

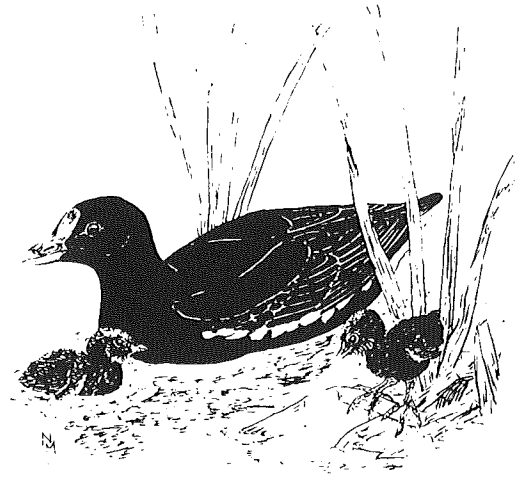
Common Moorhen

Gallinula chloropus

The Common Moorhen, formerly the Common Gallinule, seems inappropriately named for Vermont since it is neither common nor an inhabitant of moors. The species is generally restricted to the larger marshes of the state, which provide the dense emergent vegetation in which it prefers to nest. Nowhere in its extensive North American range does the Common Moorhen appear to be particularly common (Sanderson 1977), although its retiring nature and affinity for dense, inaccessible cover may confound population estimates. Because moorhens forage on open water, swimming and occasionally diving as they feed on aquatic vegetation and invertebrates, they are sometimes mistaken for ducks by the casual observer. However, moorhens are close relatives of the secretive, marsh-loving rails, despite their behavioral similarity to waterfowl.

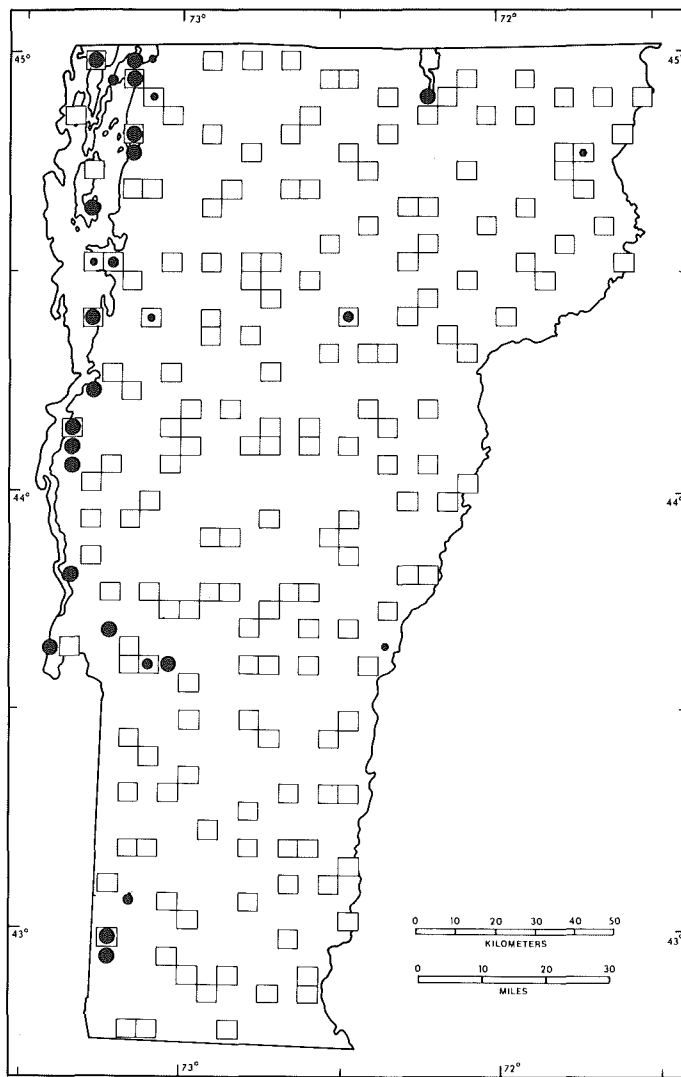
In Vermont, Atlas Project workers found the Common Moorhen restricted almost exclusively to a band of wetlands bordering Lake Champlain. Breeding has also been observed at the West Rutland Marsh, the extensive marshes on Lake Memphremagog at the mouth of the Barton River, on Lake Bomoseen, and in the vicinity of Bennington. The species is extremely rare along the Connecticut River watershed, and was absent from Herrick's Cove, where habitat seems more than adequate. Moorhens are virtually unknown in the many ponds that dot Vermont's higher elevations. Perhaps because Vermont is near the northern breeding limit of the species, Common Moorhens are rarely seen even during migration away from their usual breeding areas. Migration extends from late April through mid May and from September through mid October, with April and October being the arrival and departure months, respectively. Common Moorhens of the East winter along the Gulf Coast (AOU 1983).

Pairing and courtship begin during migration, and care must be taken not to mistake migrants for possible breeders. Pairs defend



a territory within the marsh, using calls, displays, and aggressive attacks on intruders (Cramp and Simmons 1980). Courtship entails a variety of visual and behavioral displays—bill dipping, mummering, bowing and nibbling, and chasing (Cramp and Simmons 1980)—all directed at the prospective mate. Unlike mating among many waterbirds, solicitation and copulation always occur on land or on a display platform, never on water.

Nesting activity in Vermont apparently commences in late May and early June. The nest, constructed by both members of the pair, is placed in dense emergent vegetation, usually in 0.3–0.9 m (1–3 ft) of water (Strohmeyer 1977). Built of dead cattails, sedges, and reeds, the nest, although supported and concealed by emergent vegetation, usually has a ramp to the water and a canopy. Clutches contain from 2 to 17 eggs—usually from 6 to 10. Eggs are deposited at a rate of 1 a day; the clutch is often incubated by both sexes from about the 5th egg on (Krauth 1972). The incubation period, normally 18 to 22 days, varies with clutch size, since the eggs hatch asynchronously. Data are extant on only one clutch from Vermont, a nest of 10 eggs found June 1 in the West Rutland Marsh. Although Common Moorhen chicks are precocial, they are brooded frequently after hatching by both adults. After leaving the nest, they use resting platforms (constructed from



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 13 (7%)

Possible breeding: 4 (31% of total)

Probable breeding: 3 (23% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 6 (46% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	9	29	69
Green Mountains	0	0	0
North Central	1	5	8
Northeast Highlands	1	6	8
East Central	0	0	0
Taconic Mountains	2	12	15
Eastern Foothills	0	0	0

marsh vegetation) or muskrat houses as brooding areas. Although precocial, the young are entirely dependent on the adults during their first several weeks of life (Cramp and Simmons 1980). Despite their secretive-ness, moorhens proved relatively easy to confirm as breeders through sightings of fledglings (FL), probably because full growth is not attained for 10 weeks (Strohmeyer 1977), and young remain with the parents well into the fall. Although moorhens have been reported to have high nesting, hatching, and fledging success (Byrd and Zeille-maker 1981), and northern birds are thought to have larger clutches than southern birds (Sanderson 1977), the four Vermont FLS

were of relatively small broods (2 to 4 young). Six broods were reported from June 29 (downy young) to August 21 (fledglings).

Although moorhens are considered a gamebird throughout the Northeast, few hunters actively pursue them; consequently, harvests, despite generous bag limits, are probably minimal. However, the species is rare in some areas of apparently suitable habitat, perhaps because Vermont is near the northeastern edge of its range and at the limit of its climatic tolerance. Common Moorhens have been considered rare and local in Vermont since the 1800s (Allen 1909), a status they still hold today.

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