

Eastern Phoebe

Sayornis phoebe



The Eastern Phoebe is notable among flycatchers for returning to the breeding grounds earlier in spring and departing for its southward migration later in the fall. Its prolonged presence may be related to its propensity to use roosting as well as nesting sites with solid overhanging cover. Stationed in its protective sanctuary, the Eastern Phoebe might expend less energy for warmth during the cool nights of spring and fall (cp. Weeks 1994) than other flycatcher species breeding in New England. The breeding range of the Eastern Phoebe extends through much of eastern North America from southern Canada southward into the Gulf Coast states (AOU 1998); in winter, it inhabits the southeastern United States (AOU 1998). Although it is the hardiest of Vermont's flycatchers, its occurrence anywhere in New England during winter remains quite exceptional, presumably due to limited availability of arthropod prey.

The Eastern Phoebe nests in edge situations such as forest openings, with a preference for human residences with woody vegetation nearby and a suitable structure for placement of the nest: a flat surface with a sheltering overhang. In fact, phoebes nest primarily on human-built structures, and the use of natural sites such as rock ledges is less frequently reported (Weeks 1994). Nesting is uncommon at high elevations because of a lack of suitable sites (Norse and Fichtel 1985). It is likely that phoebe populations expanded in Vermont with the construction of homes, barns, and other buildings during settlement. Indeed, the expansion of Eastern Phoebe populations into the Great Plains was facilitated by the construction of bridges, which provided sheltered surfaces for nests (Weeks 1994).

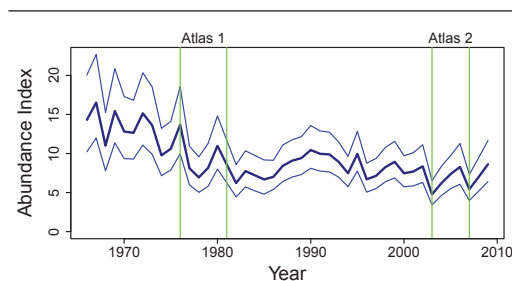
During the second atlas, nest building was observed from 5 April to 27 June. Seventy nests with eggs were found from 1 May to 25 July. Nestlings were reported from 16 May to 1 August (N = 90) and fledglings were found on dates ranging from 31 May to 13 August (N = 65). Phoebes are conspicuous, spending time in open areas and identifying themselves with characteristic frequent movements of the tail and a unique, clear song that announces *fee-bee*.

