

Black-billed Cuckoo

Coccyzus erythrophthalmus

Among the latest of our migrants to return, the Black-billed Cuckoo is quick to respond to local prey populations. The species is usually most numerous in areas experiencing outbreaks of caterpillars, particularly the hairy varieties that most other bird species avoid (Forbush and May 1939). In mid-May, this stealthy bird returns from its wintering grounds in northwestern South America to nest in the deciduous forests of the eastern and central United States and southern Canada, from the Rocky Mountains eastward to the Maritime Provinces. The southern edge of its breeding range spans from Nebraska to Virginia (Hughes 2001).

The Black-billed Cuckoo generally nests in deciduous woodland edges and thickets, using coniferous trees only rarely. Nest placement can be highly variable. Dense thickets are preferred, but a few nests have been found on the ground. Most are placed 1 to 3 meters (3 to 10 feet) off the ground on a limb. Nest construction—a joint venture by the pair—is also highly variable. Many nests are merely a platform, barely able to contain the 2 to 4 blue-green eggs of a typical clutch; others are somewhat more substantial and neatly lined. Nest construction was noted on 29 May and 6 June during the Vermont atlas. Larger clutches, up to 11 eggs, are generally considered the result of intraspecific parasitism. Such parasitic activity occurs occasionally, particularly when food is abundant. Interspecific parasitism by this species also occurs periodically (Hughes 2001). Vermont egg dates range from 7 June to 25 July (Pistorius 1985). Nestlings were found in the current atlas (N = 3) from 4 July to 4 August, however, fledglings were reported as early as 20 June, indicating considerable variation in the onset of breeding activity, possibly related to food availability (Pistorius 1985).

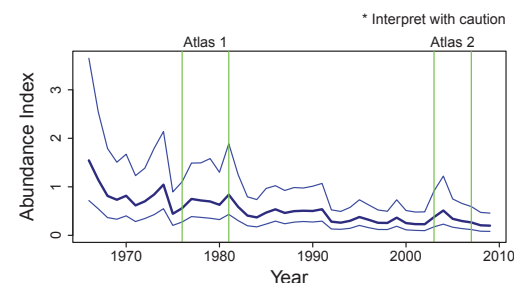
During the second atlas, the Black-billed Cuckoo was found throughout Vermont but was less common in the Green Mountains, Northeastern Highlands and Northern Vermont Piedmont. The vast acreages of coniferous forest that are more difficult to access by observers could contribute to fewer sightings in these regions. Cuckoos are often detected only when vocalizing, and the Black-

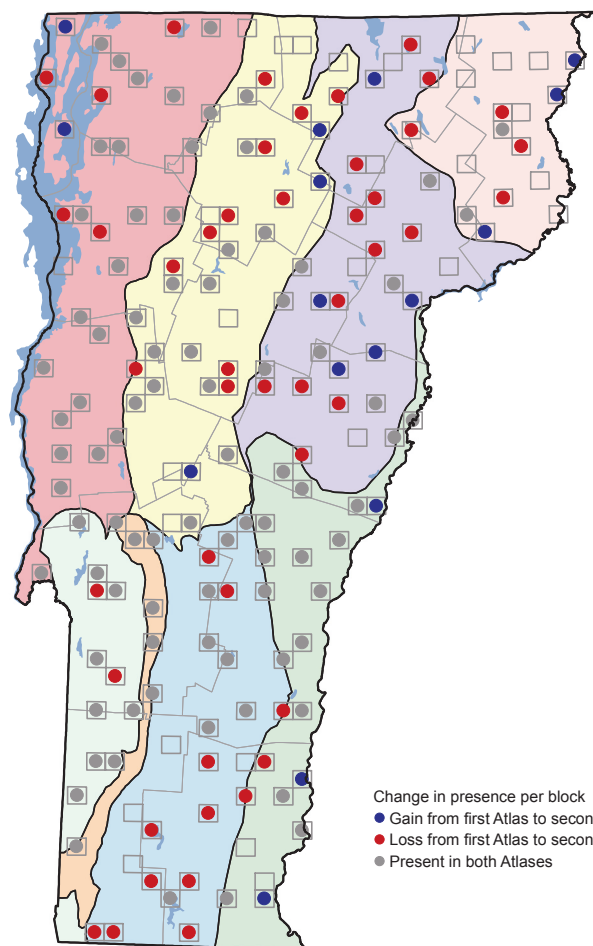


billed Cuckoo stops calling during daylight hours once incubation begins (Hughes 2001). Persuading this furtive species to reveal its presence can be a challenge.

