

Great Egret

Ardea alba

Recognizable as the long-time symbol of the National Audubon Society, the Great Egret, when observed in Vermont, always merits mention among birdwatchers. This strikingly graceful bird has been seen in the Champlain Valley with increasing regularity since the first atlas, but breeding records remain scarce. Given that the Great Egret's primary breeding range has been along the southeast coast of the United States, the increase in Vermont sightings in recent decades may be an early sign of a changing distribution, perhaps in response to climate change. The Great Egret also breeds in scattered locations in the upper Midwest and several states in the West, as well as in coastal areas of Central America and on most continents around the world (McCrimmon et al. 2001).

The breeding biology of the Great Egret is similar to that of other heron species, which are often found in the same nesting colonies. On Lake Champlain, egrets have nested with Great Blue Herons at Missisquoi NWR and with Black-crowned Night-Herons on Four Brothers Islands. Nests are placed in trees at various heights and are large, flat platforms of sticks. Nests may be 1 meter (3 feet) in width and contain clutches that average three blue eggs (McCrimmon et al. 2001). Great Egrets nest early and are often present in nesting colonies by mid-April (D. E. Capen pers. obs.).

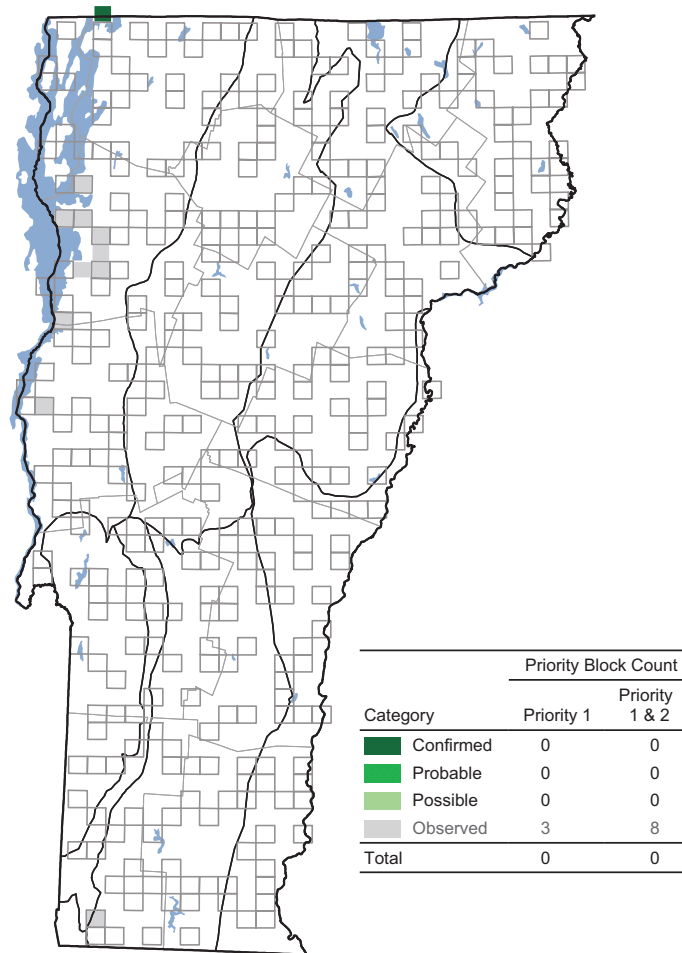
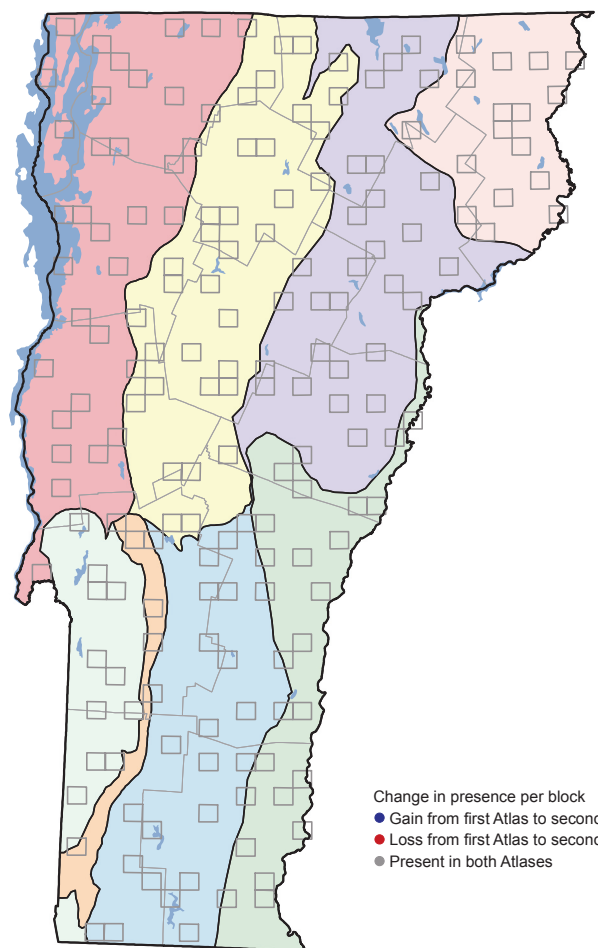
The first probable evidence of breeding in the state was reported during the first atlas, in 1977 on the Missisquoi refuge (Fichtel 1985). Subsequent breeding records on the refuge were not reported until the second atlas, when two pairs were observed on nests in 2004. Nesting was not confirmed again until 2010, although adult egrets were seen in other years during the atlas. Three nests were documented in 2010 (Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge unpubl. data). On the refuge, the egrets have nested in the dense colony of Great Blue Herons on Shad and Metcalf islands. In addition to the confirmed nesting of Great Egrets on Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge, the species was observed in eight other locations in the Champlain Valley and one atlas block in southwestern



Vermont. On the New York side of Lake Champlain, the number of successful nests on Four Brothers Islands has grown from 3 to 7 from 2006 through 2010 (D. E. Capen unpubl. data).

The North American Waterbird Conservation Plan (Kushlan et al. 2002) listed the Great Egret as a breeding species in 23 of 37 Bird Conservation Regions. With a population estimate of more than 180,000 breeding birds, the species was classified as not currently at risk. Trend analysis of Breeding Bird Survey data indicates that Great Egret populations have grown by 3.5 percent per year throughout its range from 1982 to 2007 (Sauer et al. 2011). Recent atlas projects were consistent with this trend. In Ontario, Peck (2007) concluded that the provincial population had increased from the first atlas to the second, based on an increase in records of confirmed breeding from 6 to 12 blocks, and growth in the size of monitored colonies, such as those in Lake Huron, where over 100 pairs were counted in 2005. In New York the second atlas documented a 59 percent increase in number of blocks where breeding was confirmed, with the vast majority of these records in the Long Island and New York Harbor region (McCrimmon 2008).

As with other colonial waterbirds on Lake Champlain, the most suitable nesting sites for Great Egrets are Four Brothers Islands, Young Island, and Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge. On Four Brothers, the egrets have nested only on Island B, where the forest of buckthorn is threatened by more than 1200 nesting cormorants. Restoration of trees killed by cormorants on Young Island has begun, but it will be years before habitat will be suitable



CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	0	0	+0	+0
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
Totals	0	0	+0	+0

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	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

for Great Egret nesting. Given the propensity of Great Egrets to nest with other colonial birds, Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge remains a key location for this species in Vermont.

DAVID E. CAPEN