

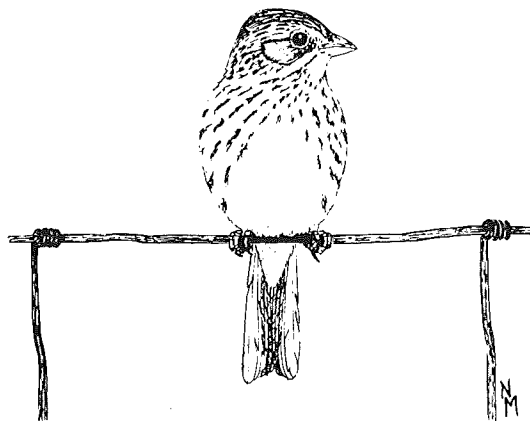
## Vesper Sparrow

*Pooecetes gramineus*

In Vermont the Vesper Sparrow inhabits overgrazed pastureland, gravel pits, and the edges of cultivated or dry hayfields. Wiens (1969) found in Wisconsin that the species showed a strong preference for dry, sparsely vegetated areas with fence posts for song perches. Song perches may also be provided by scattered saplings and shrubs (Wiens 1969). The Vesper Sparrow prefers dry areas and is found in upland localities; apparently it can do without a steady supply of water.

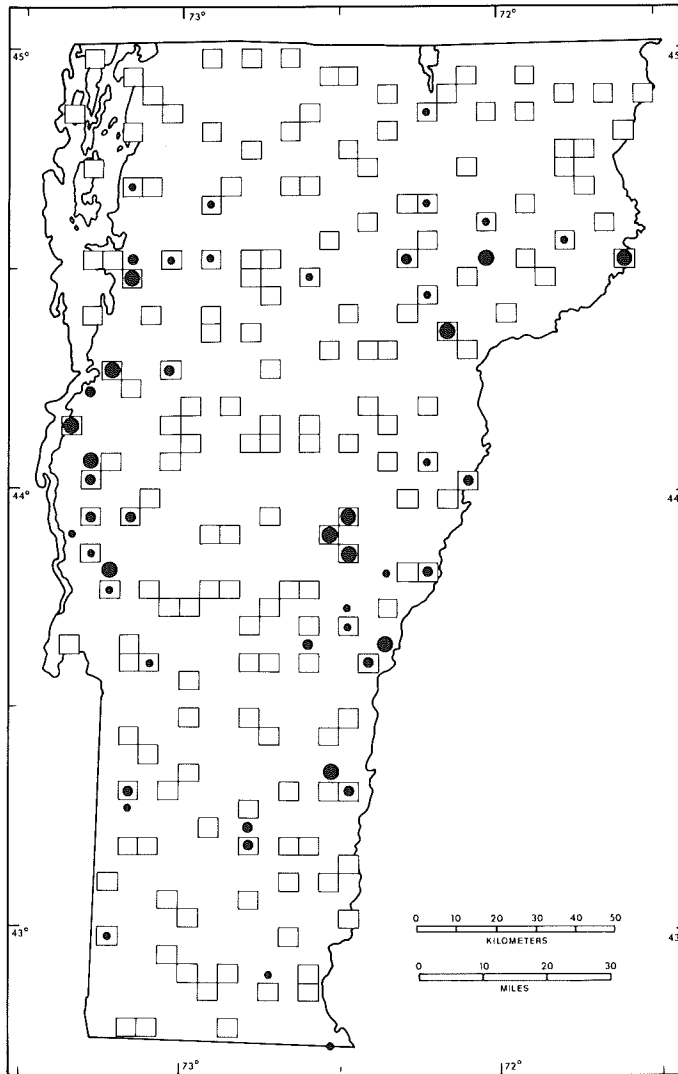
Vesper Sparrows return early to Vermont, usually in the first week and a half of April; the extreme date on record for a return is March 25. By mid April, males are on territory. Territories range up to 0.7 ha (1.8 a) (Bent 1968) or 0.9 ha (2.2 a) (Wiens 1969). Perched conspicuously, singing males are easily detected. The song consists of four slurred introductory notes, two low and two rising in pitch, which are followed by a complex, downward-spiraling series of trills that ends with a low rattle. In Vermont, the Vesper Sparrow is only sparsely distributed in suitable habitat, can be difficult to locate, and may have been overlooked in some Atlas Project priority blocks. Fewer than 30% of the Atlas Project records refer to confirmed breeding, but records of possible and probable breedings are more likely to represent unconfirmed breedings rather than transient birds. The well-concealed nest, placed in a hollow on the ground and usually protected by vegetation or other matter, may be found by systematically walking a territory until the sitting bird is flushed. Fledglings may be found in the same way, as they will explode rather like quail from under the searcher's feet. Forty-six percent of the confirmations were of fledged young.

Most Vesper Sparrows commence nesting in late April; eggs are laid in May. Egg dates from 13 Vermont records range from May 22 to June 29. Earlier and later dates probably occur, since records for other states indicate a more prolonged breeding period.



The species is double-brooded; therefore the potential period for confirmation of breeding is lengthy, probably extending into August in some years. The size of the clutch is usually 4 eggs, but may range from 3 to 6. Thirteen Vermont clutches included 10 sets of 4 eggs each and 3 sets of 3 eggs each. Most autumn migration occurs during October; a few birds are found in November.

The Vesper Sparrow's status in Vermont and the Northeast has changed markedly over the last two decades. The species was considered common for much of the early twentieth century. Recent declines so alarmed northeastern observers that the species was given Blue List status in *American Birds* from 1976 to 1979; it remained a "local problem species" in the 1982 edition of the list. In their succinct review of the Vesper Sparrow's status in *American Birds*, Tate and Tate (1982) noted that a regional decline in the Northeast is confirmed by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Breeding Bird survey data, but that the species is not declining in western North America. It is well known from accounts of Vermont in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that the forests of Vermont covered only 20% of the area of the state at that time; sheep raising and dairy farming were then the most common agricultural enterprises. The Vesper Sparrow probably flourished in the overgrazed uplands of the state. When the wool industry declined and marginal farms were abandoned, forests returned to about 80% of the state's land area. As its



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

TOTAL 35 (20%)

Possible breeding: 16 (46% of total)

Probable breeding: 11 (31% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 8 (23% of total)

**Physiographic regions in which recorded**

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	12	39	34
Green Mountains	2	4	6
North Central	6	31	17
Northeast Highlands	2	12	6
East Central	3	16	9
Taconic Mountains	4	25	11
Eastern Foothills	6	25	17

avored habitat declined, so did the Vesper Sparrow's numbers. If estimates of territory size are correct, areas of suitable habitat must be greater than 0.8 ha (2 a) to be capable of supporting even one pair.

Atlas Project records for the species revealed some interesting patterns in the Vesper Sparrow's Vermont distribution. Notably, 68% of the records may be ascribed to three physiographic regions of the state: the Champlain Lowlands (34% of the records), the Eastern Foothills (17%), and the North Central region (17%). These regions all possess extensively farmed areas. Despite its tendency to inhabit upland areas, the Vesper Sparrow is limited in some parts of the state

to major river valleys, possibly because only the more successful farms located on the fertile bottomland soils have survived the decline in agriculture in recent years.

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