

Eastern Bluebird

Sialia sialis

Vermont's premier harbinger of spring, the Eastern Bluebird arrives from its wintering grounds shortly after snowmelt. Vermont lies near the northeastern edge of the breeding range, which stretches across southern Canada from Alberta to Prince Edward Island and includes all of the eastern United States. In the American West, the Eastern Bluebird breeds along Great Plains' rivers and windbreaks to the threshold of the Rocky Mountains, and in the mountains of eastern Arizona. It also breeds in Central America as far south as Nicaragua (Gowaty and Plissner 1998).

Historically, the Eastern Bluebird took advantage of natural disturbances in the eastern deciduous forest. It greatly benefited from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century clearing of land in Vermont. Because bluebirds nest in tree cavities and forage in open land, they found the pastures and meadows of the Northeast to be ideal habitat, as hedgerows and forest edges provided plenty of nest cavities. The Eastern Bluebird was a common species in Vermont at the start of the twentieth century, but competition for nest cavities with the introduced European Starling and House Sparrow, along with the reclamation of abandoned farmland by forest, reduced their numbers.

Today, bluebird enthusiasts place nest boxes in open pastures, hayfields, and front yards, bolstering the population and providing the vast majority of nest sites. They thoughtfully determine the size, shape, and placement of boxes along "nest box trails," maximizing appeal to the Eastern Bluebird while discouraging competitors. The Eastern Bluebird is quick to accept either a natural or artificial site. In the Vermont atlas, nest building was documented from 4 April through 2 July (N = 14). Nests with eggs were reported from 3 May through 18 July (N = 12) and nestlings were found 11 May through 1 August (N = 33). Fledglings were seen 19 May to 15 August (N = 60). Because their breast spots make fledglings easy to identify (a characteristic shared by all members of the thrush family), observation of fledglings was the principal method of confirmation.

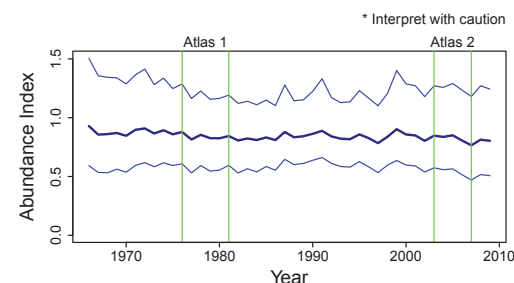


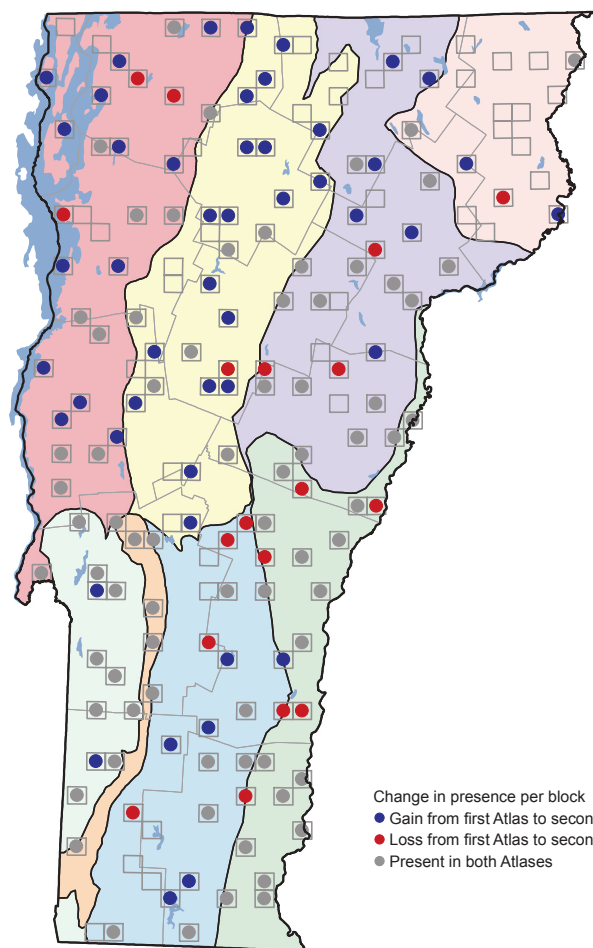
Atlasers recorded the Eastern Bluebird throughout the state, wherever open foraging areas were in close proximity to natural cavities or nest boxes. They were rarely found in the most heavily forested areas of the Green Mountains and Northeastern Highlands, although scattered openings (from logging, for example) can provide foraging sites that provide the food resources needed for nesting. Occupancy of clear-cuts would be ephemeral, however, for the Eastern Bluebird is quickly crowded out by reforestation.

