

Eastern Kingbird

Tyrannus tyrannus

The Eastern Kingbird is one of the most conspicuous and easily observed breeding birds in Vermont. If a pair is in the area, it will make its presence known. Its common name belies its actual geographic distribution, as its range encompasses nearly all of North America except for the extreme southwest, California, northern Ontario and Quebec (Murphy 1996). On the other hand, it is unquestionably the “king” because of its command of all the other birds near its territory.

Substantial numbers of Eastern Kingbirds arrive in Vermont by the first week of May. Males precede females, and adults arrive before first-time breeders (Cooper et al. 2009). They prefer open spaces, and the clearing of Vermont’s forest by early settlers probably benefited them. Prior to the clearing of the forests, the species no doubt nested in snags in beaver ponds, in trees that overhung rivers and lakes, and on the edges of blowdowns or fire-induced clearings. In heavily wooded portions of the state, they still take advantage of this nesting habitat. Isolated trees in pastures, hedgerows, and the margins of lakes and rivers are often selected for nesting, as are orchards (Ellison and Norse 1985). Thorny trees such as hawthorn, locust, and pear are frequently selected (Murphy et al. 1997), but conifers and dead snags may be used. Trees on islands or in standing water appear to be prime habitat (Blancher and Robertson 1985).

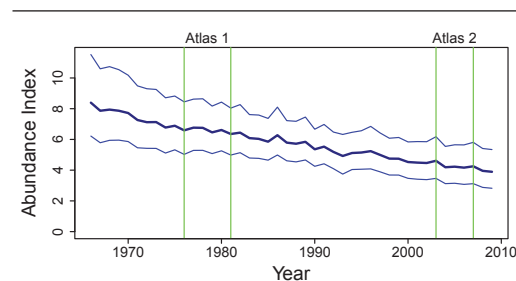
Nest building may take 1 to 3 weeks. The earliest and latest reports of nest building in Vermont are 22 May and 10 July (N = 55), respectively, but most records are from the first three weeks of June. Egg-laying may begin 2 to 14 days after the nest is completed (Murphy 1983). Nests with eggs were found between 25 May and 7 July (N = 38). Incubation, which females do without male assistance, usually takes 15 days. Nestlings were recorded from 30 May to 31 July (N = 50), but half of these were from June. The young remain in the nest for 16 to 17 days. Females feed the young twice as frequently as males (Woodard and Murphy 1999), while males take the lead in defending the nest from predators (Woodard and Murphy 1999, Redmond et al. 2009). Once fledged, parental care contin-

