

Black-backed Woodpecker

Picoides arcticus

The loud and distinctive scream-rattle-snarl call (Dixon and Saab 2000) of the Black-backed Woodpecker is a dead giveaway to its presence in Vermont's northeastern spruce-fir forests. A species often elusive to the eye, this year-round tenant can also be detected by a single loud *pik* or the flecked-off pieces of bark it spills around the base of a dead evergreen. A rather tame bird, this robin-sized woodpecker may be approached within a few meters. Widely distributed across the boreal forest from Alaska to the Maritimes, the Black-backed Woodpecker is near the southern periphery of its range in Vermont, where it remains an uncommon breeder, mainly in the Northeastern Highlands. In the past, Vermont has been part of population irruptions, although observations have been limited in the state, probably due to a lack of observers in the northeastern part of the state (e.g., Yunic 1985).

The Black-backed Woodpecker depends on mature coniferous forests for nesting and dead conifers for foraging. Lowland spruce-fir forests, and swamps and bogs with red and black spruce, fir, and tamarack are preferred habitats. These woodpeckers take advantage of outbreaks of wood-boring beetles that infest dead softwoods after the trees have succumbed to fires or heavy wind; irruptions have occurred as far south as New Jersey during the past century (Dixon and Saab 2000). Black-backed Woodpeckers often remove bark from an area several inches above and below the nest hole; when fresh this sign can be quite noticeable and aid in location of nests. Another diagnostic feature is the beveled lower edge of the nest hole.

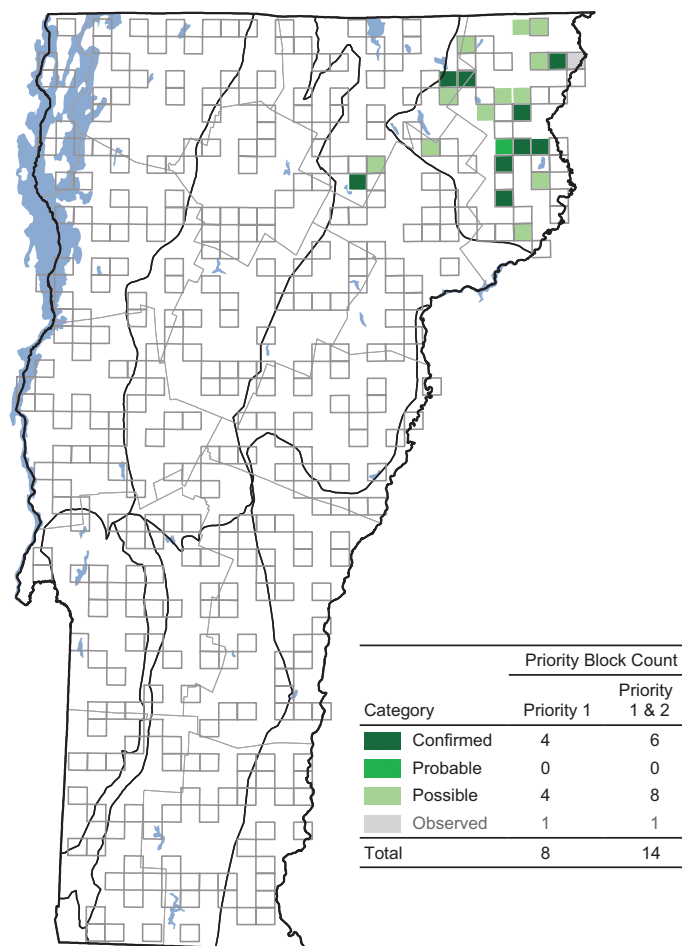
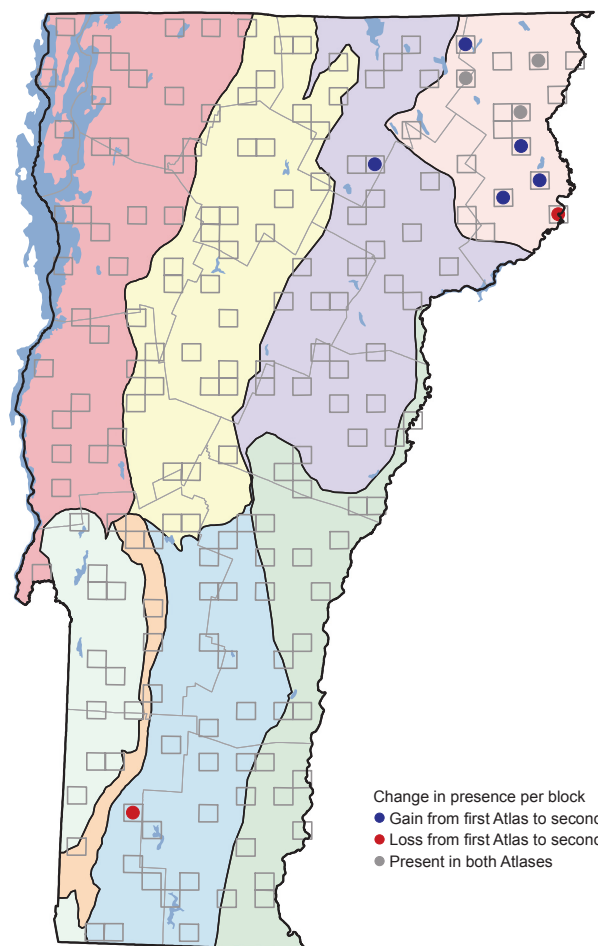
The Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department began surveys of Black-backed Woodpecker nests in 1988, identifying 7 nests in the first year (Lisi 1988). From 1991 to 1995, VFWD located 12 active nests on state-owned lands; 30 successful nests were found from 1996 to 1997 (Weinhagen 1998). All nests were located in the Northeastern Highlands and Northern Vermont Piedmont. Eighty-two percent were in softwood trees, of which nearly 50 percent were balsam fir. Fifty-seven percent were in dead trees; 43 percent in live trees. The diameter of nest trees



