

Red-breasted Nuthatch

Sitta canadensis



The diminutive Red-breasted Nuthatch is found across boreal North America, extending southward to the mountains of the southwestern United States and the southern Appalachians. Although considered a year-round resident throughout most of its breeding range, whenever northern winter cone crops fail, the Red-breasted Nuthatch stages irregular irruptions as far south as the Gulf Coast (Ghalambor and Martin 1999). Like other species of nuthatches, this bird is a well-known visitor to bird feeders, much admired for its trusting manner.

Red-breasted Nuthatches tolerate a range of coniferous and mixed forest types in the eastern United States, even though they tend to be exclusively coniferous forest dwellers in the West (Ghalambor and Martin 1999). They avoid clear-cuts and appear to prefer mature forest stands (Adams and Morrison 1993), but more rigorous evaluations of the effects of timber harvest are needed (Sallabanks et al. 2000). Food availability is an important component of suitable breeding habitat, and birds may be scarce or absent some years at otherwise acceptable sites. Conversely, after an irruption, breeding pairs may be found in marginal habitat, especially if it includes a feeding station (D. Kibbe pers. obs.).

In Vermont, Red-breasted Nuthatches begin courtship in March, and by April are excavating nesting cavities (Gosnell 1985). The species often maintains a ring of resin around the nest hole, apparently to deter predation (Ghalambor and Martin 1999). Nest building was observed from 25 April through 3 July (N = 10). No nests with eggs were reported during the atlas, but nestlings were seen 6 June through 1 July (N = 15). Red-breasted Nuthatches usually have 5 or 6 young; they remain with their parents for two weeks or more after fledging (Ghalambor and Martin 1999). Noisy broods are easily located and constituted the principal method of confirmation, with some 100 records of fledglings between 18 May and 10 August. Fifty percent of records in the second atlas consisted of breeding confirmations, slightly better than the 45 percent achieved in the first atlas.

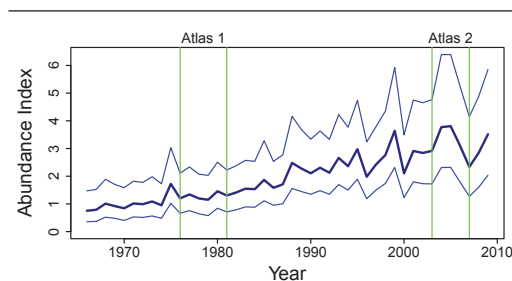
The results of the second atlas show this nuthatch to