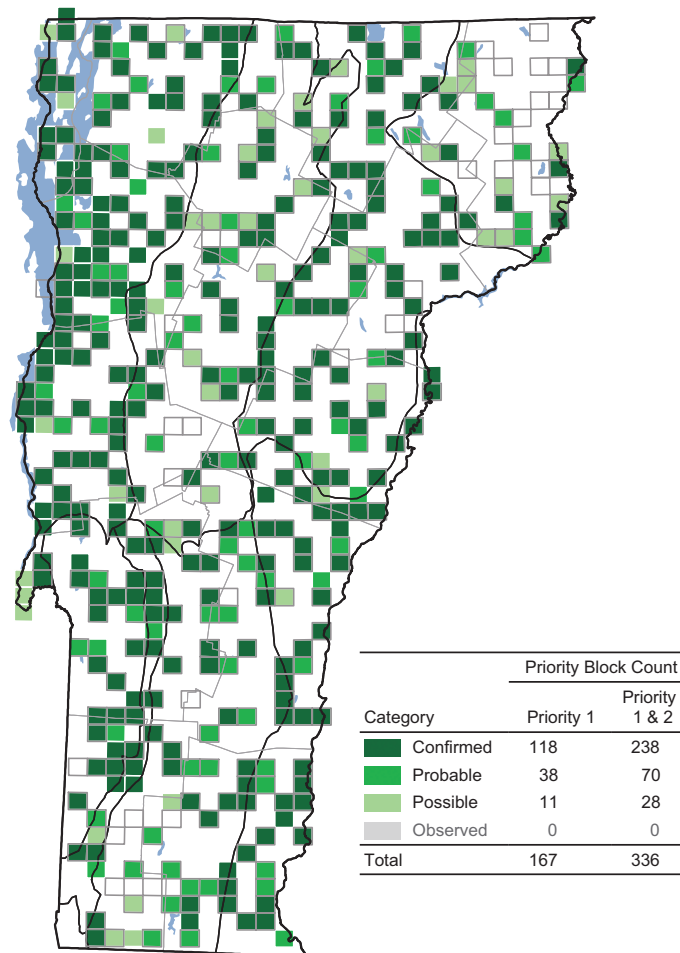
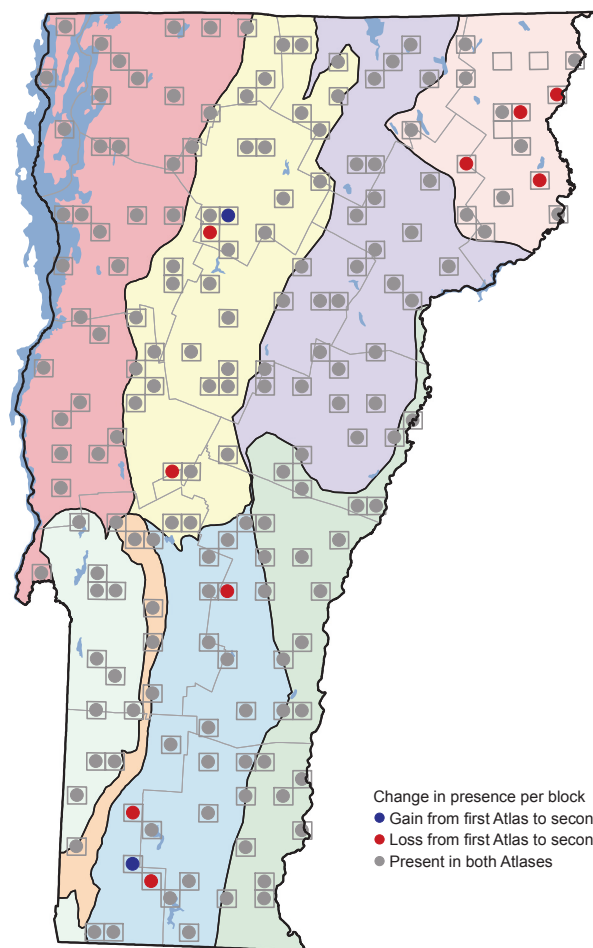


ues for 4 to 5 more weeks, and the feeding rate may even peak after the young are out of the nest (Morehouse and Brewer 1968). As a consequence, only one brood is raised per year. Fledglings (N = 58) were reported from 15 June to 7 August. By mid-August, Eastern Kingbirds form small flocks in advance of their departure for South America, and the majority leave the state by early September. Although scant information is available on their winter ecology, large nighttime roosts have been reported from Bolivia (R. Renfrew pers. obs.).

Results of the second atlas indicate that a slight decline in Eastern Kingbird numbers occurred in the Green Mountains and the Northeastern Highlands. These are areas of the state where logging has declined and reforestation has erased many previously open areas. Consequently, Eastern Kingbirds have had fewer options for establishing territories in these regions. Breeding Bird Survey data have reflected these changes, depicting a significant 1.7 percent decline annually from 1982 to 2007 (Sauer et al. 2011). Kingbirds have likewise declined sig-

RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME





CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	33	33	+ 0	+ 0
Northeastern Highlands	14	10	- 4	- 29
Northern Green Mountains	34	33	- 1	- 3
Northern Vermont Piedmont	30	30	+ 0	+ 0
Southern Green Mountains	26	24	- 2	- 8
Southern Vermont Piedmont	21	21	+ 0	+ 0
Taconic Mountains	11	11	+ 0	+ 0
Vermont Valley	5	5	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	174	167	- 7	- 4

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	100	22
Northeastern Highlands	64	7
Northern Green Mountains	92	18
Northern Vermont Piedmont	95	18
Southern Green Mountains	87	15
Southern Vermont Piedmont	100	12
Taconic Mountains	95	6
Vermont Valley	100	2

nificantly in Vermont's neighboring state of New York (Murphy 2001, McGowan and Corwin 2008), and in general across eastern North America (Sauer et al. 2011).

Farm abandonment and the loss of open fields probably underlie the widespread decline in the abundance of kingbirds in the Northeast. In Maryland, where forest regrowth is counterbalanced by fragmentation, there was no decline in the Eastern Kingbird in the second atlas (Elison 2010). A continuation of forest succession and loss of agricultural open lands in Vermont may translate into fewer numbers, but the Eastern Kingbird is likely to con-

tinue to populate the various open habitats available throughout the state.

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