

White-throated Sparrow

Zonotrichia albicollis

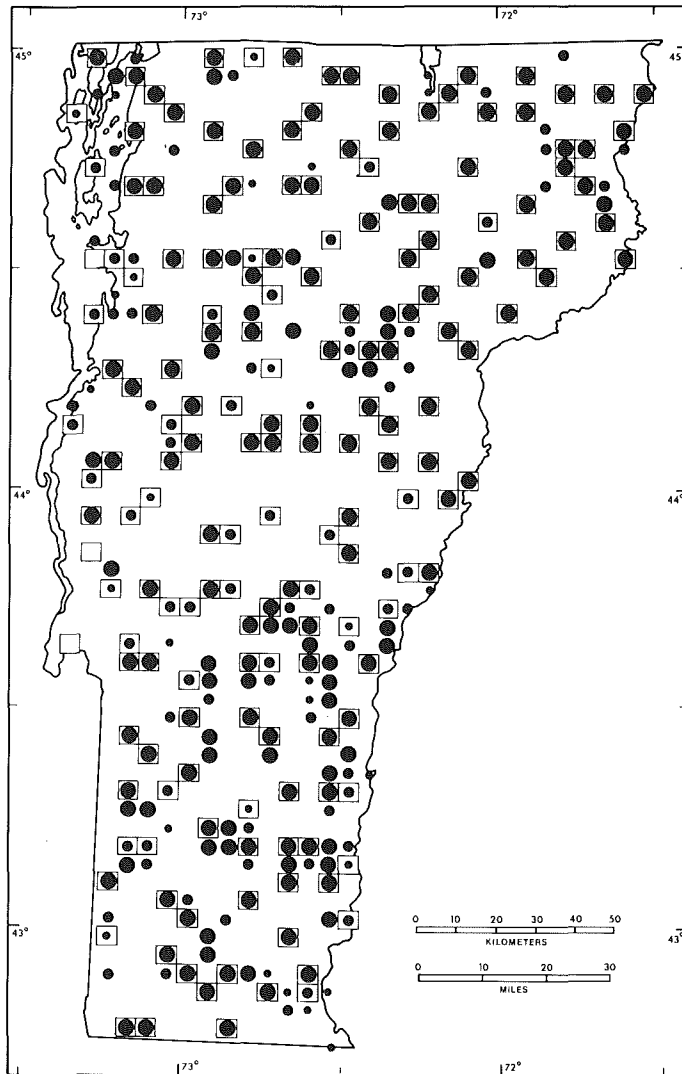
The White-throated Sparrow inhabits brush and thickets at the edges of coniferous and mixed woodlands. The species exhibits a broad environmental tolerance, and can be found at elevations from about 1,220 m (3,990 ft) to the shores of Lake Champlain (28 m [92 ft]). Some representative habitats are subalpine scrub at tree line; the edges of bogs; clear cuts and open, selective cuts; and brushy, abandoned pastureland. The species is polymorphic, and individuals may possess either tan- or white-striped crowns (Lowther 1961). Knapton and Falls (1982) found that males with tan-striped crowns tend to occur in relatively higher numbers in densely vegetated, less open habitats than do males with white-striped crowns.

The distinctive voice of this species is usually the first indication of its presence. The clear, plaintive, whistled song, *Poor Sam Peabody, Peabody, Peabody*, is a familiar sound in Vermont. The song consists of a series of low-pitched, sweet whistles—the first often lower in pitch than those following—that ends in two or three slurred triplets. The advertising song is delivered from a high perch, often the top of a conifer; whisper songs are given on the ground (Wasserman 1980). Nests are well-hidden, and are most often placed on the ground, usually beneath low shrubbery or slash having a canopy of dead herbaceous vegetation. However, a prominent sentinel perch is often near the nest (Lowther and Falls 1968), and when an observer is in the vicinity of the nest the female usually slips off of it and begins scolding loudly; this generally attracts the male, who quickly joins in. Parents carrying food accounted for 39% of the Atlas Project confirmations for the species. Fledglings are noisy and relatively easy to track down; recently fledged young constituted 34% of the confirmations. Largely because of parental wariness, active nests provided fewer than 20% of the breeding confirmations.



A handful of White-throated Sparrows overwinter in Vermont, but most depart from the state for winter quarters in the southeastern U.S. Most return in early to mid April, although at high elevations return is usually delayed until May. Egg dates for 18 clutches range from May 27 to August 1. Clutch size may range from 3 to 5 eggs, with 4 the average. According to Lowther and Falls (1968), late clutches are usually the result of failed first nests rather than examples of second broods. Dates for nestlings are from June 13 to August 11 (4 records), and dependent young are known from June 19 to July 24 (19 records). The early cutoff in nestling and fledgling dates may reflect a lack of late summer fieldwork by observers. White-throated Sparrows commence autumn migration in late September; the autumn flight peaks in October. Many White-throats linger into November and early December.

The White-throated Sparrow was recorded in 98% of the Atlas Project's 179 priority blocks. It is common over much of the state, and is very common in the Green Mountains, North Central region, and Northeast Highlands. The species is less common in the Champlain Lowlands, especially on the western fringe of the region. All three of the priority blocks from which the species was absent were in this area. The warm, dry climate and open landscape near Lake Champlain are not well suited to the species' habitat preferences. Forbush (1929)



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 176 (98%)

Possible breeding: 11 (6% of total)

Probable breeding: 32 (18% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 133 (76% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	28	90	16
Green Mountains	54	100	31
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

and others indicated that the White-throated Sparrow was unknown at elevations below 305 m (1,000 ft) early in this century. Bull (1974) found that since 1950 White-throated Sparrows have expanded into lowland sites in upstate New York from their montane strongholds. Considering the present distribution of the species in Vermont, the same trend may have occurred in this state as well.

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