Gray Catbird

Dumetella carolinensis



An accomplished mimic, the Gray Catbird is related to the Northern Mockingbird. Gray Catbirds breed from the Maritime Provinces west across Canada to southern British Columbia. Although absent from most of the southern Rocky Mountains, they breed throughout the eastern United States south to northern Florida. They are most abundant in the Northeast (Sauer et al. 2011). Catbirds return to Vermont in late April from wintering grounds that extend along the southeastern Gulf Coast south to Central America.

Catbirds are thicket-loving birds, seldom found far from a dense tangle of underbrush. Forest edge, riparian thickets, previously logged areas, hedgerows, and suburbs all provide potential breeding habitat. The Gray Catbird is one of only about a dozen bird species that will remove eggs deposited in their nests by Brown-headed Cowbirds. This learned behavior is less than perfect, however; some birds apparently mistake their own eggs for a cowbird's, and eject them from the nest (Rothstein 1974). Gray Catbird nests are placed low, about 1.5 meters (5 feet) off the ground (Cimprich and Moore 1995).

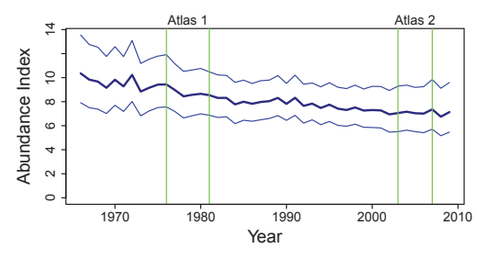
Gray Catbirds may raise two broods at our latitude (Cimprich and Moore 1995). In Vermont, nest building (N = 32) was recorded from 15 May to 21 July. Fourteen nests with eggs were found from 22 May to 14 July. Nestlings (N = 23) were discovered from 4 June to 24 July. Fledglings, which remain dependent on the adults for a dozen days after fledging (Zimmerman 1963), constituted the primary source of breeding confirmations, with 86 records between 12 June and 6 August. Overall, the species had a 73 percent confirmation rate.

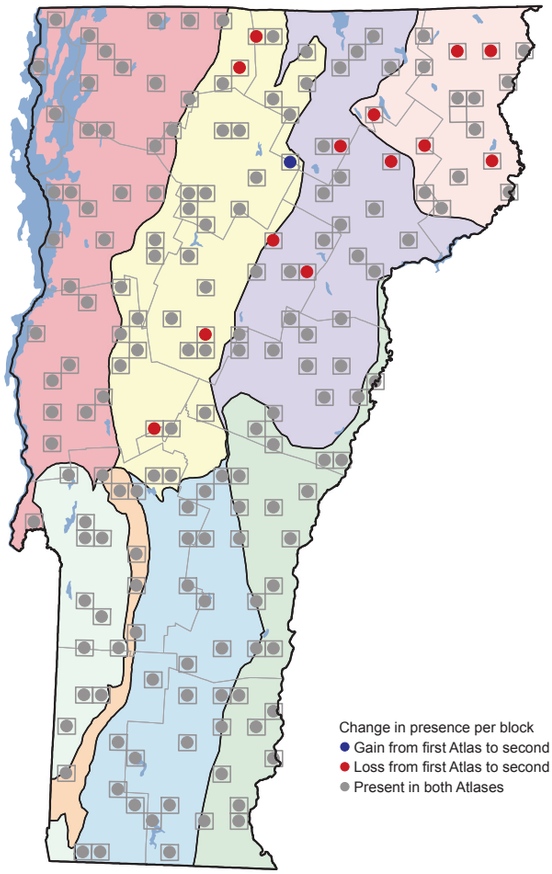
In both atlases, Gray Catbirds were slightly less common in the Green Mountains and the Northeast Kingdom, where unbroken forest lacks suitable nesting habitat compared to the rest of the state. Within those areas, individuals are quick to occupy any shrub community that can be established after logging, fire, or windfalls allow sufficient light to reach the forest floor.

