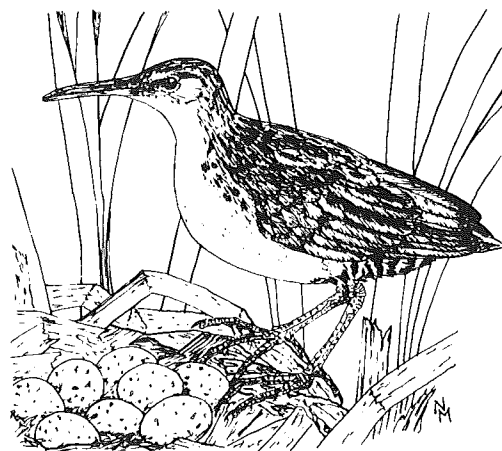


Virginia Rail

Rallus limicola

Widely distributed in North America, the Virginia Rail is the most frequently encountered rail in Vermont. Breeding across the middle of Canada and south to North Carolina, Oklahoma, and New Mexico, the species occupies freshwater marshes of various types. In Vermont, this species is most frequently found in cattail marshes. The Virginia Rail, though apparently highly territorial—as evidenced by its fearless, aggressive assaults on birdwatchers' tape recorders—demands little space for its territory. Tiny wetlands, 0.1 ha (0.3 a) or less in size, may host one or more pairs. While this fact undoubtedly contributes to the species' success, it also means that some pairs were probably overlooked by Atlas Project workers who ignored small patches of potential habitat. The species made a strong showing around the Memphremagog, West Rutland, and northern Champlain marshes, but was less well represented in the Connecticut River valley and southern end of Lake Champlain. Elsewhere in the state, Virginia Rails were sparsely distributed. Habitat is limited in much of the state, particularly in the Green Mountains, and without nearby rails to serve as population reservoirs, isolated patches of suitable habitat may go unpopulated.

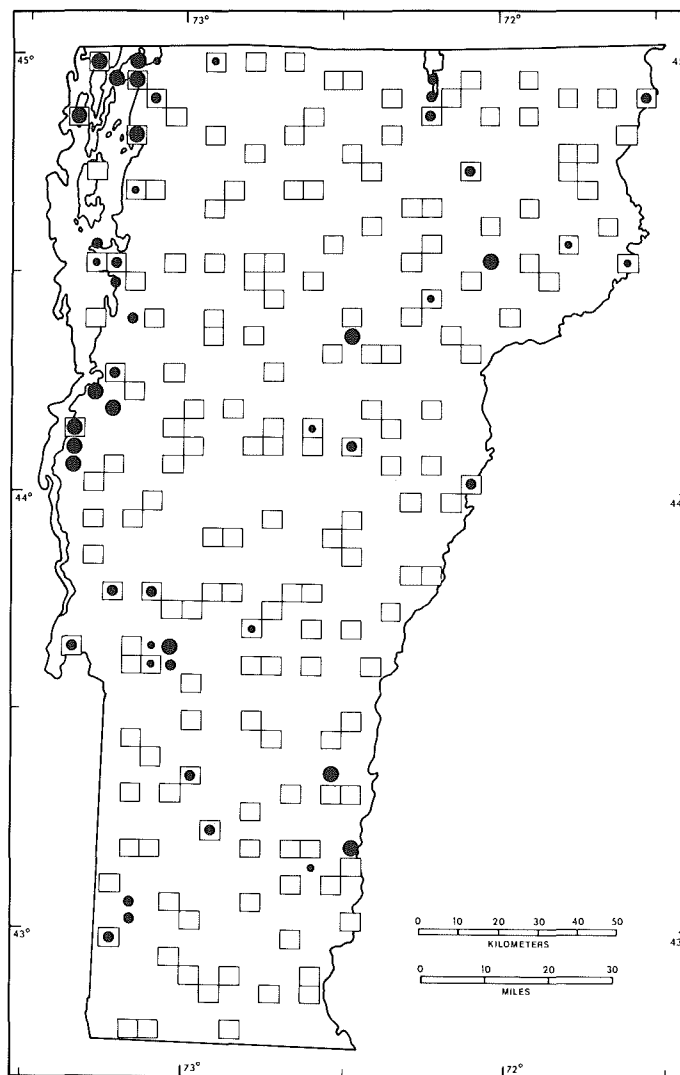
Virginia Rails are early migrants and usually begin appearing on territory in the third week of April, shortly after the marshes thaw. Vocalizations by neighboring males are challenged at any time of day, although calling appears most intense in the evening. Territorial response was used to advantage by Atlas Project workers with tape recorders, who found Virginias quick to respond, frequently running or—more rarely—flying to the attack. The significance of interspecific territoriality is unknown, but tape-recorded Sora calls frequently elicit more vigorous responses from Virginia Rails than do the Virginia's own calls. Both species, however, may share the same territory (Glahn



1974). Densities of Virginia Rails in Vermont marshes are unknown, but in the major marsh systems at least they appear to be fairly high. Zimmerman (1977) included much of Vermont in the general area of highest breeding densities, and indicated that 0.4 to 4.0 pairs per ha (0.2 to 1.6 pairs per a) may occur locally.

Nests are loosely built of available vegetation in 3 to 4 days, and are placed 5–13 cm (2–5 in) above water that is 8–25 cm (3–10 in) deep. Rarely, a ramp to the water is built. Nest material may be added to compensate for rising water levels, and the nest may be domed by overhanging vegetation. From 6 to 13 buff eggs with brown spots are laid; incubation commences as soon as the clutch is completed. Nine Vermont clutches, containing 6 to 11 eggs each, have been reported between May 20 and June 14. Duties during the roughly 18- to 20-day incubation period are shared by both adults (Walkinshaw 1937). The young, like those of other Rallidae, are precocial and black. They can be told from young Soras by the black ring around their yellowish bills. Foraging by the brood may occur several hundred feet from the marsh. The young are unable to fly until 6 to 7 weeks of age; they have been sighted in Vermont as early as June 1 and as late as August 11 (six dates).

Virginia Rails winter from Virginia south to Mexico, normally departing from Vermont by mid October, but occasional lag-



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 28 (16%)

Possible breeding: 9 (32% of total)

Probable breeding: 14 (50% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 5 (18% 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	43
Green Mountains	3	5	11
North Central	3	16	11
Northeast Highlands	3	19	11
East Central	2	10	7
Taconic Mountains	4	25	14
Eastern Foothills	1	4	3

gards can be expected to remain in large marshes into December.

Considerable uncertainty exists over the past status of the Virginia Rail in Vermont. Apparently it has always been considered an uncommon species, although its past abundance relative to that of the Sora is unclear. Both species have always been classified as gamebirds with generous bag limits, but the actual annual take of either is minimal. Since drainage of marshland in Vermont has occurred only on a limited local basis, habitat loss is unlikely to have caused any change in status. No breeding studies or concerted searches for the Virginia Rail

have ever been conducted in Vermont; such studies could offer further insight into the status of the species. With no evidence of a marked change in the species' status, it may be concluded that the Virginia Rail has probably always been common in prime habitats in the Champlain Valley and the Lake Memphremagog marshes, but uncommon to rare in suitable habitat elsewhere throughout the state.

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