state will support a self-sustaining breeding population is extremely low.

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