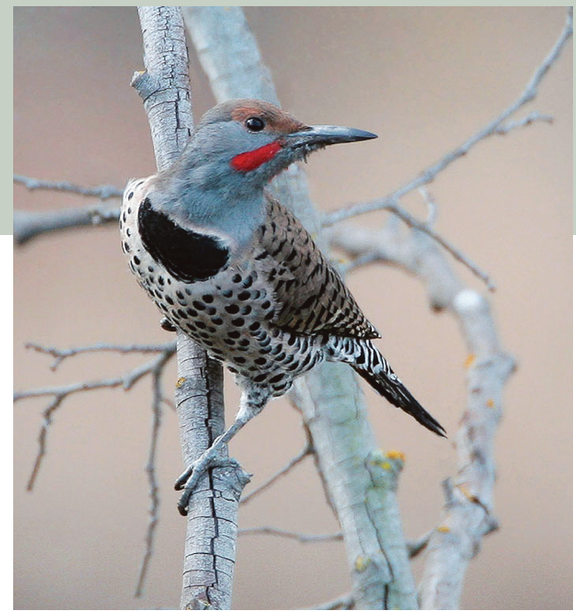
Northern Flicker

Colaptes auratus

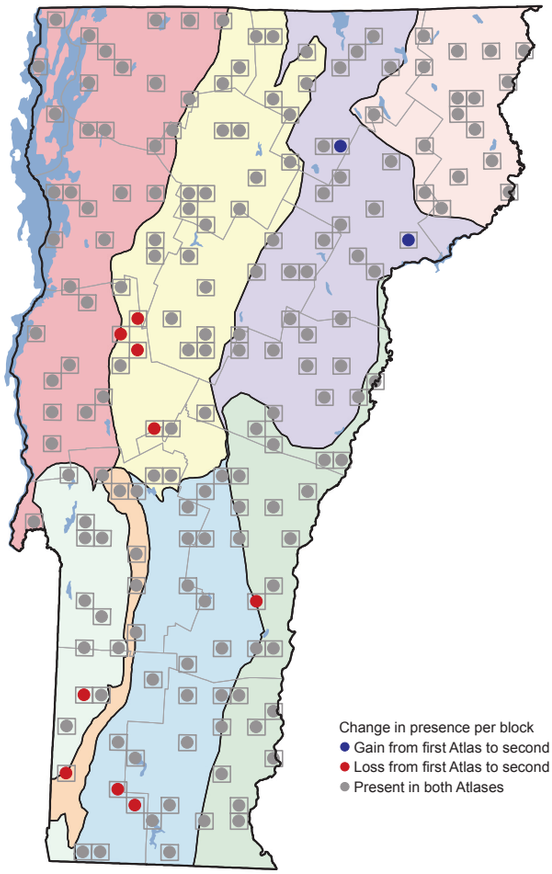


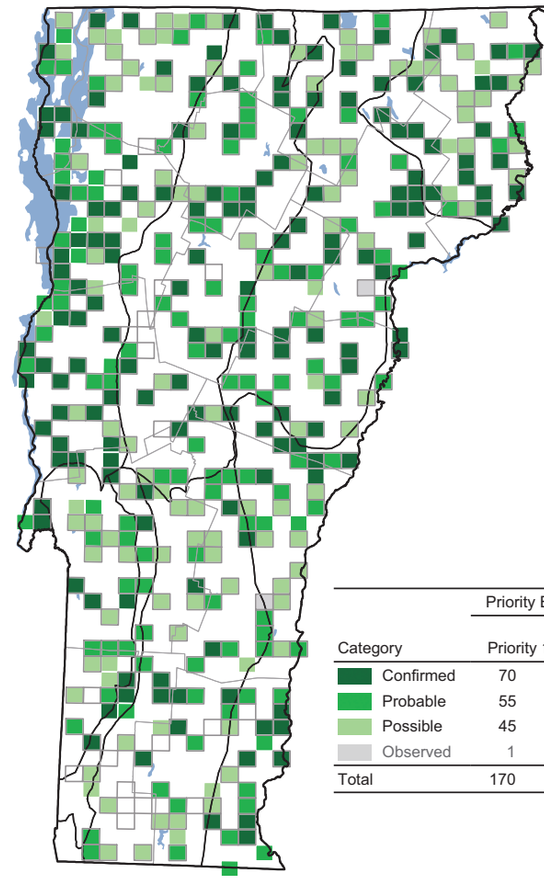
The colorful Northern Flicker is the most terrestrial of woodpeckers in Vermont. It is distinctive in its habit of foraging on the ground to obtain its favored food: ants. The eastern subspecies, the Yellow-shafted Flicker, nests from the Great Plains eastward throughout North America wherever there are trees (AOU 1998). The red-shafted subspecies breeds in western North America. While most of Vermont's woodpecker species are present year round, nearly all Northern Flickers migrate to the southeastern United States for the winter (AOU 1998). Flickers have been reported in Vermont from the time of the earliest recorded observations of birds in the early nineteenth century (Thompson 1842). During the latter half of the nineteenth century, when agriculture was more widespread in Vermont than at present, the Northern Flicker was the most common woodpecker species in the state (Cutting 1884).

