

# Fields, Farms and Towns



## Vermont Fish and Wildlife Habitat Fact Sheet

Being basically a forested state, Vermont does not come easily by its open spaces. It takes work to maintain a field here. A clearing will not long remain if untended, for the natural momentum is toward building the forest, following the various paths of succession; field to shrubs to forest is a continuous evolution, set back only by fire, flood, wind, mowing by people, and grazing by animals, or else the replacement of the earth with concrete and steel.

The stone walls, often coursing mile upon mile, through mature woodlands or along backroads overarching with trees, are testimony to this resiliency; they are the former definers of fields and meadows. The stone walls persist, though moss-covered and collapsing in places. But the split-rail fences of an earlier era of land clearing (1700s) have disappeared, while barbed wire running through the middle of trees is rusty evidence of yet an later one (late 1800s). The trees grow back, and the forests return as they have time and again through our history, as well as many more times on their own.

### Birds

The spring and summer fields are places of busy bird activity in Vermont. But though many species visit the fields for hunting or picking at seeds and fruits, few actually nest there, for the open space affords limited protection, and there is a lack of plant diversity

and only a few "levels" of vegetation here.

With night a great horned owl or a screech owl may soar out from the trees, where it has spent the day, and on silent wings directed by great, staring eyes and large, sensitive ears, glide toward its prey. In the mornings and evenings of a fall, winter, or early spring, the short-eared owl is seen once in a while, especially in the broad valley of the Lake Champlain basin. This visitor from the north is the most open-oriented of owls seen in Vermont, frequenting the fields for both hunting and nesting (although nesting is very sporadic in Vermont).

### Mammals

Except for a few species of bats that fly over in search of insects, or some large mammals, such as deer, that wander in to graze or hunt, most of the mammals residing in the open areas, thickets, and wood lots are small and remain within the shelter of the vegetation, or else go below ground.

Some mammals live completely within the bounds of a field, others combine the fields and forest edges as home or feeding ground. Many, because of their catholic preferences, are often the unwanted companies of human beings, and may in certain situations become pests. The nighttime foraging of the raccoon and the striped skunk, Vermont's only skunk species, are

all too well known to campers and homeowners of every corner of the state. Deer mice may move into country or village houses in the winter, and actually supplant the house mouse of more urban areas. Mice, chipmunks, and red squirrels have become a problem in sugar bushes that employ the relatively new method of plastic tubing to collect sap—the rodents eat into the tubing, whether to taste the sap or merely sharpen their teeth, causing considerable loss of time, money, and effort of those working the trees in the spring. And to many gardeners trying to raise vegetables, the woodchucks, deer, mice, voles, raccoons, skunks, and rabbits are an ever-present threat, the source of much annoyance.

Excerpted from Charles Johnson's book  
*Nature of Vermont*