The Eastern Bluebird showed a substantial statewide increase of 33 percent in block occupancy since the first atlas, in large part due to an increase of 243 percent in the Northern Green Mountains—a surprising change for that region. Despite this expansion in distribution, Breeding Bird Survey data suggest that numbers were stable in the state from 1982 to 2007 (Sauer et al. 2011).

In the New York atlas, blocks occupied by Eastern

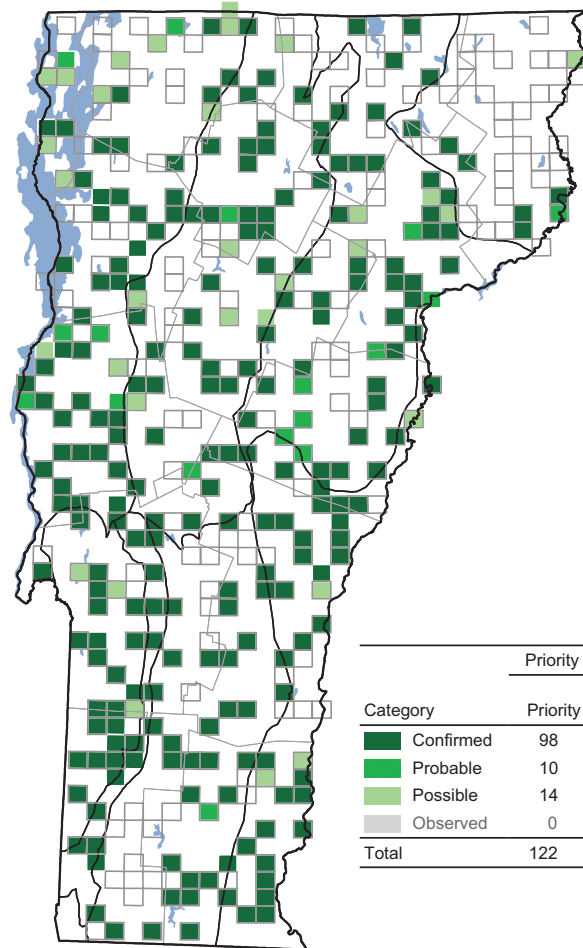
RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME





CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	14	25	+ 11	+ 79
Northeastern Highlands	3	4	+ 1	+ 33
Northern Green Mountains	7	24	+ 17	+ 243
Northern Vermont Piedmont	18	21	+ 3	+ 17
Southern Green Mountains	16	15	- 1	- 6
Southern Vermont Piedmont	20	17	- 3	- 15
Taconic Mountains	9	11	+ 2	+ 22
Vermont Valley	5	5	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	92	122	+ 30	+ 33



DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	69	21
Northeastern Highlands	21	3
Northern Green Mountains	69	18
Northern Vermont Piedmont	70	19
Southern Green Mountains	60	14
Southern Vermont Piedmont	82	13
Taconic Mountains	95	8
Vermont Valley	100	3

Bluebird increased by more than 50 percent; this was attributed to the success of numerous nest box trails across the state (Berner 2008). In Maryland, the increase in the second atlas was 14 percent (Ellison 2010); in Pennsylvania, a more modest 9 percent (Wilson et al. 2012). Ontario's second atlas also recorded an increase (Cadman et al. 2007).

The Eastern Bluebird was never a species of conservation concern in Vermont, but it had been listed in nearby New York and Ontario. Due to the bird's general population increase over the past several decades, it has been de-

listed in both regions. In Vermont the Eastern Bluebird is faring well and does not require special attention.

DOUGLAS P. KIBBE