The number of blocks occupied in Vermont declined by over 20 percent since the first atlas. This appears to be part of a larger trend in the Atlantic Northern Forest (Bird Conservation Region 14), where the population has shown a significant 6.2 percent annual decline from 1982 to 2007 (Sauer et al. 2011). Maryland found a 33 percent decline in block occupancy in their second atlas (Ellison 2010). Conversely, the Ontario atlas found a substantial 26 percent increase in the probability of observation (Cadmán et al. 2007), Pennsylvania had a 6 percent increase in occupied blocks, and New York found a 4 percent increase in occupied blocks (McGowan and Corwin 2008). Determining population changes in small geographic areas may be futile given the nomadic movements of this

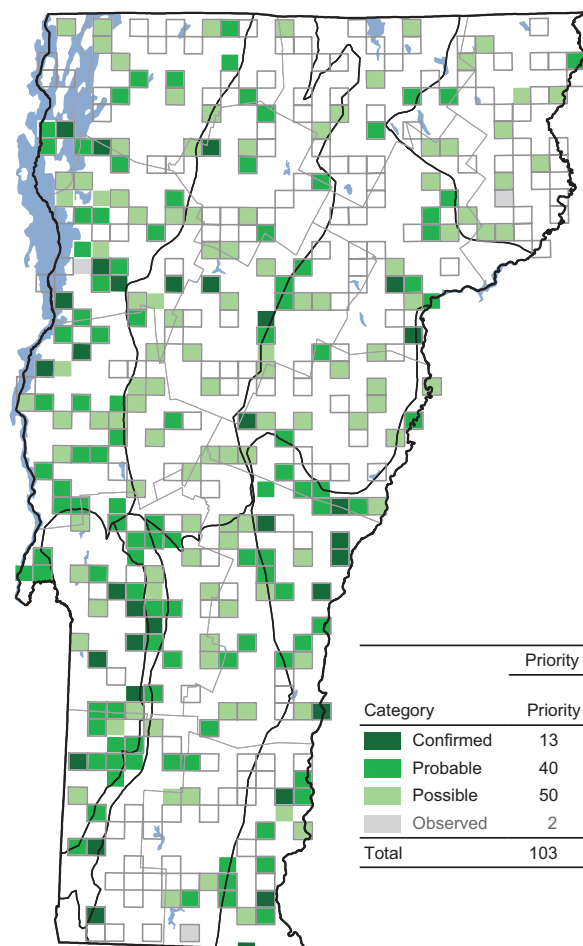
RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME





CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	28	25	- 3	- 11
Northeastern Highlands	6	5	- 1	- 17
Northern Green Mountains	25	17	- 8	- 32
Northern Vermont Piedmont	20	13	- 7	- 35
Southern Green Mountains	23	11	- 12	- 52
Southern Vermont Piedmont	16	18	+ 2	+ 13
Taconic Mountains	11	9	- 2	- 18
Vermont Valley	5	5	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	134	103	- 31	- 23



Category	Priority Block Count	
	Priority 1	Priority 1 & 2
Confirmed	13	27
Probable	40	90
Possible	50	100
Observed	2	2
Total	103	217

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	69	24
Northeastern Highlands	35	6
Northern Green Mountains	53	16
Northern Vermont Piedmont	47	14
Southern Green Mountains	50	13
Southern Vermont Piedmont	82	15
Taconic Mountains	85	8
Vermont Valley	100	4

species in response to irruptive prey populations. Consequently, the range-wide Breeding Bird Survey data may provide the most accurate information regarding the status of Black-billed Cuckoo.

The Black-billed Cuckoo was placed on the state's medium-priority list in the Vermont Wildlife Action Plan in 2005, due to evidence of declining populations. In the Midwest, where declines have been even steeper, the species has been considered a high priority for conservation (Probst and Thompson 1996). Although the reasons behind this species' apparent decline are still speculative

and sometimes contradictory (for example, breeding success could be sensitive to forest fragmentation or to re-growth of farmlands to forest), any reduction in the use of pesticides for insect outbreaks on the breeding grounds is likely to benefit cuckoos and several other avian species.

DOUGLAS P. KIBBE