

American Three-toed Woodpecker

Picoides dorsalis

The American Three-toed Woodpecker is Vermont's rarest woodpecker. Recently split from the Three-toed Woodpecker of northern Europe and Asia (Banks 2003), the species breeds across Canada and Alaska, dipping south in the western mountains to Arizona and New Mexico. In the East, the southern limit of the range occurs as small, isolated pockets in northern New Hampshire and Vermont and in the Adirondack Mountains of New York.

Like many members of the family, the American Three-toed Woodpecker is a specialist, feeding almost exclusively on bark beetles, which it exposes by scaling bark from dead and dying trees (Leonard 2001). In the East, the Three-toed Woodpecker is most often found in mesic spruce-fir forests, particularly if fire, flood, or disease has rendered large numbers of trees susceptible to beetle infestation. Due to its rarity, little is known about the bird's breeding phenology in Vermont. The only CO record noted in the current atlas was a fledgling seen on 16 July. Incubation normally takes 12 to 14 days, and another three weeks pass before nestlings venture from the nest. Limited research shows that fledglings may be fed for up to two months by their parents (Leonard 2001).

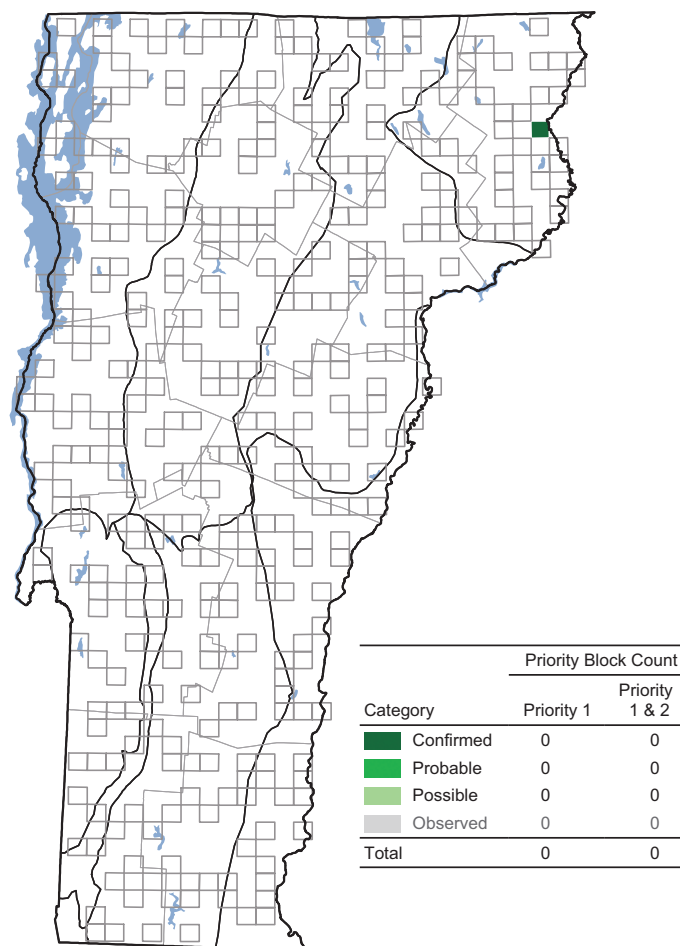
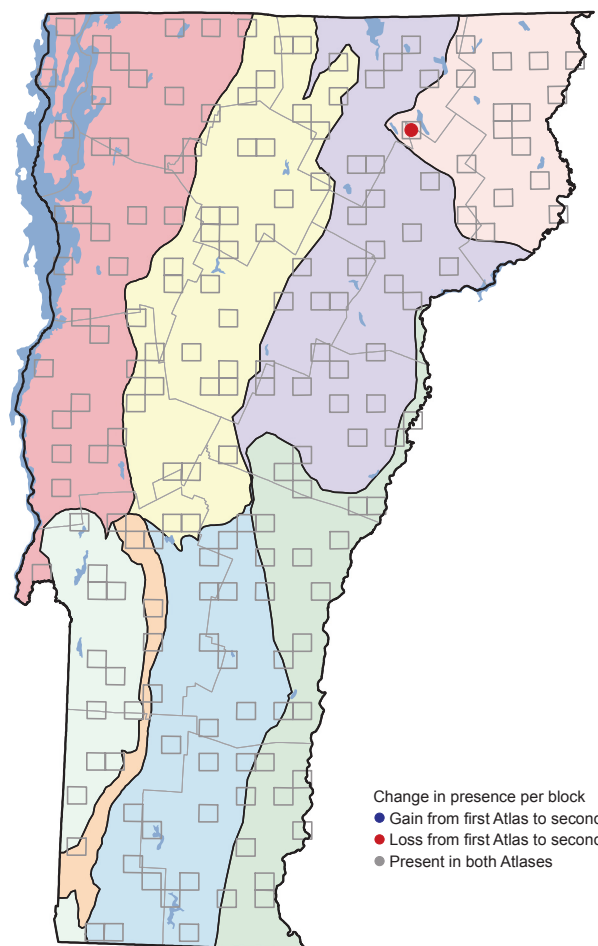
Forbush (1929) considered the American Three-toed Woodpecker more widely distributed in New England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, prior to the logging of old-growth spruce-fir forests. Still, there were only four reports prior to 1928—none of breeding—all from the southern Green Mountains. Between 1928 and 1977, there were fewer than a dozen reports of the species, all outside of the breeding season and in the vicinity of Island Pond (Oatman 1985). All records for both atlases came from the Northeastern Highlands, where spruce-fir forests are relatively intact. Two of the records from the first atlas occurred near Averill Pond in Essex County; the third was near Lake Willoughby on the Orleans-Caledonia County line (Oatman 1985). The current atlas had a single record from a non-priority block in eastern Essex County. The only summer record between the two



