

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

Sphyrapicus varius



The industrious Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, a keystone species in Vermont, drills rows of tiny, shallow holes around the trunks and larger limbs of trees. The network of sap wells is an important wildlife food resource, drawing insects, other bird species, and even mammals. The Ruby-throated Hummingbird is perhaps most tightly linked to the sapsucker; it sometimes nests near wells and even defends sapsucker wells from other hummingbirds (T. Sherry pers. comm., Walters et al. 2002). The Yellow-bellied Sapsucker nests over a wide swath of forested lands east of the Rocky Mountains, from southeast Alaska to Newfoundland, and southward into northern Georgia in the Appalachian Mountains (AOU 1998). In Vermont, the species has been a regular summer resident and breeder since the first half of the nineteenth century (Thompson 1842). The wintering range of this woodpecker extends from the southern United States south through Central America and eastward to the Bahamas and Cayman Islands (AOU 1998).

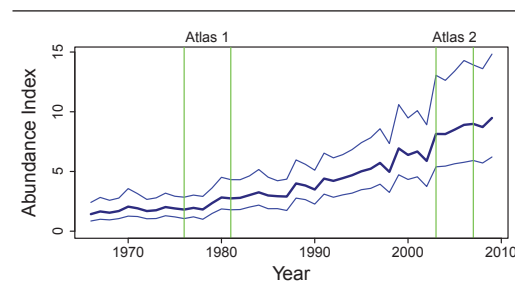
Although present in deciduous and mixed forests, the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker favors early-successional trees that appear after disturbance (Walters et al. 2002). It frequently nests in quaking aspens infected with heartwood decay (Kilham 1971, Runde and Capen 1987, Walters et al. 2002). During the second atlas, nest excavation was reported on 25 May and 25 June. Nests with eggs were found from 14 June to 3 July (N = 4); nests with young from 7 May to 26 July (N = 147); fledglings from 24 May to 11 August (N = 112). During the breeding season the sapsucker's distinctive, erratic pounding can be heard on metal road signs, mailboxes, and home flashing, as well as on trees. Advertising males seek out hammering sites that produce as loud a noise as possible and thus can sometimes be heard from hundreds of meters away. Nestlings, which call loudly from the nest cavity, accounted for 55 percent of all confirmations. Atlases provide an accurate representation of the distribution of such a conspicuous species.

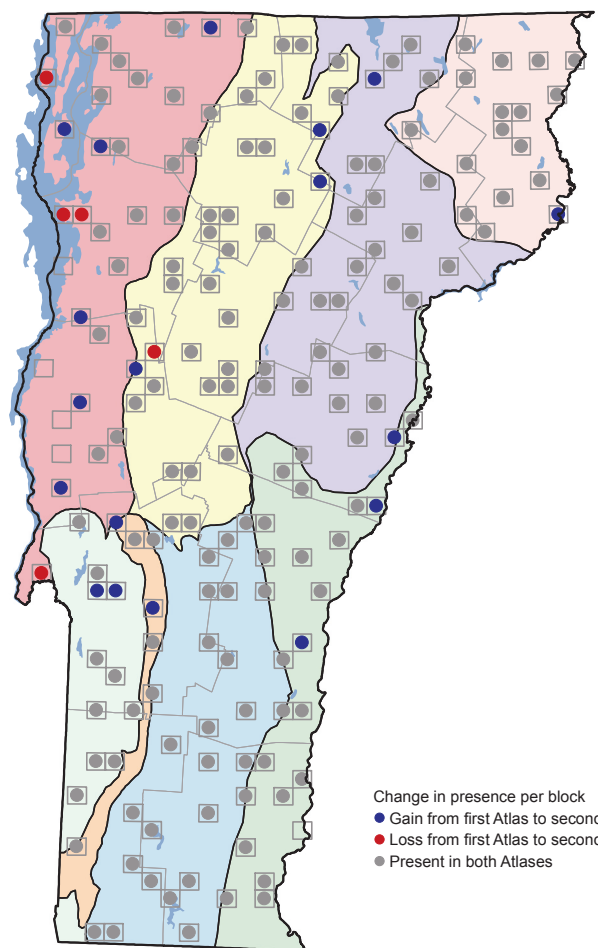
Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers nested statewide, but were least prevalent in the lower Champlain Valley, where for-

ested stands are more limited than in the rest of the state. Elsewhere, the proportion of occupied priority blocks was at least 97 percent. This species has become more common in Vermont since the first atlas, showing an 8 percent increase in the total number of blocks occupied. All biophysical regions showed a slight increase except for the Southern Green Mountains, where the number of occupied blocks remained unchanged.