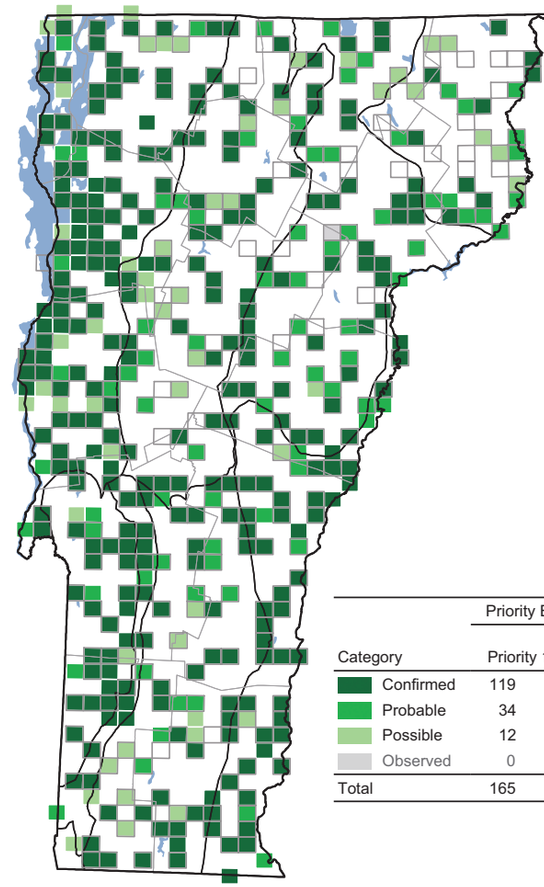
During the first atlas, Gray Catbirds were found in all but 2 Priority 1 blocks. The proportion of occupied blocks was lower during the second atlas but still enough to make it one of the most widespread species in the state (92 percent). The 7 percent decrease is likely a result of succession, as shrubby fields gave way to forest. Population numbers were stable in Vermont from 1982 to 2007 (Sauer et al. 2011).

New York's second atlas revealed a decline of 24 percent in the number of blocks where Gray Catbird was detected in the heavily forested Adirondack Mountains, while elsewhere in the state the population appeared to be stable (McGowan 2008). This decline was also reflected in the Adirondack Breeding Bird Survey data (Sauer et al. 2008). Pennsylvania and Maryland found little change in the Gray Catbird's distribution or proportion of blocks occupied (Wilson et al. 2012, Ellison 2010). In Ontario, declines were noted in the northern sections of the province (Curry 2007), while the species remained common in the southern regions. From 1982 to 2007, catbird numbers increased significantly in southern New England, but decreased significantly in northern New England (Sauer et al. 2008).

RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME







Category	Priority Block Count: Priority 1	Priority 1 & 2
Confirmed	119	245
Probable	34	59
Possible	12	30
Observed	0	1
Total	165	334

CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	33	33	+ 0	+ 0
Northeastern Highlands	16	11	- 5	- 31
Northern Green Mountains	34	31	- 3	- 9
Northern Vermont Piedmont	30	26	- 4	- 13
Southern Green Mountains	27	27	+ 0	+ 0
Southern Vermont Piedmont	21	21	+ 0	+ 0
Taconic Mountains	11	11	+ 0	+ 0
Vermont Valley	5	5	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	177	165	- 12	- 7

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	100	22
Northeastern Highlands	70	8
Northern Green Mountains	86	17
Northern Vermont Piedmont	86	17
Southern Green Mountains	96	16
Southern Vermont Piedmont	100	12
Taconic Mountains	100	6
Vermont Valley	100	2

The Gray Catbird may continue to decline in regions of Vermont where forest eventually replaces the early successional shrublands that characterized former farmlands during the latter half of the twentieth century. Over the remainder of the state, however, the species is likely to continue to thrive. As a fruit and berry eater, it avidly consumes cherries, grapes, blueberries, raspberries, and strawberries. It is also found in natural communities that spring up after logging operations, particularly when raspberries, blackberries, and elderberries are present. Sixty percent or more of its diet in the summer, fall, and winter is fruit (Cimprich and Moore 1995). The Gray Catbird's ability to quickly colonize early successional habitats, and to live in and even benefit from close proximity to people, will likely ensure its continued success in a human-altered environment.

DOUGLAS P. KIBBE