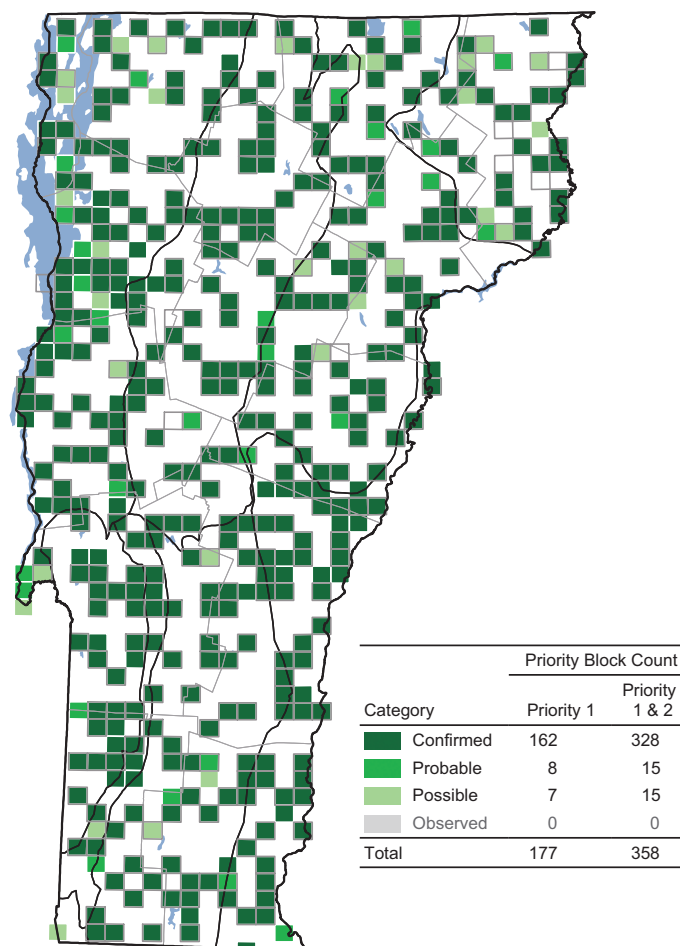
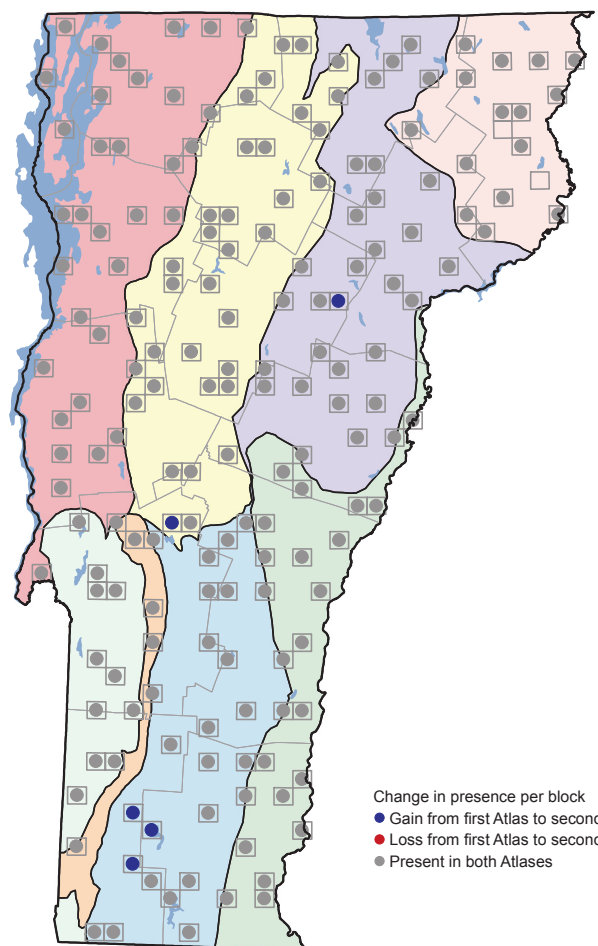
Eastern Phoebe nesting is widespread in Vermont. During the second atlas, phoebes were found in most blocks of every biophysical region, with the lowest occupancy rate of 89 percent occurring in the Northeastern Highlands. Although Eastern Phoebe occurred in slightly fewer blocks in the first atlas, its status has not changed notably in Vermont.

Breeding Bird Survey data for Vermont showed significant declines in Eastern Phoebe populations from 1966 to 1981, followed by no significant change from 1982 to 2007. In the Atlantic Northern Forest (Bird Conservation Region 14), BBS data indicated populations were stable from 1982 to 2007 but, in eastern North America, there was a significant 1.0 percent increase annually (Sauer et al. 2011). The second atlases for Maryland (Ellison 2010), Pennsylvania (Wilson et al. 2012), New York (McGowan and Corwin 2008), and Ontario (Cadman et al. 2007) all showed increases since their first atlases.

Relatively severe winters in the southeastern United States can sharply reduce phoebe populations, producing short-term fluctuations in breeding numbers over periods of a few years (Hall 1983, Weeks 1994, McGowan 2008). Temporary declines in Vermont and other northeastern areas are likely attributable to severe conditions on the wintering grounds, such as those that occurred

RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME





CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	33	33	+ 0	+ 0
Northeastern Highlands	15	15	+ 0	+ 0
Northern Green Mountains	34	35	+ 1	+ 3
Northern Vermont Piedmont	29	30	+ 1	+ 3
Southern Green Mountains	24	27	+ 3	+ 13
Southern Vermont Piedmont	21	21	+ 0	+ 0
Taconic Mountains	11	11	+ 0	+ 0
Vermont Valley	5	5	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	172	177	+ 5	+ 3

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	100	20
Northeastern Highlands	89	9
Northern Green Mountains	96	18
Northern Vermont Piedmont	98	18
Southern Green Mountains	100	16
Southern Vermont Piedmont	100	11
Taconic Mountains	100	6
Vermont Valley	100	2

from 1976 to 1977, and spring storms may also result in casualties (Weeks 1994). Based on BBS data, Vermont's population has not rebounded from declines that occurred before 1982. Speculative explanations include the loss of barns and sheds, changes in architectural design or, perhaps less likely, changes in culvert design that reduced the number of nest sites. Despite potential threats, this flycatcher is a widespread species that tolerates people and it will likely continue to be a regular breeder in the state.

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