atlas periods came from Albany in Orleans County on 13 June 1983.

Because the American Three-toed Woodpecker is a very rare breeder in Vermont, occurring only in the spruce-fir forests of the extreme northeastern part of the state, it is difficult to draw any conclusions regarding changes in status. It is noteworthy, however, that in both Vermont and New York's second atlases, the American Three-toed Woodpecker was frequently not reported in blocks where it had been previously found. Although medium-sized spruce-fir trees in mixed stands decreased in Vermont due to spruce budworm outbreaks, the area occupied by the pure stands used by nesting three-toed woodpeckers has not changed appreciably (R. De Geus, VDFPR, pers. comm.).

Due to the American Three-toed Woodpecker's preference for mesic boreal habitats, roadside surveys are unlikely to provide reliable population-trend information; it is not surprising that the species has gone unreported on Breeding Bird Survey routes east of the Great Lakes (Sauer et al. 2011). New York's second atlas documented a 32 percent decrease in block occupancy, and the woodpecker appeared in only 2 of the 22 blocks where it had been recorded during the first atlas (Peterson 2008). In Ontario, no appreciable change in distribution was found, but Escott (2007) concluded that atlas data probably under-represented the species' presence. Focused efforts to locate the species using playback tapes are recommended to elicit more records during the breeding season.



CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Northeastern Highlands	1	0	- 1	- 100
Northern Green Mountains	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Northern Vermont Piedmont	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Southern Green Mountains	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Southern Vermont Piedmont	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Taconic Mountains	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Vermont Valley	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	1	0	- 1	- 100

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	0	0
Northeastern Highlands	0	0
Northern Green Mountains	0	0
Northern Vermont Piedmont	0	0
Southern Green Mountains	0	0
Southern Vermont Piedmont	0	0
Taconic Mountains	0	0
Vermont Valley	0	0

As a sporadic and localized breeder in Vermont, the American Three-toed Woodpecker does not require special conservation measures at this time, though climate change poses a potential threat to the woodpecker's boreal habitat (IPCC 2001). Protection of this habitat will help ensure that future generations of birders may be able to enjoy a rare glimpse of this northern-nesting, deep forest bird.

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