

Willow Flycatcher

Empidonax traillii

Formerly considered a subspecies of the Traill's Flycatcher, the Willow Flycatcher was classified as a separate species from the nearly identical Alder Flycatcher in 1973 (AOU 1973). The two species maintain distinct inter-specific territories, overlapping extensively in both range and habitat throughout Vermont. Field identification of the Willow Flycatcher is reliably accomplished only by hearing its song, a sneezy *fitz-bew*. Generally, the Willow Flycatcher prefers slightly drier habitats and lower elevations than the Alder Flycatcher. It breeds from British Columbia to New Brunswick and southward to northern Georgia, southern Arizona, and California. The southwestern subspecies (*E. traillii extimus*) is classified as endangered due to population declines caused by loss of riparian habitat. Willow Flycatchers spend barely three months in Vermont before retreating to Central America and northern South America for the non-breeding season.

Willow Flycatchers are among Vermont's last migrant breeders to return in spring, arriving in late May or early June, slightly ahead of Alder Flycatchers. Although sometimes found in alders or willows along streamsides and wetland margins, the species also breeds in drier, upland fields overgrown with shrubs. Grasslands without woody vegetation are avoided, as are woodlands. The nest, a loosely woven cup placed in a low crotch along the edge of a thicket or hedgerow, is more compact than that of the Alder Flycatcher (Sedgwick 2000). Low willows are commonly, but not exclusively, used. Nest building in Vermont (N = 12) was noted as early as 26 May and as late as 23 July. Nests with eggs were found on 26 June, 4 July, and 17 July. Fledglings were recorded from 13 June, a remarkably early date, to 12 August (N = 7).

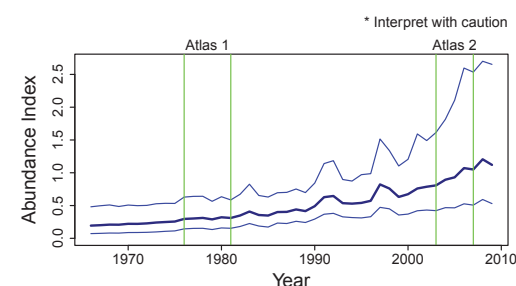
Both atlases recorded the Willow Flycatcher throughout Vermont. It was uncommon, however, in the extreme northeast and at the highest elevations, where coniferous forests dominate and early-successional shrub habitat is generally scarce. The second atlas documented a substantial increase in the occurrence of the Willow Flycatcher in every region of the state. Except for a handful of blocks

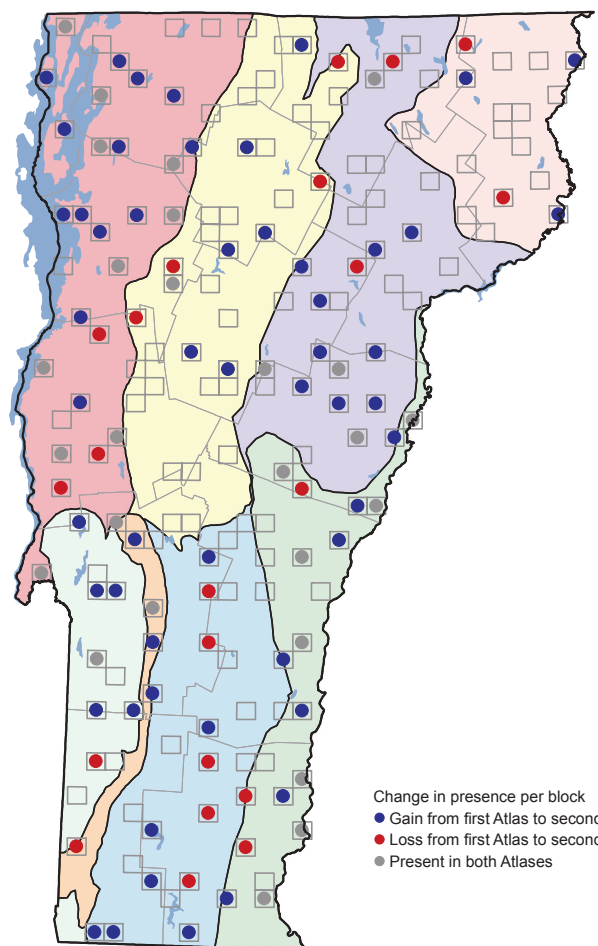


in the Southern Green Mountains, the Willow Flycatcher was missed in very few blocks in which it had been recorded during the first atlas. Only in the Northern Green Mountains and Northeastern Highlands was the species uncommon, occurring in 20 percent or fewer of priority blocks. The Breeding Bird Survey does not separate these two sibling species and therefore does not provide an accurate measure of population trends or distributional changes for either.

