

Evening Grosbeak

Coccothraustes vespertinus

Once a very rare visitor from the Northwest, the Evening Grosbeak became a common winter resident beginning in the 1970s and is now a “poster bird” of Vermont’s backyard feeders. The species breeds across much of Canada, southward through the western mountains into Mexico, and in the northeastern states to central New York and Massachusetts. When population numbers are high and tree seed crops fail, grosbeaks irrupt southward. During these winter invasions, individuals (usually females) might venture deep into the Southeast (Gillihan and Byers 2001). In recent decades, however, such irruptions have become less noticeable, and finding birds south of northern Pennsylvania has become increasingly difficult. Prior to the mid-1800s, the Evening Grosbeak was considered a western species; it was not observed in New England until the winter of 1889–90. The first summer record in Vermont was reported in 1893 (Oatman 1985), although breeding in the state was not confirmed until 1926 at Woodstock (Marble 1926). Box elder seeds are a favored food item, and their widespread use in shelterbelts is credited with luring winter flocks eastward across the formerly treeless grasslands (Bent 1968). Spruce budworm outbreaks, along with the proliferation of wild cherries after forest clearing and controlled burning, may have facilitated early invasions as well (Gillihan and Byers 2001, Bolgiano 2004). Feeder watchers, on the other hand, contend that it was tons of sunflower seeds which led to the species’ move to the East.

The secretive Evening Grosbeak nests in spruce-fir and mixed conifer forests. Courtship and pair-bond establishment are accompanied by soft calls, quite unlike the harsh chattering of winter flocks or the musical displays of other territorial songbirds. It is possible that breeding went undetected in remote blocks that received minimal coverage. During the atlas, nest building was observed from 22 May to 29 June (N = 5); this stage may extend into early July (Downs 1956). Nests are placed in the interior of the upper third of the canopy; this inaccessibility was no doubt a factor in the absence of egg and nestling data recorded during the atlas. The clutch of 3 to 4 eggs is in-

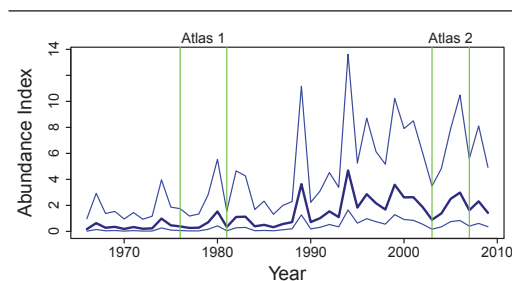


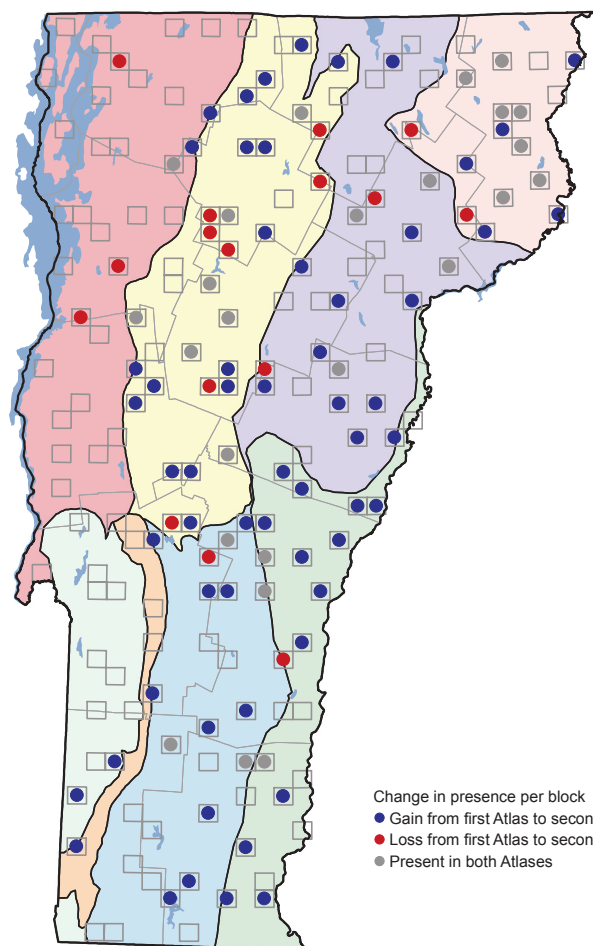
cubated by the female for two weeks, and young fledge within a similar time period. Fledglings were observed from 12 June to 15 August; these accounted for more than 90 percent of confirmations. Adults apparently leave the breeding area ahead of the fledglings (Gillihan and Byers 2001), but the period of dependency and dynamics of these movements need further research.

