

Herring Gull

Larus argentatus



Although increasingly common inland, the sight of a Herring Gull still conjures images of an ocean beach, rolling dunes, an urban landfill, or a fishing boat screened by ravenous crying birds. A circumpolar breeder, the Herring Gull's transcontinental range extends from northern Alaska and Canada eastward to the Maritime Provinces, and southward down the East Coast to Cape Hatteras (Pierotti and Good 1994). Herring Gulls are common breeders in both the Great Lakes and New England states. They have a long history on Lake Champlain islands where human disturbance is low and predatory mammals absent. Ellison (1985) cited breeding records back to the mid-1800s. Apparently the Herring Gull has maintained its status as a breeding bird for more than 150 years, but records suggest that the nesting population, at least until the mid-1960s, never exceeded 200 to 300 pairs (Ellison 1985).

On Lake Champlain, Herring Gulls nest most frequently on the fringe of Ring-billed Gull colonies, but they also can be solitary or small-group nesters and are more successful at pioneering new sites than ring-bills. Nests are most often placed on the ground in areas of little or no vegetation, sometimes against logs or rocks near the shoreline. Nest initiation on Lake Champlain takes place from late April through May, with some flightless young still present at the end of July (D. E. Capen pers. obs.). Despite its reputation as a landfill bird, the Herring Gull relies more on natural food items than garbage during the nesting season. They scavenge on dead fish, join Ring-billed Gulls in feeding on schools of surface fish, and take advantage of the abundant numbers of dead and dying gulls and cormorants in the dense colonies on Lake Champlain islands (D. E. Capen pers. obs.).

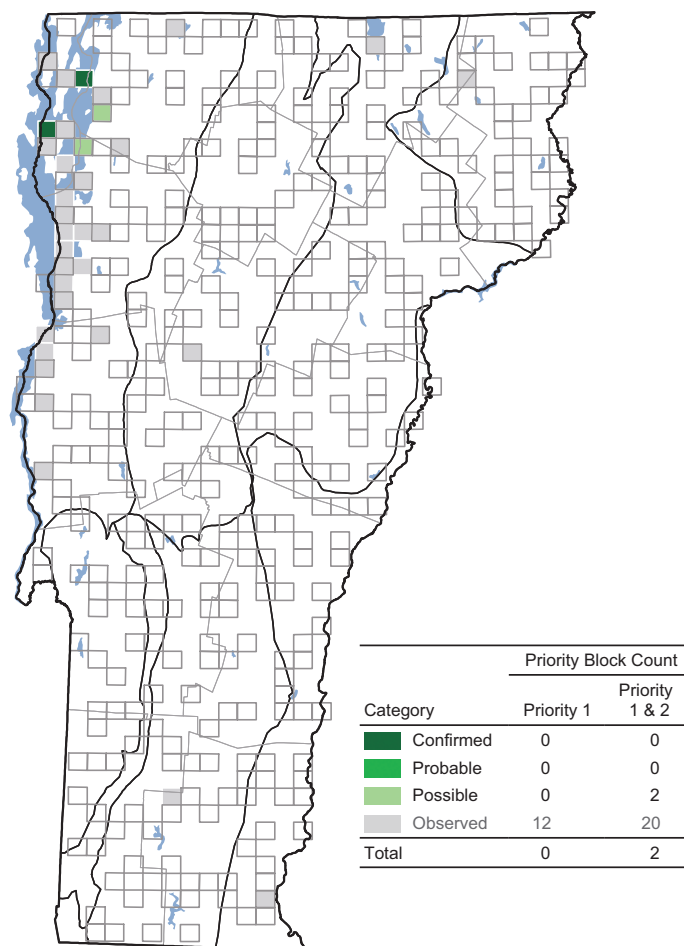
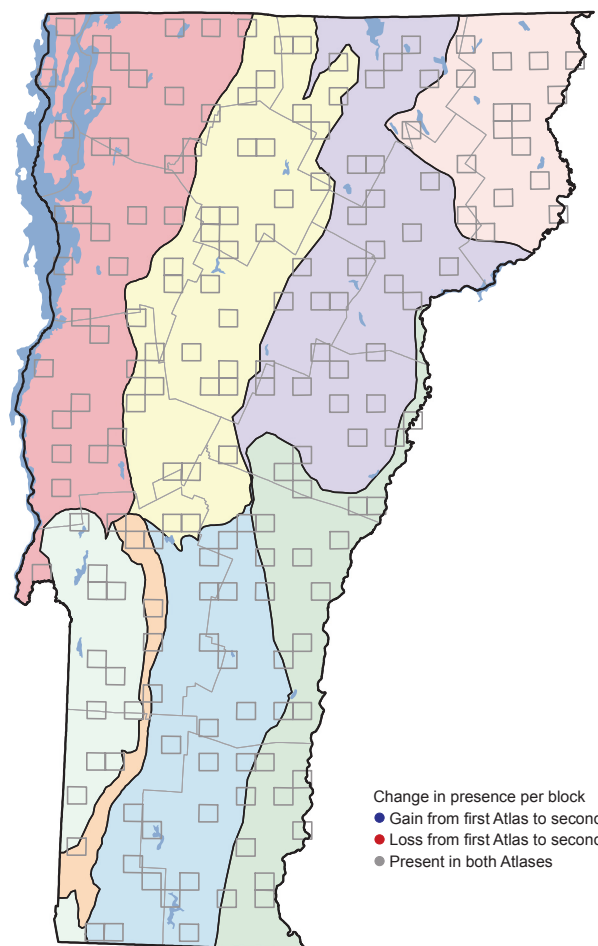
During the 1970s, as well as in the first atlas, the only Herring Gull nests in Vermont were on Young Island in Lake Champlain. Their numbers may have dipped below 100 pairs during these years, while populations of Ring-billed Gulls grew rapidly. In the second atlas, nesting Herring Gulls were still confined to islands in Lake Champlain. Young Island harbored the largest population: 150

nests in 2007 (J. Gobeille pers. comm.). The only other Vermont island to host breeding Herring Gulls was Popasquash Island, where a single nest was recorded in 2004. The 20 observations of this species in priority atlas blocks throughout Vermont probably represent subadult birds or non-breeding adults, although it would not be surprising if nesting pairs were discovered on other inland lakes. During New York's atlases, dozens of CO records occurred on small lakes in the Adirondacks (Richmond 2008), and atlasers in Ontario confirmed breeding in the lakes region of that province's boreal forest (Weseloh 2007).

Four Brothers Islands in New York host the only other persistent colony of Herring Gulls on Lake Champlain; 20 to 30 nests are counted annually on each of the four islands. Across New York, the second atlas found almost no change in the distribution of this species, which occurred in 84 blocks (Richmond 2008). Similarly, the Ontario atlas found no significant change in numbers of blocks where Herring Gulls were confirmed nesting. Yet censuses of nesting colonies in the Great Lakes have shown a steady decline, dropping 14.3 percent since 1990 (Weseloh 2007).

Throughout the Herring Gull's range in the United States and Canada, there has been an estimated 19 percent decline in the breeding population (MANEM 2006), likely a result of better management of landfills and changes in stocks of baitfish. Despite declines, the species still is classified as one of "low concern" in the North American Waterbird Conservation Plan (Kushlan et al. 2002); this label might also be appropriate for Herring Gulls in Vermont. The widespread distribution of this species, matched with few threats to survival and productivity, should assure its status as a common species in the Lake Champlain region.

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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	2	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