Because the Willow Flycatcher was accorded full species status only a decade before the first atlas and was at that time assumed to have a more westerly distribution (Spear 1976), some observers may have missed them during the first atlas by assuming *Empidonax* flycatchers that were not singing were the "more likely" Alder Flycatcher. Similarly, the apparent increase in the second atlas may partly reflect a greater awareness of the bird's regular occurrence in Vermont.

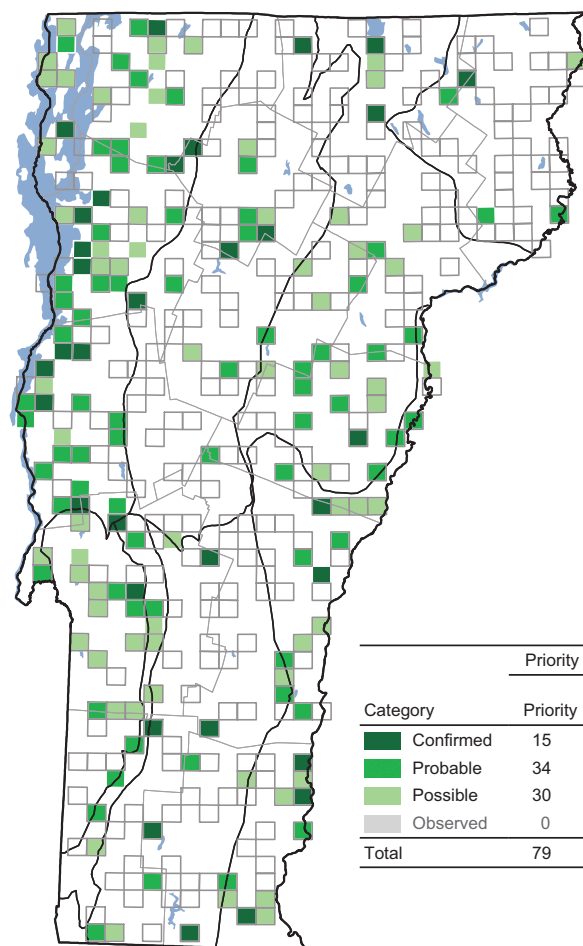
RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME





CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	13	23	+ 10	+ 77
Northeastern Highlands	2	3	+ 1	+ 50
Northern Green Mountains	5	7	+ 2	+ 40
Northern Vermont Piedmont	6	14	+ 8	+ 133
Southern Green Mountains	6	8	+ 2	+ 33
Southern Vermont Piedmont	10	14	+ 4	+ 40
Taconic Mountains	2	6	+ 4	+ 200
Vermont Valley	3	4	+ 1	+ 33
Totals	47	79	+ 32	+ 68



Category	Priority Block Count	
	Priority 1	Priority 1 & 2
Confirmed	15	26
Probable	34	62
Possible	30	54
Observed	0	0
Total	79	142

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	60	31
Northeastern Highlands	10	3
Northern Green Mountains	20	9
Northern Vermont Piedmont	41	19
Southern Green Mountains	23	9
Southern Vermont Piedmont	55	15
Taconic Mountains	61	9
Vermont Valley	75	4

Occurrence of the Willow Flycatcher increased by 36 percent statewide in the second New York atlas (Post 2008), although the species remained uncommon in the Adirondacks. Pennsylvania registered a 23 percent increase in its second atlas (Wilson et al. 2012); Maryland 7 percent (Ellison 2010); and southern Ontario 79 percent (Cadman et al. 2007). These data reflect the Willow Flycatcher's gradual spread into the Northeast, despite the maturation of successional shrubland into forest in much of the region. Yet the species continues to be of conservation concern range-wide, due to steep declines in

other regions, such as the Southwest, where the species is threatened by riparian development (Sedgwick 2000). Increases in Willow Flycatcher populations in the Northeast appear to have had little impact on Alder Flycatchers, which have also increased their apparent distribution in Vermont since the first atlas.

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