A species of forest edges and open woodlands, the flicker excavates nest holes in trees located in open woodlands, fields remaining after lumbering, and edge situations (Wiebe and Moore 2008). These birds also occasionally use nest boxes (Ingold 1998). During the second atlas, the single nest found with eggs was recorded on 17 June. Nests with young were found from 8 June to 18 July (N = 38), and fledglings were found from 19 May to 11 August (N = 58). Because flickers frequently forage on lawns, call loudly, drum noisily on utility poles, and are easily recognized, they are readily detected.

Northern Flicker was well represented in every physiographic region in both atlases. Five regions showed slight declines, however, and occupancy rates fell from highs of 95 to 100 percent in each region during the first atlas, to lows of 87 percent in two regions during the second atlas. Breeding Bird Survey data for the Atlantic Northern Forest (Bird Conservation Region 14) showed a significant decline from 1982 to 2007, and Vermont was part of this trend, showing a significant 3.7 percent decline. New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and New York also have shown significant declines during this period (Sauer et al. 2011). In Quebec, Dunn et al. (2001) found a significant decrease from 1971 to 1992. Second atlases for Maryland (Ellison 2010), Pennsylvania (Wilson et al. 2012), New York (McGowan and Corwin 2008), and Ontario (Cadman et al. 2007) indicated only slight changes for the flicker; atlas methods do not closely track population changes in birds that are relatively abundant.

Wiebe and Moore (2008) summarized evidence for a general decline of the Northern Flicker since 1966 in North America. Three suggested causes of the decline are lack of nesting substrate, including standing dead trees and snags; competition for nest cavities, especially by European Starling; and pesticide application on golf courses and suburban lawns that reduces prey abundance. Although there are several accounts of starlings evicting flickers from nest cavities (see Wiebe and Moore 2008), the extent to which flicker productivity is affected needs more investigation (Koenig 2003). Modern agricultural practices might also have adverse effects on flickers, including the previously mentioned application of pesticides (Wiebe and Moore 2008) as well as removal of trees bordering farm fields. It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the Northern Flicker as a producer of tree cavities used by other wildlife; for that reason, this woodpecker has been noted as a keystone species in some natural communities (Martin et al. 2004). Interestingly, Christmas Bird Count data documented more birds remaining in Vermont during the past 7 winters than in any other years since the mid-1970s. The possibility that climatic change is affecting distribution of this species





Category	Priority Block Count: Priority 1	Priority 1 & 2
Confirmed	70	140
Probable	55	109
Possible	45	96
Observed	1	2
Total	170	345

CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	33	33	+ 0	+ 0
Northeastern Highlands	17	17	+ 0	+ 0
Northern Green Mountains	35	31	- 4	- 11
Northern Vermont Piedmont	28	30	+ 2	+ 7
Southern Green Mountains	27	25	- 2	- 7
Southern Vermont Piedmont	21	20	- 1	- 5
Taconic Mountains	11	10	- 1	- 9
Vermont Valley	5	4	- 1	- 20
Totals	177	170	- 7	- 4

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	97	21
Northeastern Highlands	100	11
Northern Green Mountains	90	17
Northern Vermont Piedmont	98	19
Southern Green Mountains	87	14
Southern Vermont Piedmont	95	11
Taconic Mountains	95	6
Vermont Valley	87	2

needs further study. The Northern Flicker remains an abundant species, but widespread population declines are of concern.

GEORGE A. CLARK, JR.