

Downy Woodpecker

Picoides pubescens

The smallest of Vermont's woodpeckers, the Downy Woodpecker breeds throughout most areas of the continental United States and Canada, wherever there are trees. It is a year-round resident throughout its range, including in Vermont, where the ice and heavy snow cover of northern winters do not restrict this bark forager's natural food resources. The Downy Woodpecker was reported in Vermont as early as the nineteenth century (Thompson 1842).

The Downy Woodpecker occurs in open, young, deciduous and riparian woodlands. It is, in many respects, a species of edges. This woodpecker does not require extensive tracts of woodland and thus can be present even in largely open environments, including agricultural settings, parks, and suburbs, as long as some trees are present (Jackson and Ouellet 2002). Mature woodlands are avoided. The Downy Woodpecker is scarce or absent above 1000 meters (roughly 3300 feet) in elevation, where its preferred deciduous habitat becomes less abundant and softwoods dominate (Forbush 1927, Beehler 1978, Hall 1983). Where Downy and Hairy woodpeckers coexist, the Downy Woodpecker tends to forage more frequently on finer branches than the Hairy Woodpecker, and on different plant species (Kisiel 1972).

The Downy Woodpecker is a primary cavity nester. Nest holes are excavated in trees, branches, fence posts, or snags. During the second Vermont atlas, nestlings were found from 2 June to 18 July (N = 41). Fledglings were found between 16 May and 1 August (N = 159). For much of the year Downy Woodpeckers are conspicuous and can be located and distinguished by their vocalizations, drumming, and pounding, and by their undulating flight. While incubating their eggs, however, Downy Woodpeckers can be quiet and inconspicuous and might be missed or difficult to confirm. Once the young have hatched, however, nests are easy to locate, as the begging nestlings are noisy. Indeed, 80 percent of breeding confirmations were of nests with young.

During the second atlas, Downy Woodpeckers were found in 97 percent of priority blocks and, as in the first

