

# Yellow-billed Cuckoo

*Coccyzus americanus*



Fond of hairy caterpillars, nomadic, and a facultative nest parasite with an extremely short reproduction cycle, the Yellow-billed Cuckoo is unquestionably unique. It is one of the few species that consumes hairy caterpillars, and local populations are known to fluctuate significantly in response to local caterpillar abundance, most notably tent caterpillars. Major outbreaks of tent caterpillars are sometimes combated with aerial applications of pesticides, which may be harmful to the bird (Hughes 1999).

Yellow-billed Cuckoos breed throughout the eastern United States and extreme southern Canada, and west of the Rockies along riparian forests to California. This cuckoo has been extirpated from most of the Pacific Northwest and occurs only in small remnant populations in the American West. Its distribution in Vermont, on the northeast edge of the species' range, appears to be irregular (Pistorius 1985), but whether this is the result of fluctuating food availability or land-use patterns is uncertain.

Among the last migrants to return to Vermont, Yellow-billed Cuckoos are rarely seen before mid-May and are most abundant in late May and early June (eBird 2011). They nest in riparian thickets, open deciduous woodlands, abandoned farmland, overgrown fruit orchards, and successional shrublands (Hughes 1999). Cuckoos are stealthy birds that hide in forest canopies, easily overlooked and difficult to confirm. During the second atlas, a single nest with eggs was found on 13 June, and nestlings were found on 25 and 27 June. Both sexes build the nest and incubate, a characteristic that may facilitate the short incubation cycle of only 9 days. Incubation starts with the laying of the first egg; hatching is asynchronous. The only fledglings reported were found on 10 and 30 July. Young often leave the nest before they can fly, and may move about on tree branches until they are fully capable of flight at approximately 21 days (Jauvin 1996). The absence of more sightings of young attests to their ability to elude detection.

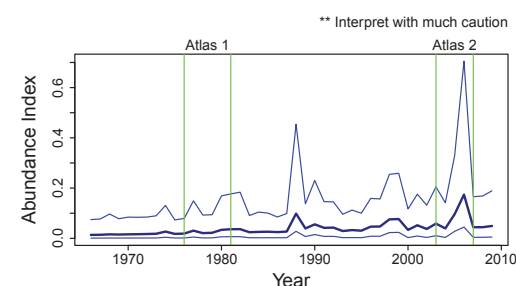
Yellow-billed Cuckoos have remained scattered throughout the Champlain Valley north nearly to Canada, but seem to be absent from areas dominated by co-

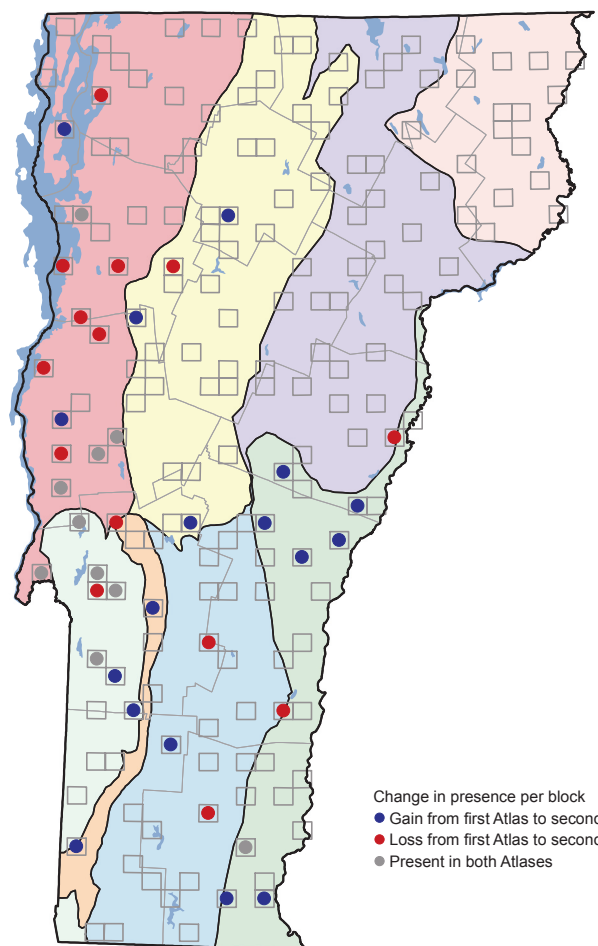
niferous forest in the northeast and at high elevations. Its distribution appears to have remained relatively constant, although there was considerable shifting in occupied blocks within regions. This species seeks abundant food sources before nesting and is unlikely to return to natal areas to breed if it encounters more productive feeding areas elsewhere.

Yellow-billed Cuckoos were not found on 14 blocks where they were previously recorded, but the overall number of occupied blocks increased by 13 percent. Substantial losses in the southern end of the Champlain Valley were offset by increases in the Southern Vermont Piedmont, where forest tent caterpillars increased during the second atlas (VDFPR 2006).

