Song Sparrow

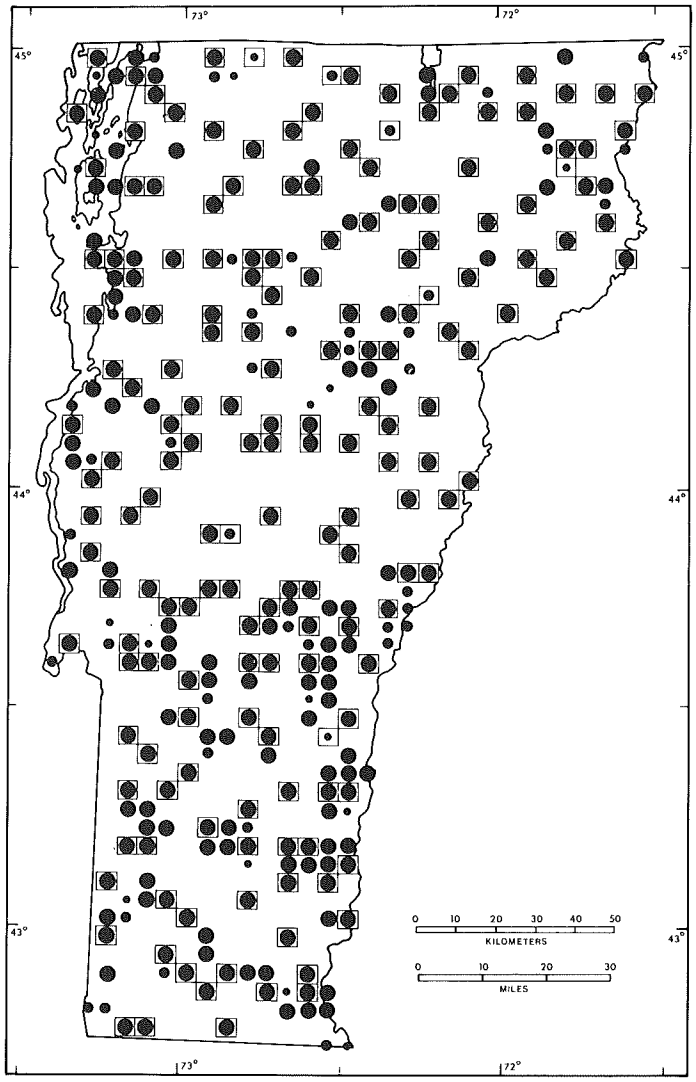
Melospiza melodia

"This is one of our most common and familiar sparrows," Zadock Thompson wrote in 1842 about the Song Sparrow, and his statement remains true in Vermont today. Indeed, the Song Sparrow is familiar and abundant across North America, with some races resident and some migrant (Nice 1937). Breeding habitat includes brushy areas with water nearby, overgrown fencerows, and shrubby areas bordering gardens and yards (Nice 1937). The diet consists of insects and weed seeds, with a higher proportion of insects in the summer (Nice 1937).

During the Atlas Project, the Song Sparrow occurred in 100% of the priority blocks and was confirmed as a breeder in 96%. Song Sparrows annually overwinter in Vermont in small numbers; for migrants, spring arrival dates are early to mid March, and fall departure is by the end of October (RVB 1972–83).

The males establish their territories through their tuneful, persistent, and variable song, and through fighting (Nice 1937), and are strongly territorial throughout the breeding season. As is usual in songbird courtship, the females are attracted to the male's territory. Nice's (1939) detailed studies of the Song Sparrow chronicle the life of a male who occupied the same geographic area for 8 years, had 11 mates through those years, and only once had the same mate 2 years in succession. The size of a pair's territory is usually less than 0.4 ha (1 a) (Bent 1968). One of the male's courtship activities is "pouncing" on the female: suddenly flying down and hitting her and then flying off while singing loudly (Nice 1937).

In Vermont, nest building has been observed as early as April 23 (1977, in Wallingford). The nest is constructed entirely by the female (Nice 1937), and takes from 5 to 10 days to build, depending on the weather (Bent 1968). The nest is relatively simple; it is built largely of dead grasses and weeds, with a few fine roots and pieces of grapevine bark, and is lined with fine grasses or hair. The nest is located either on the ground or at an elevation of 0.6–1.2 m (2–4 ft) in weeds or a small tree or bush. The diameter varies, depending on whether the nest is located on the ground or above it; the nests above ground are considerably larger. Usually, the nests earlier in the season are on the ground and those later in the season are above the ground (Nice 1937). Many nests are placed on the ground under a tuft of grass, a bush, or a brush pile (Bent 1968). The timing of egg laying correlates with spring temperatures, with April 25 being the average date in Ohio (Nice 1937). In Vermont, nests with eggs have been found between May 1 and August 19 (52 nests). Clutches average 4.1 eggs (Nice 1937) in a range of 3 to 6; the average Vermont clutch was 4.6 eggs in a range of 3 to 6 (42 clutches). Incubation of the reddish-speckled, pale green to greenish white eggs averages 12 to 13 days (Nice 1937); the male defends the territory and nest site while the female incubates. Nests with young have been located in Vermont between May 22 and August 4 (22 records). The young leave the nest at about 10 days of age, before they can fly (Nice 1937); they can fly at 17 to 20 days (Stokes 1979). Re-



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 179 (100%)

Possible breeding:	3 (2% of total)
Probable breeding:	4 (2% of total)
Confirmed breeding:	172 (96% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	31	100	17
Green Mountains	54	100	30
North Central	19	100	11
Northeast Highlands	16	100	9
East Central	19	100	11
Taconic Mountains	16	100	9
Eastern Foothills	24	100	13

cently fledged young have been observed in Vermont between June 11 and July 31 (20 records). Song Sparrows regularly attempt three or four nestings a year, and some raise three broods (Nice 1937). The first egg of the second clutch may be laid as early as 6 days after the first brood fledges; the male feeds the first brood while the female incubates (Stokes 1979).

Nest parasitism by the Brown-headed Cowbird is a major factor in Song Sparrow nesting failure; the Song Sparrow's nest is a favorite site for cowbirds throughout the Song Sparrow's range. Nesting success is much lower in a parasitized nest (Nice 1937).

As might be expected, the Song Sparrow has apparently always been considered one of the more common species in Vermont (Allen 1909), and remains one of the most common and well-distributed species in the state.

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