

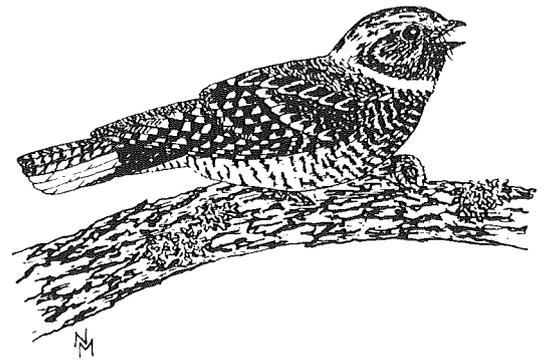
## Whip-poor-will

*Caprimulgus vociferus*

With the possible exception of owls, no breeding bird in Vermont is as well known but as seldom seen as the Whip-poor-will. Although the species inhabits ungrazed woodlots and forests throughout Vermont, many active observers go for years without actually sighting one of these exclusively nocturnal birds. Rare indeed are those observers fortunate enough to have witnessed actual courtship.

Although apparently suitable breeding habitats occur throughout Vermont, Whip-poor-wills were recorded in only 17% of the Atlas Project priority blocks. Very few were recorded in Vermont's North Central region, Northeast Highlands, or Taconic Mountains; but this relative scarcity may be in part a result of the fact that much of the Atlas Project fieldwork in these sectors was conducted by block-busting teams rather than by local residents who might have been more likely to hear nocturnal singing. Fifty percent of all records came from non-priority blocks, in response to a general news release soliciting sightings. Even in those areas where most frequently encountered, the Champlain Lowlands and Eastern Foothills, the species was relatively uncommon, occurring in 39% and 33% of the respective priority blocks in these sectors.

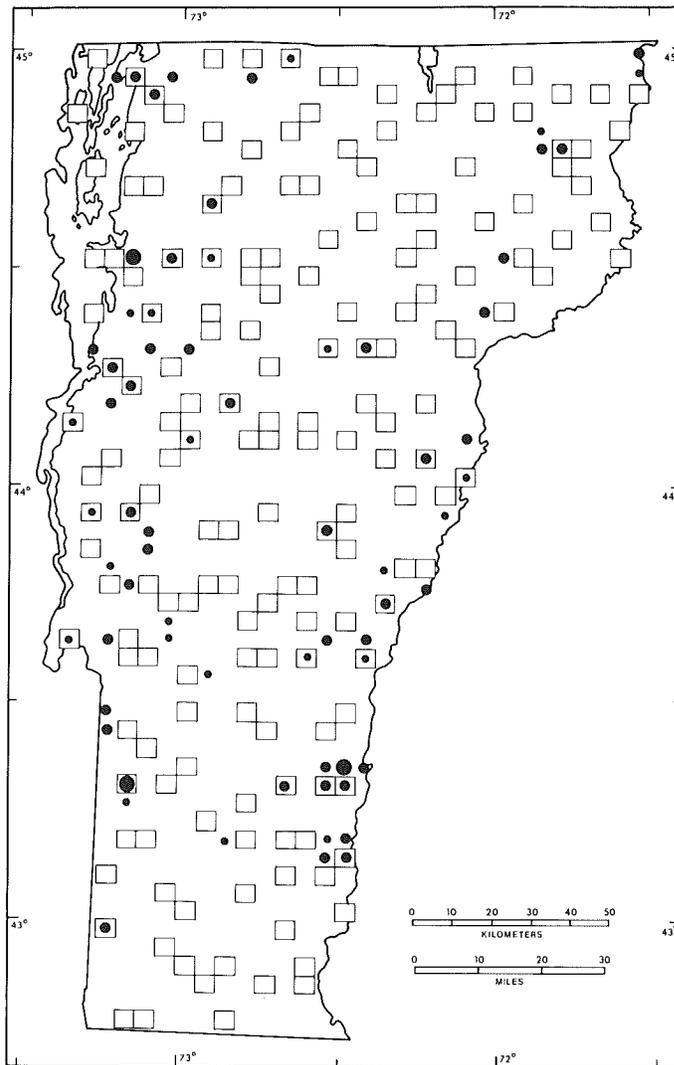
The Whip-poor-will is believed to have been more common in Vermont in the past. Allen (1909) considered it to be fairly common everywhere in the state except at the extreme high elevations. Thompson (1853) and Perkins and Howe (1901) indicated the species was locally distributed, more frequently encountered in lowland areas than in upland areas. Davenport (1907) reported that Whip-poor-wills were less abundant and more restricted in Windham and Bennington counties than in earlier times. Although reported to undergo cyclic population fluctuations in response to availability of prey (principally *Cecropia* and other large moths)



(N. Proctor, pers. comm.), the exact reasons and extent of the Whip-poor-will's apparent decline in Vermont are unknown.

Whip-poor-wills winter in small numbers in the southern U.S., but the majority of the population spends the winter from northern Mexico to Costa Rica. The species begins reappearing in Vermont's forests during the last week of April, but the brunt of migration is in early May, with the peak of breeding activity coming later in that month. As is true for most nocturnal bird species, vocalizations play a major role in territorial and courtship displays, and the Whip-poor-will's song, a monotonous repetition of its name, can keep nearby would-be sleepers awake. The birds exhibit a daily bimodal peak in singing, at dusk and again near dawn. Moon phase affects calling activity significantly; the singing period is greatly extended on moonlit nights (Cooper 1981). More than 60% of all Whip-poor-will records for the Vermont Atlas Project were of singing birds. Courtship apparently includes accelerated and shortened renditions of the first call note, and a hovering display by the male, who exhibits his white tail patches (Bruce 1973). Copulation may occur on a perch (D. P. Kibbe, pers. observ.) or on the ground (Bent 1940).

The 2 eggs, usually creamy white with gray blotches overlaid with brown dots, are laid directly on the open forest floor. The cryptically colored female incubates for 19 to 20 days. The male may occasionally share in the incubation duties, at least during the



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

TOTAL 30 (17%)  
 Possible breeding: 11 (37% of total)  
 Probable breeding: 18 (60% of total)  
 Confirmed breeding: 1 (3% 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	40
Green Mountains	3	5	10
North Central	1	5	3
Northeast Highlands	1	6	3
East Central	3	15	10
Taconic Mountains	2	12	7
Eastern Foothills	8	33	27

night (Raynor 1941; Babcock 1975). There is at least one record of a marked pair in New York raising a second brood (Raynor 1941). Because Whip-poor-wills are rarely observed outside the courtship period, their actual fall departure dates for Vermont are poorly defined. The latest sighting on record is October 3 (RVB, Fall 1982).

The Whip-poor-will is currently undergoing a range expansion in the southern U.S., apparently in response to reforestation of abandoned cropland (Cooper 1981). Forest area has increased markedly in Vermont over the past century, but whether the Whip-

poor-will has undergone a proportional population increase remains unclear. The consensus of most observers is that the population has, at best, remained stable.

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