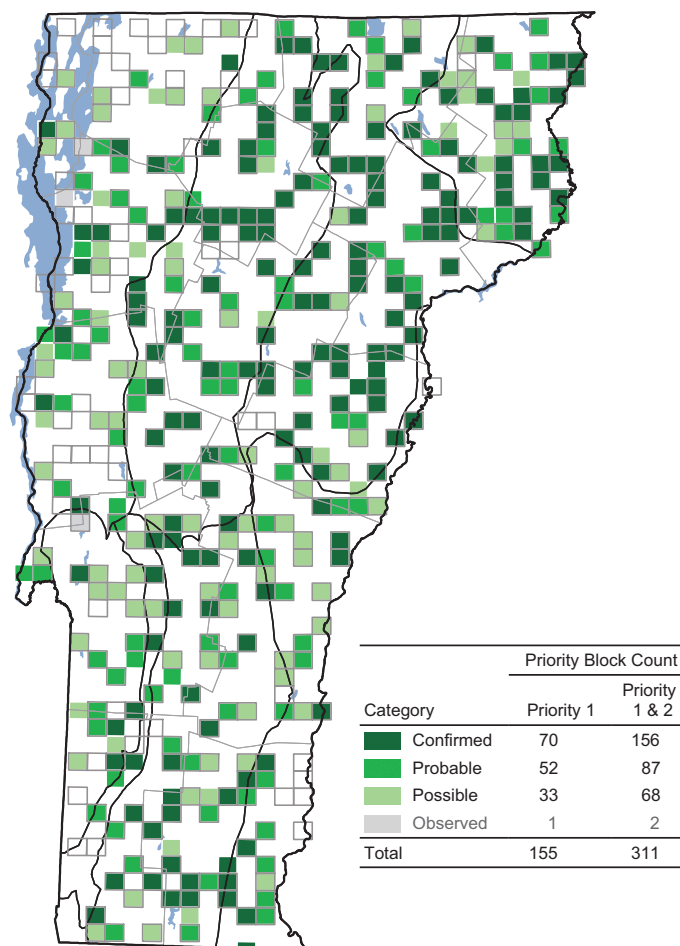
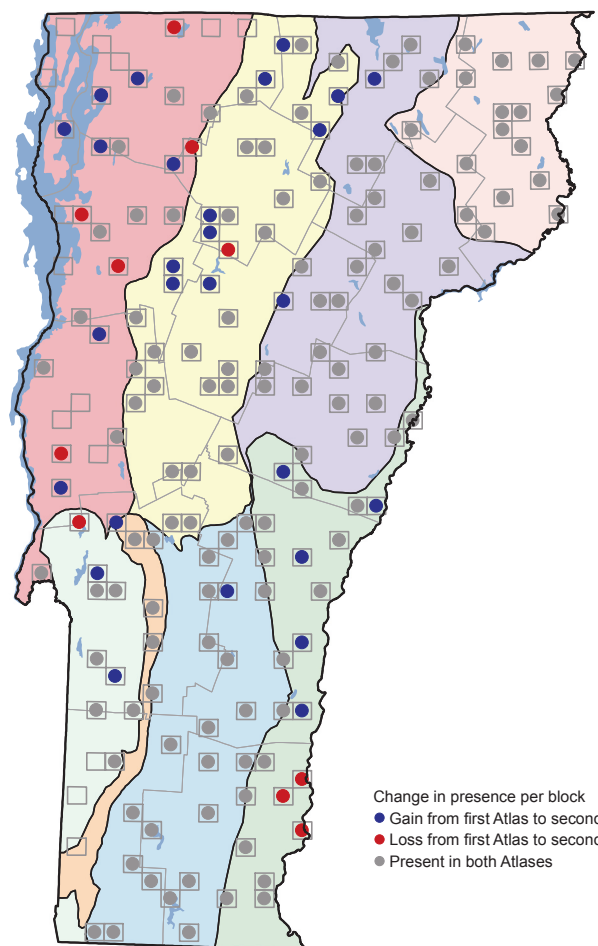
be well distributed throughout the state. It was reported from more than 95 percent of blocks in the Northeastern Highlands, Northern Vermont Piedmont, and Northern and Southern Green Mountains. Although missed in 9 blocks where it had previously been recorded, the species showed a 12 percent increase statewide, with most new records coming from the Northern Green Mountains. The Red-breasted Nuthatch probably breeds throughout the state, although not in all locations in every year.

Northern New England and New York have some of the highest Red-breasted Nuthatch densities in the East. In the eastern Breeding Bird Survey region, populations have increased significantly by 4.5 percent per year from 1982 to 2007 (Sauer et al. 2011), and atlas data corroborate this trend. New York's 36 percent increase in occupied blocks was three times that of Vermont. McGowan (2008) speculated that maturation of the many conifer plantations established in the 1930s facilitated the Red-breasted Nuthatch's expansion into portions of southern and western New York. A similar rationale was presented to explain the 38 percent increase Ontario found during its second atlas (Cheskey 2007). In Pennsylvania, the increase in block occupancy was more than 177 percent (Wilson et al. 2012).

At present, the Red-breasted Nuthatch is doing ex-

RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME





CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	15	17	+ 2	+ 13
Northeastern Highlands	17	17	+ 0	+ 0
Northern Green Mountains	26	34	+ 8	+ 31
Northern Vermont Piedmont	28	30	+ 2	+ 7
Southern Green Mountains	26	27	+ 1	+ 4
Southern Vermont Piedmont	16	18	+ 2	+ 13
Taconic Mountains	7	8	+ 1	+ 14
Vermont Valley	3	4	+ 1	+ 33
Totals	138	155	+ 17	+ 12

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	54	13
Northeastern Highlands	97	12
Northern Green Mountains	96	20
Northern Vermont Piedmont	96	20
Southern Green Mountains	96	17
Southern Vermont Piedmont	85	11
Taconic Mountains	71	5
Vermont Valley	75	2

tremely well in the Northeast. Climate-change models project substantial declines in the species' populations in New York and northern New England, however, although remnant populations are predicted to remain (Matthews et al. 2007). Management practices that leave soft snags and decaying trees in coniferous and mixed forests will provide suitable nesting habitat (Raphael and White 1984, Steeger and Hitchcock 1998).

DOUGLAS P. KIBBE