Rose-breasted Grosbeak

Pheucticus ludovicianus

From a birder's perspective, the Rose-breasted Grosbeak has it all. The black and white male, with his crimson breast, is handsome beyond compare. And both sexes sing a rich, melodious song, reminiscent of a voice-trained American Robin.

The Rose-breasted Grosbeak breeds from the southeastern corner of the Yukon across the southern boreal forests of Canada to Nova Scotia, and in the United States from the riverine woods of the Great Plains, eastward around the Great Lakes to New England, and southward along the Appalachian Mountains to Georgia (Bent 1968, Wyatt and Francis 2002). According to the Breeding Bird Survey, southern Vermont hosts some of the densest populations in New England; the primary center of abundance, however, is Wisconsin (Sauer et al. 2008).

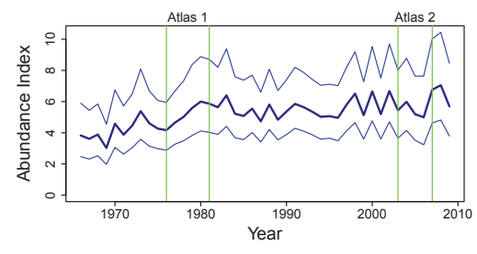
The Rose-breasted Grosbeak utilizes a wide variety of habitats, including primary and secondary deciduous and mixed woods, thickets, parks, orchards, forest edges, and even suburban yards, all of which Vermont has in spades. The species was undoubtedly widespread in the Northeast prior to European settlement, as its favored successional habitats would have been triggered by a constellation of factors: beavers, wind and ice storms, insect outbreaks, fire, and abandoned indigenous villages. Although Rose-breasted Grosbeak populations must have declined in Vermont in the 1800s—an era of intense farming when nearly 85 percent of the state's forests were cleared—the species has always been considered relatively common (Ellison 1985).

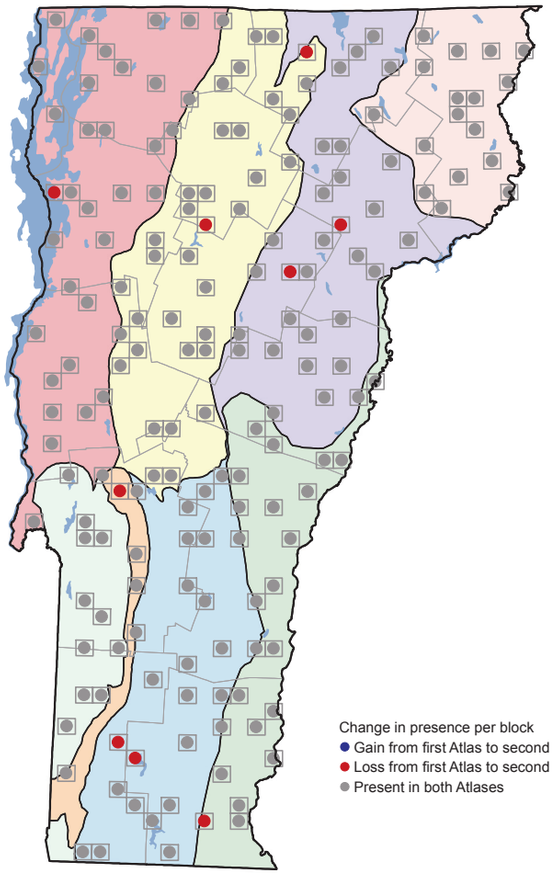
Rose-breasted Grosbeaks return to the Northeast in late April and frequently visit sunflower feeders. A well-stocked feeder may be attended throughout the summer; more than one breeding confirmation during the atlas was of fledglings begging at a feeder. The nest is usually placed in the fork of a deciduous sapling about 6 meters (20 feet) high, rarely lower (Scott 1998). Both adults build and incubate. Nest building accounted for 11 percent of breeding confirmations (N = 20); the earliest record was 19 May and the latest 10 July. Although nests are generally too high to check for contents, three nests with young were reported between 7 June and 4 July. Fledglings, which remain with the parents for about three weeks (Wyatt and Francis 2002), accounted for 86 percent (N = 148) of the atlas confirmations (25 May to 10 August).

