

## Common Barn-Owl

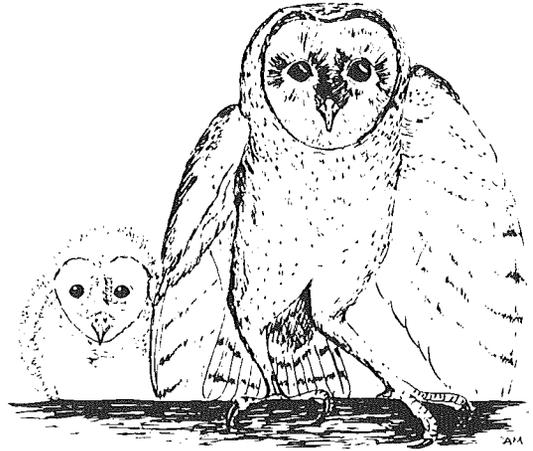
*Tyto alba*

The Common Barn-Owl is distributed worldwide, occurring in North and South America, Eurasia, Australia, and Africa, and populating most tropical zones and temperate regions where winter temperatures are not too severe (Bunn 1982); the subspecies *T. a. pratincola* occurs in North and Central America. Although the American Ornithologists' Union recently changed the species' name to Common Barn-Owl (from Barn Owl), it is doubtful that it is common anywhere in the United States; the species has been on the National Audubon Society's Blue List since 1972 (Tate 1981). This long-winged bird of open country with a distinctive heart-shaped face and dark eyes belongs to a different family (Tytonidae) than the other North American owls.

The Common Barn-Owl is a secretive species that requires open habitat, such as lightly wooded areas or agricultural lands. It nests in such man-made structures as barn lofts, church steeples, uninhabited buildings, nest boxes, ruins, silos, and water towers, as well as in natural sites such as hollow trees and hollows in banks or cliffs (Bent 1938; Bunn et al. 1982). An expert mouser able to hunt in total darkness (Payne 1962), the Common Barn-owl specializes in meadow voles, white-footed mice, rats, and shrews (Errington 1932).

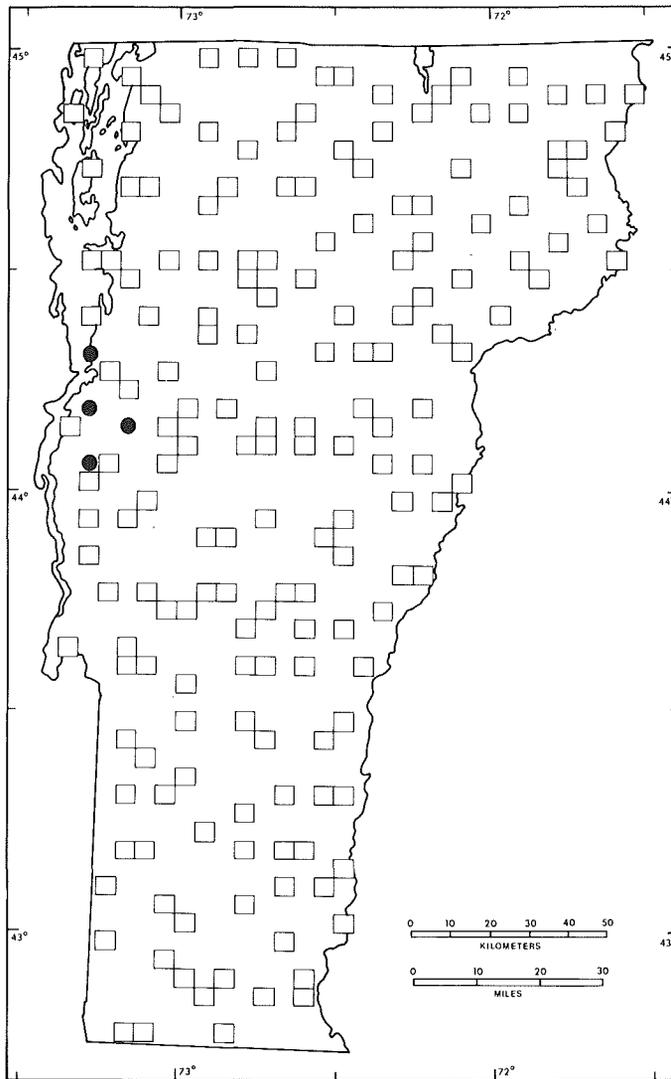
The Common Barn-Owl is on the northern edge of its range in Vermont, and was not known to breed in the state until the Atlas Project survey (Cutting 1884; Perkins and Howe 1901; Stewart 1952; AOU 1957). Fortner et al. (1933) and Smith (1934b) called the species "accidental" in Vermont. The species is rather lightly feathered for an owl and is susceptible to mortality during cold weather, requiring therefore a protected place to roost (Speirs 1940; S. B. Laughlin, pers. observ.) as well as a steady supply of food. Stewart (1952) stated that birds north of 35° latitude tend not to be sedentary.

