

Alder Flycatcher

Empidonax alnorum

Most reliably identified by its *fee-bee-o* song, the Alder Flycatcher is one of the most widely distributed members of its genus in North America, breeding from Alaska east to the Maritime Provinces and southward in the higher elevations to the Appalachian Mountains (Lowther 1999). Less than a half-century ago, the Alder and Willow flycatchers—both widespread in Vermont—were considered one species, the Traill's Flycatcher (AOU 1973).

Of the two sibling species, the Alder Flycatcher is more likely to be found at higher elevations (Kibbe and Norse 1985), often in alders along streams and in beaver meadows. Preferred habitat includes damp fields and meadows with willow, alder, cedar, aspen, hawthorn, and maple (Peck and James 1987). Both species occur at lower elevations in alder and willow thickets. As suggested in the first atlas (Kibbe and Norse 1985), both species commonly occur in the same block. In view of the apparent expansion of both species' distribution, there is no evidence that one displaces the other, although they maintain interspecific territories that do not overlap (Lowther 1999).

Few observers were intrepid enough to search for nests in the Alder Flycatcher's wet, swampy habitat, and most breeding confirmations were of adults carrying food for young. Atlas data show that nesting begins in early June and is completed by the end of July, with fledglings observed as late as 10 August. As with many bird species, calling is less frequent after eggs are laid (Lowther 1999); this, combined with a sometimes inaccessible habitat, may have made detection difficult. Banding results indicate most Alder Flycatchers depart Vermont during the latter half of August (Kibbe and Norse 1985).

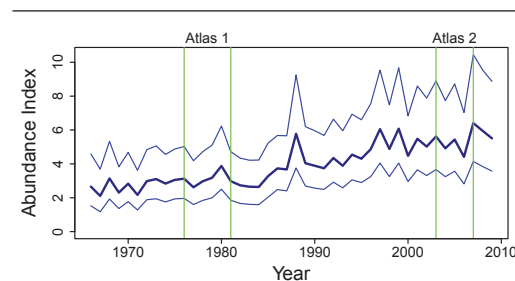
Alder Flycatchers were found in more than 70 percent of the blocks in every biophysical region of the state. Data from the second atlas indicate that the Alder Flycatcher has increased in all biophysical regions in the past twenty years, with the largest increases in the Taconic Mountains, Vermont Valley, Champlain Valley, and Southern Vermont Piedmont. Breeding Bird Survey data show a significant, 3.2 percent per year increase in Vermont's populations from 1982 to 2007 (Sauer et al. 2011).