Evening Grosbeaks breed throughout the mountains of central and eastern Vermont but are virtually unknown during the summer along the western edge of the state. Cropland and hayfields fail to interest them, but the maturing forests of our higher elevations appear to be very attractive. The number of blocks occupied by Evening Grosbeaks has more than doubled since the first atlas, with the greatest increase (400 percent) occurring in the Southern Vermont Piedmont. Only the Champlain Valley, where the species is a rare breeder, showed a net loss.

Continental populations of Evening Grosbeak have shown significant declines since the 1980s, and the same can be said of wintering numbers in the Northeast. How-

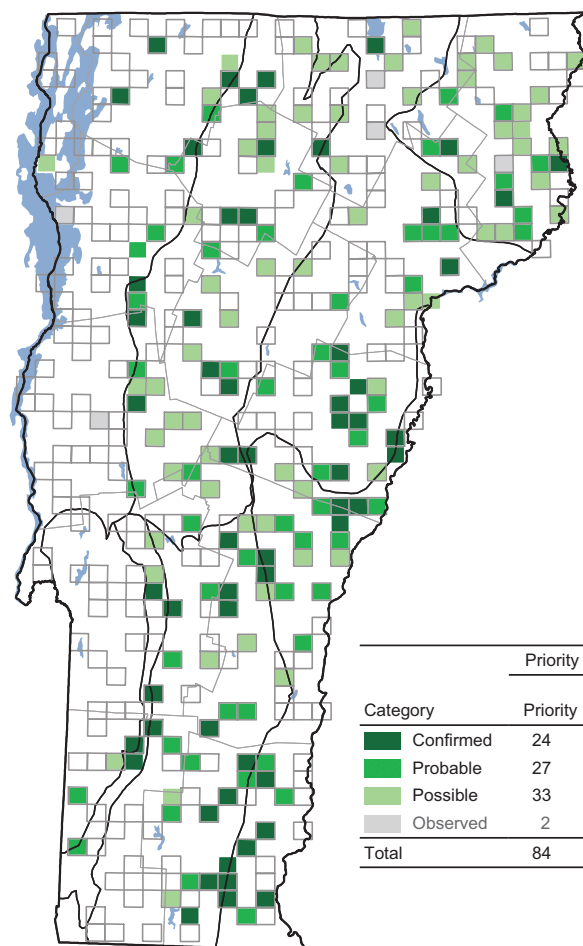
RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME





CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	4	3	- 1	- 25
Northeastern Highlands	9	12	+ 3	+ 33
Northern Green Mountains	14	22	+ 8	+ 57
Northern Vermont Piedmont	6	15	+ 9	+ 150
Southern Green Mountains	5	14	+ 9	+ 180
Southern Vermont Piedmont	3	15	+ 12	+ 400
Taconic Mountains	0	2	+ 2	+ 200
Vermont Valley	0	1	+ 1	+ 100
Totals	41	84	+ 43	+ 105



Category	Priority Block Count	
	Priority 1	Priority 1 & 2
Confirmed	24	50
Probable	27	54
Possible	33	61
Observed	2	5
Total	84	165

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	12	5
Northeastern Highlands	67	15
Northern Green Mountains	61	24
Northern Vermont Piedmont	47	19
Southern Green Mountains	51	18
Southern Vermont Piedmont	65	16
Taconic Mountains	14	2
Vermont Valley	25	1

ever, breeding populations in the Northeast, where the species is a relatively recent colonist, have consistently and dramatically increased since the 1960s (Sauer et al. 2008). These increases likely have something to do with the Northeast's abundance of bird-feeding stations. New York's second atlas found Evening Grosbeaks in 44 per cent more blocks (McGowan and Corwin 2008). Conversely, Ontario's second atlas found decreases in the probability of observation in all regions of the province (Cadman et al. 2007).

Evening Grosbeak populations in Vermont and other

nearby states appear to be increasing. Although periodic fluctuations are to be expected for this irruptive species with a fondness for variable food supplies, they appear likely to remain permanent residents even in the face of climatic change.

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