American Goldfinch

Carduelis tristis

The American Goldfinch is one of the latest breeders among Vermont's passerines. Their seed-eating diet brings them in contact throughout the year with those who provide thistle feeders. Given its small size and bright coloration, a backyard birder might mistake one for a warbler until noticing the conical finch bill. The species breeds across central Canada and southward nearly to the Gulf Coast; densities are highest in the Northeast and Great Lakes states (Sauer et al. 2011). Northern populations, including some in Vermont, are migratory, with females moving farther south in the winter than males (Prescott and Middleton 1990), sometimes well into Mexico. Although some birds remain in Vermont throughout the year, the American Goldfinch is a vagabond during the non-breeding season, traveling in flocks to feed on birch catkins and a variety of grass and forb seeds.

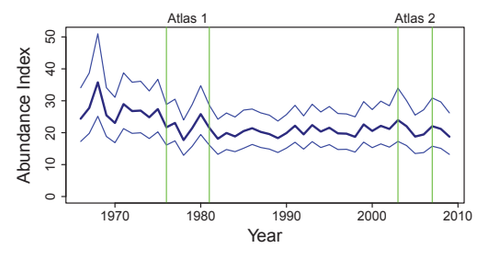
In Vermont, secondary growth and riparian shrubs are the most frequently occupied breeding habitats, although the species is also commonly found in suburbs and forest edges (D. Kibbe pers. obs.). Unlike many other birds, they do not feed their young insects; their late breeding season appears to be timed to the maturation of thistle and milkweed seeds. (They also use thistle down to construct the lining of their nests.) Delayed nesting makes them less vulnerable to parasitism by the Brown-headed Cowbird, whose egg-laying period has essentially ended before the goldfinch's begins (Middleton 1993).

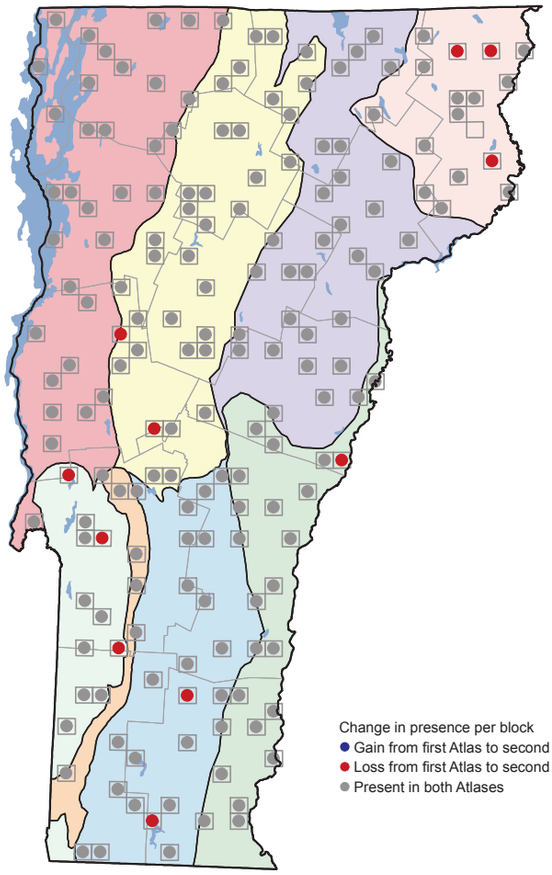
Perhaps because American Goldfinches are such conspicuous birds, easy to recognize and with a long season of nest building, atlas workers observed nest building more frequently for this species than for any other. Nest building was observed between 28 May and 3 September (N = 65), and nests with eggs were reported from 11 June to 1 August (N = 14). Nestlings were found in Vermont as early as 7 July during the second atlas (N = 5) and as late as 19 September during the first atlas (Laughlin and Kibbe 1985). Fledglings (N = 54) were seen from 17 June through mid-October. Although usually able to raise only one brood in their short breeding season, experienced females may leave fledglings with their first mate and seek another male to father a second brood (Middleton 1993). Nesting attempts in August and September probably represent second broods or renesting attempts following nest loss.