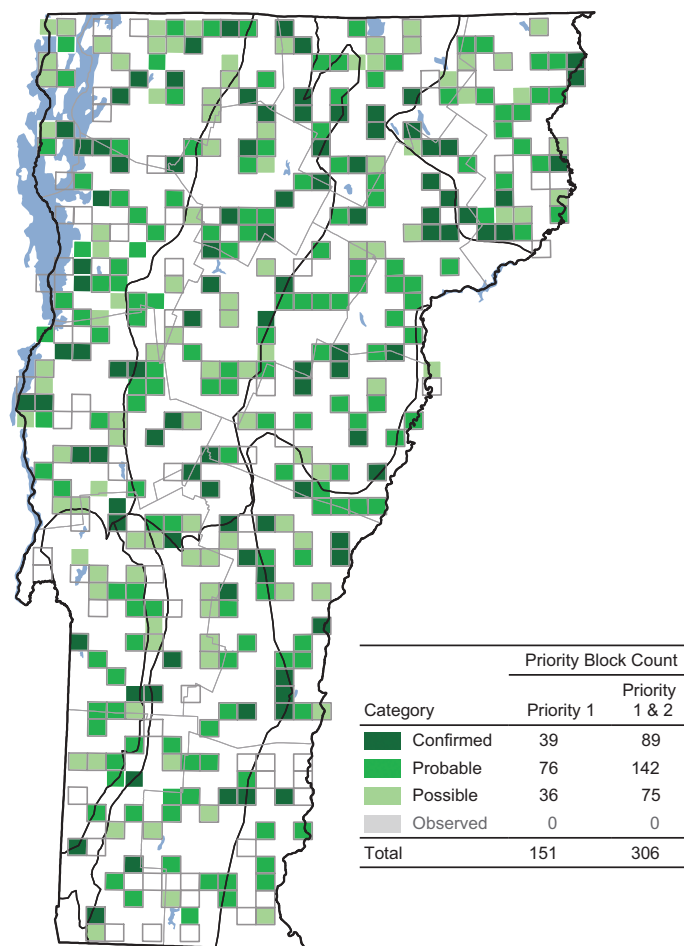
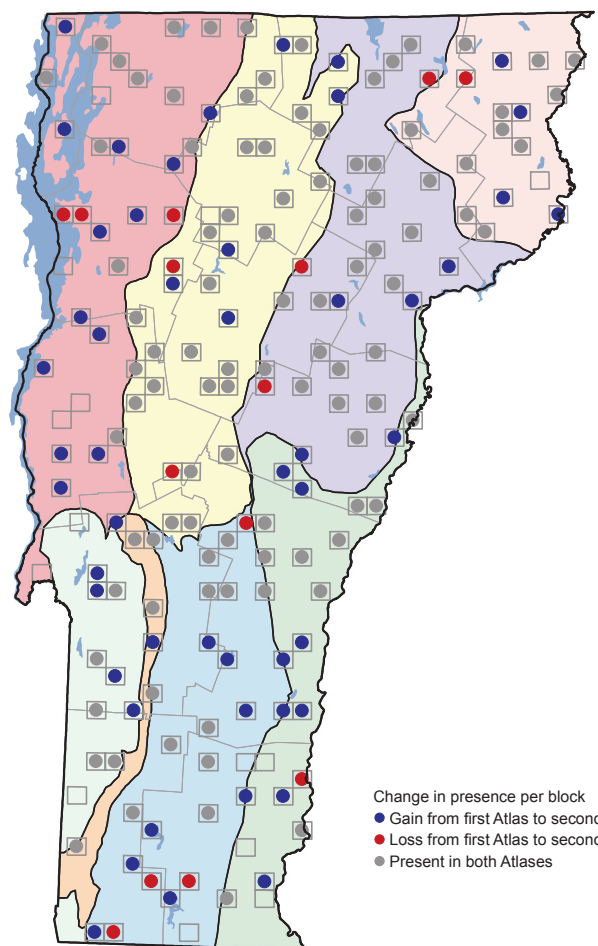


Second atlases in Maryland and New York found similar increases, by 36 and 45 percent respectively (McGowan and Corwin 2008, Ellison 2010). The Pennsylvania atlas indicates a 163 percent increase in block occupancy (Wilson et al. 2012). Ontario found a 26 percent increase in the probability of observation across the province (Cadman et al. 2007).

At first glance, it seems illogical that a species occupying an early seral community type would show increased abundance, given trends in forest maturation and a slight increase in forest cover. The Maritimes atlas noted that Alder Flycatchers were often found in roadside shrubbery. They concluded that although regrowth of fallow land into forests may result in the loss of breeding habitat, the species' affinity for shrubs along roadways has maintained populations (Erskine 1992). They are probably still most commonly found, however, in the wet shrublands that border Vermont's many streams and beaver ponds. Perhaps they, like the moose, are finding more wetlands

RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME





CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	15	25	+ 10	+ 67
Northeastern Highlands	12	15	+ 3	+ 25
Northern Green Mountains	28	32	+ 4	+ 14
Northern Vermont Piedmont	25	27	+ 2	+ 8
Southern Green Mountains	16	21	+ 5	+ 31
Southern Vermont Piedmont	11	17	+ 6	+ 55
Taconic Mountains	5	9	+ 4	+ 80
Vermont Valley	3	5	+ 2	+ 67
Totals	115	151	+ 36	+ 31

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	72	17
Northeastern Highlands	89	11
Northern Green Mountains	93	20
Northern Vermont Piedmont	93	20
Southern Green Mountains	80	15
Southern Vermont Piedmont	75	10
Taconic Mountains	80	6
Vermont Valley	75	2

to their liking, given some land-use trends. Dairying has diminished, and the establishment of buffer strips on remaining farms (through Farm Bill programs) has likely allowed some riparian thickets along pasture streams to recover.

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