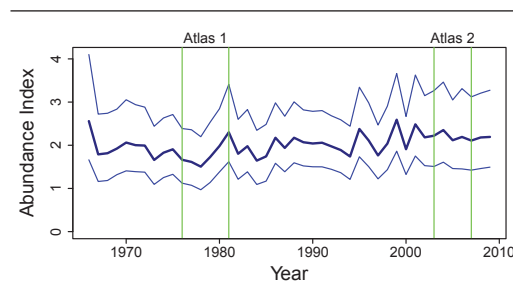


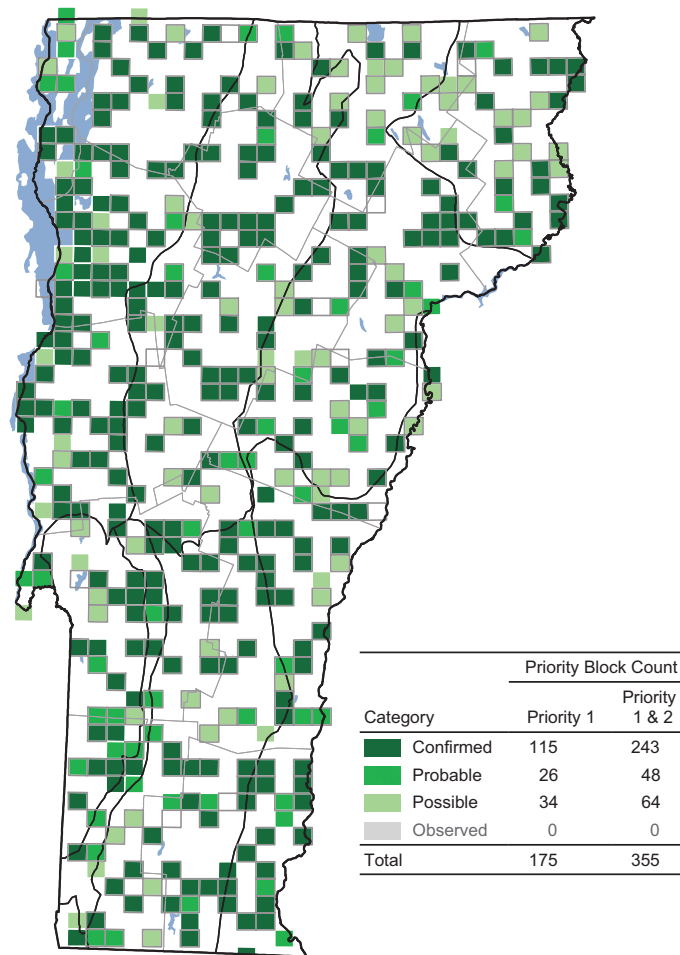
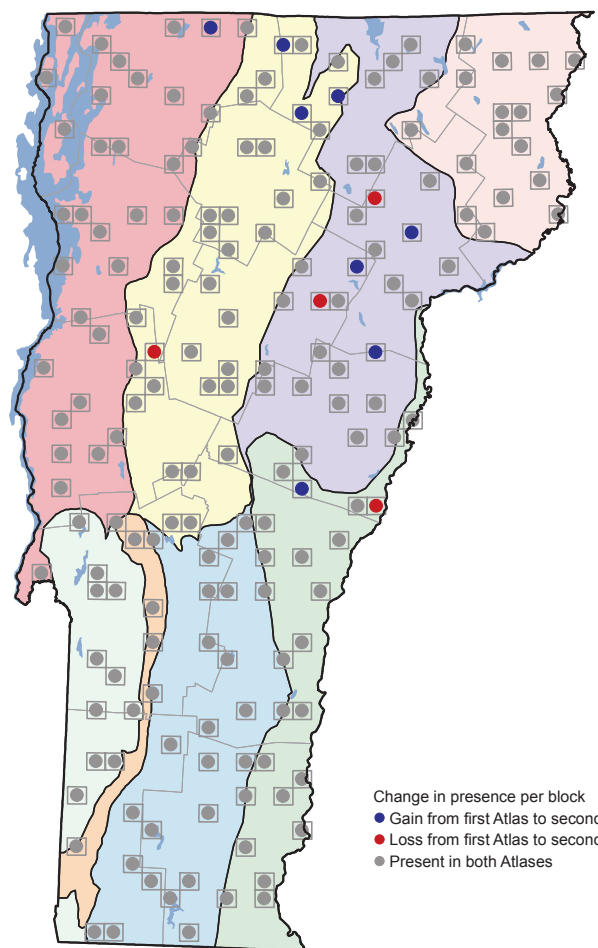
atlas, were distributed uniformly over the entire state. There was no significant change in distribution nor proportion of occupied blocks since the first atlas.

Breeding Bird Survey data show no significant change in Downy Woodpecker counts in Vermont or Maine from 1966 to 2007, nor for the shorter time period from 1982 to 2007. In New Hampshire, however, populations increased significantly by 1.7 percent per year over the longer term, and by 1.6 percent during the shorter period (Sauer et al. 2011). The Vermont Forest Bird Monitoring Program found no significant trend after monitoring 16 sites throughout the state from 1989 to 2006. Christmas Bird Count data in Vermont from 1983–84 to 2008–9 show neither a positive nor a negative long-term trend. Data from the second atlases in Maryland, Pennsylvania, New York, and Ontario showed no significant change in the status of this species since their respective first atlases (Ellison 2010, Wilson et al. 2012, Cadman et al. 2007).

In a thirty-year study at the Hubbard Brook Experi-

RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME





CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	32	33	+ 1	+ 3
Northeastern Highlands	17	17	+ 0	+ 0
Northern Green Mountains	32	34	+ 2	+ 6
Northern Vermont Piedmont	27	28	+ 1	+ 4
Southern Green Mountains	27	27	+ 0	+ 0
Southern Vermont Piedmont	20	20	+ 0	+ 0
Taconic Mountains	11	11	+ 0	+ 0
Vermont Valley	5	5	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	171	175	+ 4	+ 2

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	98	20
Northeastern Highlands	97	10
Northern Green Mountains	98	18
Northern Vermont Piedmont	95	17
Southern Green Mountains	96	15
Southern Vermont Piedmont	97	11
Taconic Mountains	95	6
Vermont Valley	100	2

mental Forest in New Hampshire, Holmes and Sherry (2001) found a decline in the Downy Woodpecker population. Jackson and Ouellet (2002) suggested that the change was attributable to forest maturation. The current trend of forest maturation in Vermont may result in reduced Downy Woodpecker numbers, and future climate change may affect the species' elevational distribution. For the time being, however, the species remains common and widely distributed, and no special measures are needed to promote its conservation.

GEORGE A. CLARK, JR.