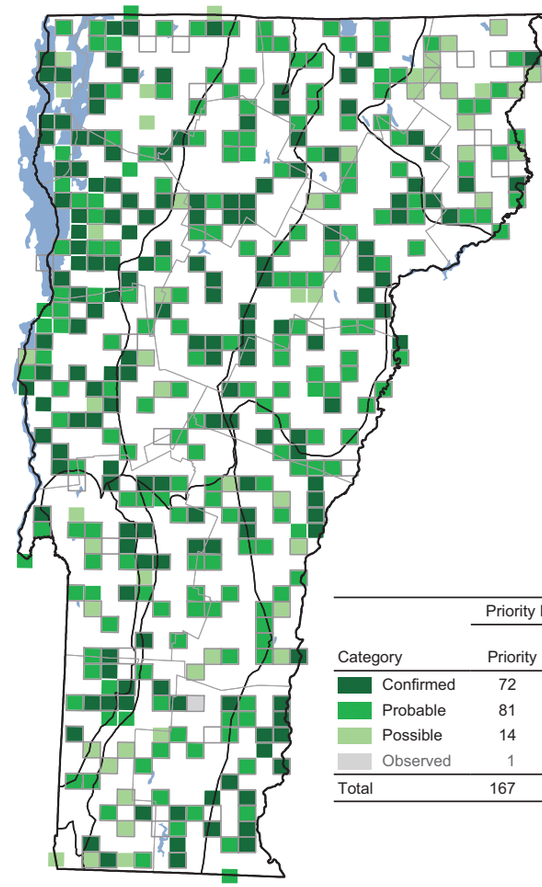
American Goldfinches breed throughout Vermont wherever suitable riparian or secondary growth occurs. They were well represented in all biophysical regions in both atlases but slightly less common in areas with unbroken mature forest. A 6 percent decline in block occupancy was noted in the second atlas, with the greatest declines in the Taconic Mountains and Northeastern Highlands. Reasons for such changes are unknown, although forest maturation could account for some of this decline.

Breeding Bird Survey data indicate significantly increasing American Goldfinch populations in eastern North America from 1982 to 2007; during the same period, populations in Vermont have been stable (Sauer et al. 2011). Second atlases in New York, Pennsylvania, and Maryland showed virtually no change in distribution (McGowan and Corwin 2008, Wilson et al. 2012, Ellison 2010). In the second Ontario atlas, goldfinch popula-

RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME







Category	Priority Block Count: Priority 1	Priority 1 & 2
Confirmed	72	136
Probable	81	176
Possible	14	35
Observed	1	1
Total	167	347

CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	33	33	+ 0	+ 0
Northeastern Highlands	16	13	- 3	- 19
Northern Green Mountains	35	33	- 2	- 6
Northern Vermont Piedmont	30	30	+ 0	+ 0
Southern Green Mountains	27	25	- 2	- 7
Southern Vermont Piedmont	21	20	- 1	- 5
Taconic Mountains	11	8	- 3	- 27
Vermont Valley	5	5	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	178	167	- 11	- 6

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	95	20
Northeastern Highlands	89	10
Northern Green Mountains	96	18
Northern Vermont Piedmont	98	18
Southern Green Mountains	94	15
Southern Vermont Piedmont	95	11
Taconic Mountains	85	5
Vermont Valley	100	2

tions were essentially unchanged in the southern portion of the province, but significantly increased in the north, perhaps due to boreal forest harvesting (Leckie and Cadman 2007).

American Goldfinch populations appear to be relatively stable and the species is not of conservation concern in the region. Climate-change models predict a range-wide decline (Matthews et al. 2007), due in part to a northward range shift. Such a shift appears to be occurring in Ontario, although perhaps for other reasons.

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