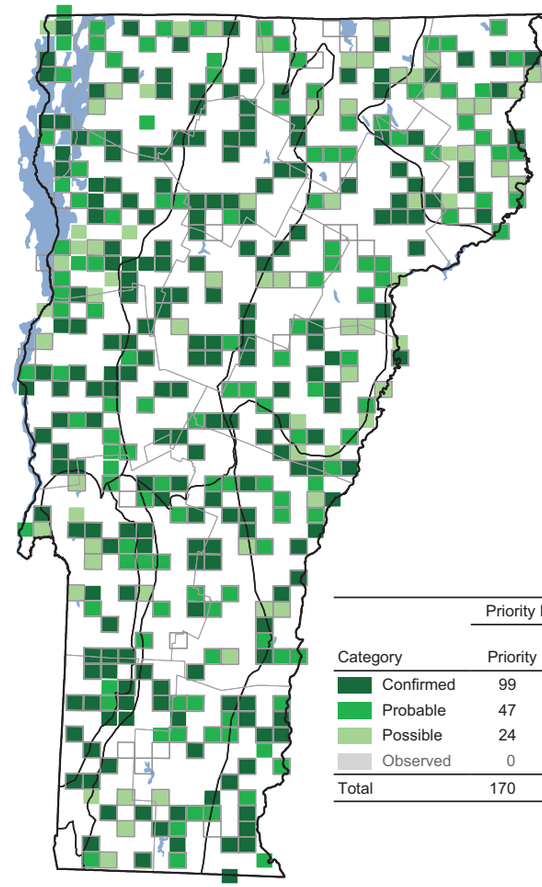
The Rose-breasted Grosbeak is one of Vermont's most widely distributed species, having been found in every block in the first atlas. During the second atlas, it was not found in only 8 Priority 1 blocks, a decrease of 4 percent. Maturation of secondary forests has occurred steadily over the past half century in Vermont. If this trend continues, the increase in canopy closure and shading of the understory could reduce the species' reproductive success (Burke and Nol 2000).

New York's second atlas recorded a 6 percent decrease in Rose-breasted Grosbeak occupancy (McGowan and Corwin 2008). The majority of the decline occurred in the southern Adirondacks, where a group of over 25 contiguous blocks appear to have lost the species. Conversely, Pennsylvania found that Rose-breasted Grosbeaks had increased by 13 percent (Wilson et al. 2012). In

RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME







Category	Priority Block Count: Priority 1	Priority 1 & 2
Confirmed	99	189
Probable	47	113
Possible	24	44
Observed	0	0
Total	170	346

CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	33	32	- 1	- 3
Northeastern Highlands	17	17	+ 0	+ 0
Northern Green Mountains	35	33	- 2	- 6
Northern Vermont Piedmont	30	28	- 2	- 7
Southern Green Mountains	27	25	- 2	- 7
Southern Vermont Piedmont	21	20	- 1	- 5
Taconic Mountains	11	11	+ 0	+ 0
Vermont Valley	5	4	- 1	- 20
Totals	179	170	- 9	- 5

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	97	10
Northern Green Mountains	96	18
Northern Vermont Piedmont	87	16
Southern Green Mountains	92	15
Southern Vermont Piedmont	97	11
Taconic Mountains	100	6
Vermont Valley	87	2

Ontario, Wyatt (2008) considered the species to be "ubiquitous" in the southern portion of the province, but populations declined overall due to a decrease in the north. Breeding Bird Survey data have indicated stable populations in Vermont from 1982 to 2007, but have shown significant decreases in New Hampshire and Maine (4.2 and 2.8 percent, respectively; Sauer et al. 2011).

Although the Rose-breasted Grosbeak occurs on small patches of forested land (Wyatt and Francis 2002), populations may not be self-sustaining within these habitat fragments (Burke and Nol 2000). In larger patches of forest, management practices such as selective cutting, which opens the canopy and increases understory density, would benefit the species (Burke and Nol 2000, Holmes and Sherry 2001). Continued maturation of the state's forests likely will result in lower densities in the future but, as the Rose-breasted Grosbeak is a generalist, it should remain one of Vermont's most widespread songbirds.

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