ranged from 19 centimeters to 55 centimeters (7.5 to 21.7 inches) at breast height; the average cavity height ranged from 1.0 to 12.8 meters (3.3 to 42 feet) (Weinhagen 1998). Cavity excavation was documented between 14 May and 11 June. In previous data, the earliest recorded incubation date was 22 May; the latest 4 June. Nestlings appeared between 9 June and 1 July, and fledglings between 20 and 29 June (Lisi 1988, Weihagen 1998). In this atlas, nestlings were found from 5 June to 5 July (N = 5), and fledglings on 28 June and 25 July.

The distribution of the Black-backed Woodpecker was more widespread in the Northeastern Highlands during the second atlas, where breeding was confirmed or suspected in 7 Priority 1 blocks compared to 4 in the first atlas. Maturation of Vermont's forests along with designation of no-cut softwood reserves and riparian zones on state-owned lands and industrial forestlands may have led to an increase in suitable nesting habitat for the species. The first atlas confirmed one nest in the Southern Green Mountains; none, however, were recorded there during the second atlas.

Black-backed Woodpecker distribution and block occupancy has remained relatively stable in New York. Atlasers recorded woodpeckers in approximately 125 blocks (23 CO, 27 PR, 75 PO) during the second atlas (McGowan and Corwin 2008) compared to 114 blocks (32 CO, 18 PR, 56 PO) during the first atlas (Andrle and Carroll 1988). The Ontario atlas also found no substantial changes in the population (Cadman et al. 2007).



CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Northeastern Highlands	4	7	+ 3	+ 75
Northern Green Mountains	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Northern Vermont Piedmont	0	1	+ 1	+ 100
Southern Green Mountains	1	0	- 1	- 100
Southern Vermont Piedmont	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Taconic Mountains	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Vermont Valley	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	5	8	+ 3	+ 60

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	0	0
Northeastern Highlands	35	93
Northern Green Mountains	0	0
Northern Vermont Piedmont	1	7
Southern Green Mountains	0	0
Southern Vermont Piedmont	0	0
Taconic Mountains	0	0
Vermont Valley	0	0

Although the Black-backed Woodpecker is not of regional concern (Panjabi et al. 2005), it is a Species of Special Concern in Vermont. Areas of suitable breeding habitat within the state should be mapped. Additional research is needed to determine minimum and optimum patch size and the effects of logging and seasonal or permanent residential development on the Black-backed Woodpecker (Kart et al. 2005).

CEDRIC ALEXANDER