New York's second atlas found the distribution of Yellow-billed Cuckoos virtually unchanged, with very few sightings in the Adirondacks and other high-elevation areas (McGowan 2008). As in Vermont, considerable shifting in blocks occurred, presumably in response to outbreaks of forest tent caterpillars, but the net change in

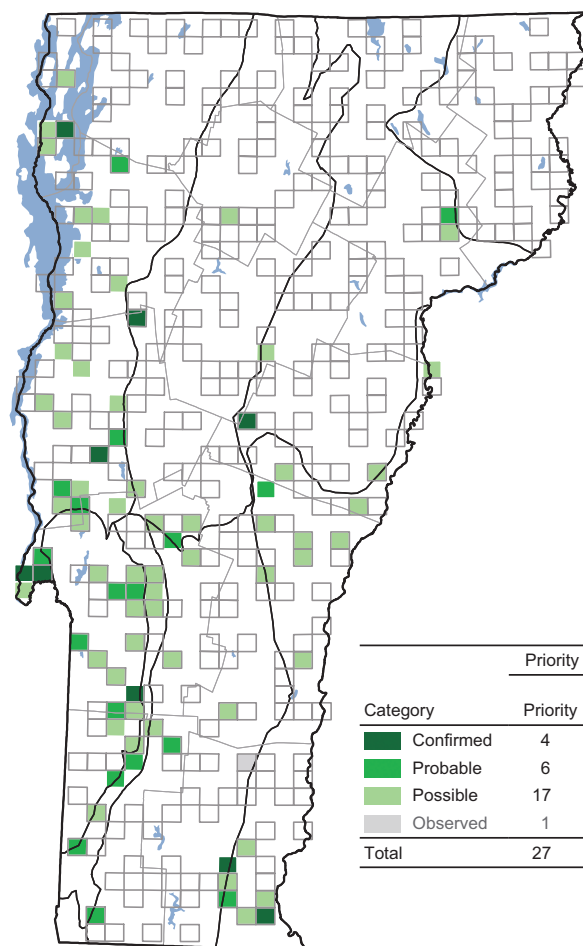
## RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME





**CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES**

| Biophysical Region        | First Atlas | Second Atlas | Change | % Change |
|---------------------------|-------------|--------------|--------|----------|
| Champlain Valley          | 12          | 7            | -5     | -42      |
| Northeastern Highlands    | 0           | 0            | +0     | +0       |
| Northern Green Mountains  | 1           | 3            | +2     | +200     |
| Northern Vermont Piedmont | 1           | 0            | -1     | -100     |
| Southern Green Mountains  | 3           | 1            | -2     | -67      |
| Southern Vermont Piedmont | 1           | 8            | +7     | +700     |
| Taconic Mountains         | 5           | 6            | +1     | +20      |
| Vermont Valley            | 1           | 2            | +1     | +100     |
| Totals                    | 24          | 27           | +3     | +13      |



| Category  | Priority Block Count |                |
|-----------|----------------------|----------------|
|           | Priority 1           | Priority 1 & 2 |
| Confirmed | 4                    | 6              |
| Probable  | 6                    | 12             |
| Possible  | 17                   | 41             |
| Observed  | 1                    | 1              |
| Total     | 27                   | 59             |

**DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS**

| Biophysical Region        | % of region species occupies | % of all records for this species found in region |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Champlain Valley          | 20                           | 25                                                |
| Northeastern Highlands    | 0                            | 0                                                 |
| Northern Green Mountains  | 7                            | 8                                                 |
| Northern Vermont Piedmont | 4                            | 5                                                 |
| Southern Green Mountains  | 12                           | 12                                                |
| Southern Vermont Piedmont | 32                           | 22                                                |
| Taconic Mountains         | 57                           | 20                                                |
| Vermont Valley            | 50                           | 7                                                 |

block occupancy was small. In Pennsylvania, on the other hand, a substantial increase of 43 percent was found in the second atlas (Wilson et al. 2012). Maryland found the species widely distributed (more than 90 percent of survey blocks) with no change in the proportion of blocks occupied (Ellison 2010).

Yellow-billed Cuckoo populations appear to be stable in Vermont and in the Northeast in general, although Maine, on the extreme northeastern fringe of its range, has listed it as a Species of Special Concern. Though atlases show no losses in block occupancy, the species de-

clined significantly on Breeding Bird Survey routes—by 1.3 percent annually in eastern North America from 1982 to 2007 (Sauer et al. 2011). Moth mortality during warmer winters could be a factor in decreased production, resulting in a decrease in the population (Anders and Post 2006). In the far West, the species is found in riparian habitats, a fact that has placed them in even greater jeopardy as these areas are often degraded (Anderson and Laymon 1989).

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