Four specimen records exist for Vermont



from 1894 to 1920 (Tyler 1894; Fortner et al. 1933). Although no evidence of barn-owl nesting in Vermont has previously been published, the Vermont Institute of Natural Science has received at least two reports of nesting "monkey-faced" owls with weird calls: a nest in an unused fireplace in Rockingham in the 1920s (M. E. Workman, pers. comm.); and a nest with adults and young, in the late 1800s, in a sawmill in Shrewsbury (M. Collins, pers. comm.)—an area now completely reforested but then devoid of trees. The possibility exists that, despite the lack of documentation, the Common Barn-Owl has bred in Vermont in the past. The intensive fieldwork of the Atlas Project, as well as an appeal for the report of observations through newspaper articles and articles in the state agricultural journal, led to 4 confirmed nestings between 1976 and 1981. Of the birds found nesting, however, only 1 pair was still breeding in 1983. The species is nocturnal as well as secretive, making detection difficult at any time and, outside the breeding season, nearly impossible. Aside from Atlas Project reports, only two Vermont records exist, both from the *Records of Vermont Birds* (1973–83): one from Poultney in the spring of 1973, and one from Middlebury in the winter of 1978–79.

The first confirmed breeding for the state was obtained on July 3, 1977, when 3 young (ranging in age from 10 days to 2 weeks) were rescued from a collapsed chimney in



**No. of priority blocks in which recorded**

TOTAL ○ (○%)

Possible breeding: ○ (○% of total)

Probable breeding: ○ (○% of total)

Confirmed breeding: ○ (○% of total)

**Physiographic regions in which recorded**

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	○	○	○
Green Mountains	○	○	○
North Central	○	○	○
Northeast Highlands	○	○	○
East Central	○	○	○
Taconic Mountains	○	○	○
Eastern Foothills	○	○	○

Charlotte (ASR, M. Burden, S. B. Laughlin); 2 of the young were unhurt, but the youngest had a crushed wing and has remained at the Vermont Institute of Natural Science.

Barn-Owls nested in the chimney of a house on a large dairy farm in Addison in the summer of 1976; 4 to 5 birds were seen flying out of the chimney at night in late summer (ASR, B. Danyow). The adults were frequently seen and the young were heard. A pair laid 5 eggs in the upper part of a hay barn in Ferrisburg in May 1977; the farmer stored his bales carefully so as to not interfere with the birds (ASR, B. Guyett).

A fourth nesting was in an old quarry south of Burlington; the report was sub-

mitted on the understanding that the location be kept confidential. The owls have nested in a man-made structure there from 1980 to 1983. This site provided Vermont with its only definite egg dates: 2 eggs on July 12, 1982, and 3 eggs on July 30, 1983 (ASR, J. J. Allen). Clutch size in North America has reportedly ranged from 2 to 11 eggs (Bent 1938; Terres 1980; Bunn et al. 1982). The only Vermont hatching date is for July 20.

The Atlas Project established that the Common Barn-Owl nests in Vermont, however tenuously. This rare and beneficial species is proposed for Species of Special Concern status in Vermont.

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