Breeding Bird Survey data from 1982 to 2007 show a significant annual increase in abundance of 4.7 percent for Vermont. For the same time period, New Hampshire and New York BBS data show significant annual increases of 2.4 and 4.7 percent, respectively (Sauer et al. 2011). The second atlas in New York showed a notable range expansion into lower elevation areas—part of an overall 52 percent increase in block occupancy (McGowan 2008). The number of blocks with sapsuckers in Pennsylvania almost doubled from the first to second atlases, resulting in a statewide increase of 88 percent (Wilson et al. 2012); as in New York, the species' range expanded to the south.

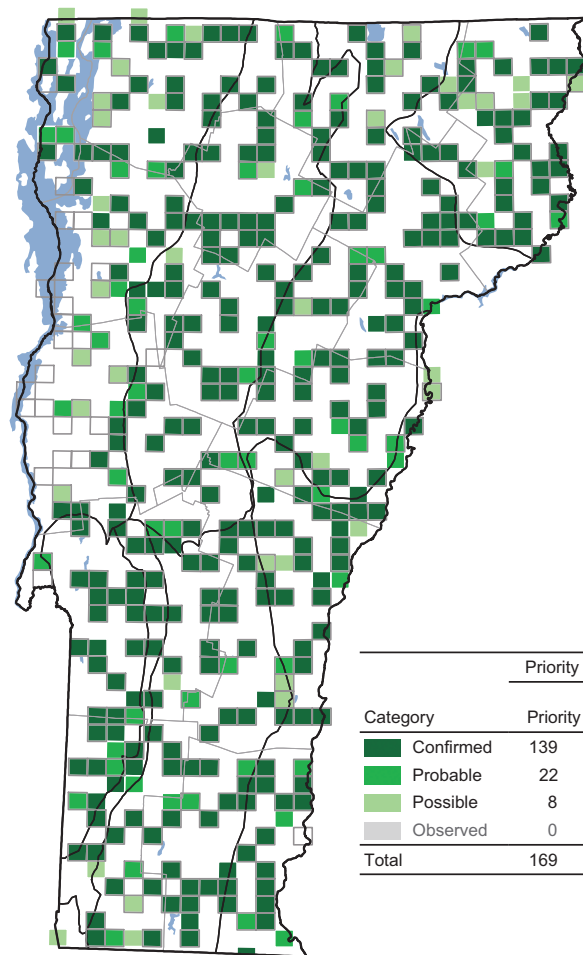
RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME





CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	23	25	+ 2	+ 9
Northeastern Highlands	16	17	+ 1	+ 6
Northern Green Mountains	32	34	+ 2	+ 6
Northern Vermont Piedmont	28	30	+ 2	+ 7
Southern Green Mountains	27	27	+ 0	+ 0
Southern Vermont Piedmont	18	20	+ 2	+ 11
Taconic Mountains	9	11	+ 2	+ 22
Vermont Valley	3	5	+ 2	+ 67
Totals	156	169	+ 13	+ 8



Category	Priority Block Count	
	Priority 1	Priority 1 & 2
Confirmed	139	281
Probable	22	41
Possible	8	22
Observed	0	0
Total	169	344

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	73	16
Northeastern Highlands	100	11
Northern Green Mountains	98	19
Northern Vermont Piedmont	100	19
Southern Green Mountains	100	16
Southern Vermont Piedmont	97	11
Taconic Mountains	100	6
Vermont Valley	100	2

A significant increase from the first to second atlas was also found in the southern parts of Ontario (Crins 2007). A southward and eastward breeding-range expansion has occurred in Connecticut since 2000 (Carrier 2006).

The success of the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker in the Northeast might be attributable to an increase in early-successional patches due to regrowth on lumbered or formerly agricultural lands. The population has grown not only within the historic northeastern breeding range, but has expanded southward and into lower elevations (Kilham and Foss 1994, Rising 1998, McGowan 2008).

McGowan (2008) proposed that the sapsucker is now reclaiming a former range that was lost during the historic expansion of agriculture. All indications are that the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker will continue as a prominent breeding species in Vermont, and likely has yet to reach its capacity in the state.

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