

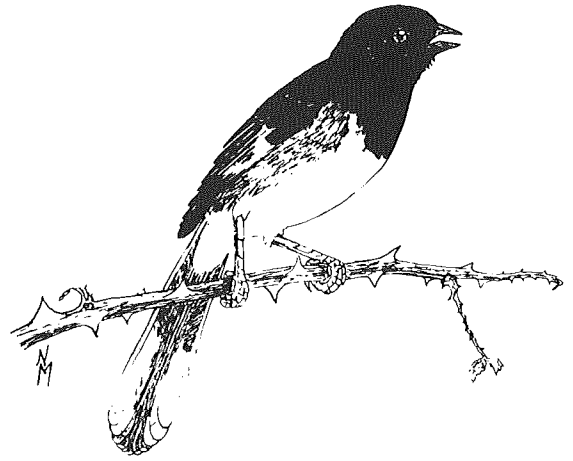
Rufous-sided Towhee

Pipilo erythrophthalmus

The Rufous-sided Towhee is a large, ground-foraging sparrow that inhabits the brushy ecotones associated with early forest regeneration, including an array of disturbed areas containing young woody plants. In Vermont, the species is most commonly encountered in overgrown pastureland, and also inhabits regenerating northern hardwoods in clear cuts, open selective cuts, burns, and caterpillar-damaged forest—wherever the dead crowns of trees allow a significant amount of sunlight to reach the forest floor, permitting raspberries and blackberries to grow up.

The Rufous-sided Towhee is usually first located by its voice. Both “towhee” and the vernacular name “chewink” are derived from its wheezy location call. Nests are usually built on the ground, and observers sometimes find them while trekking through brushy pastures. More than 15% of Atlas Project confirmations involved the discovery of a nest with eggs. Adults bearing food to their young accounted for 38% of the confirmed breedings, and recently fledged young provided 40%.

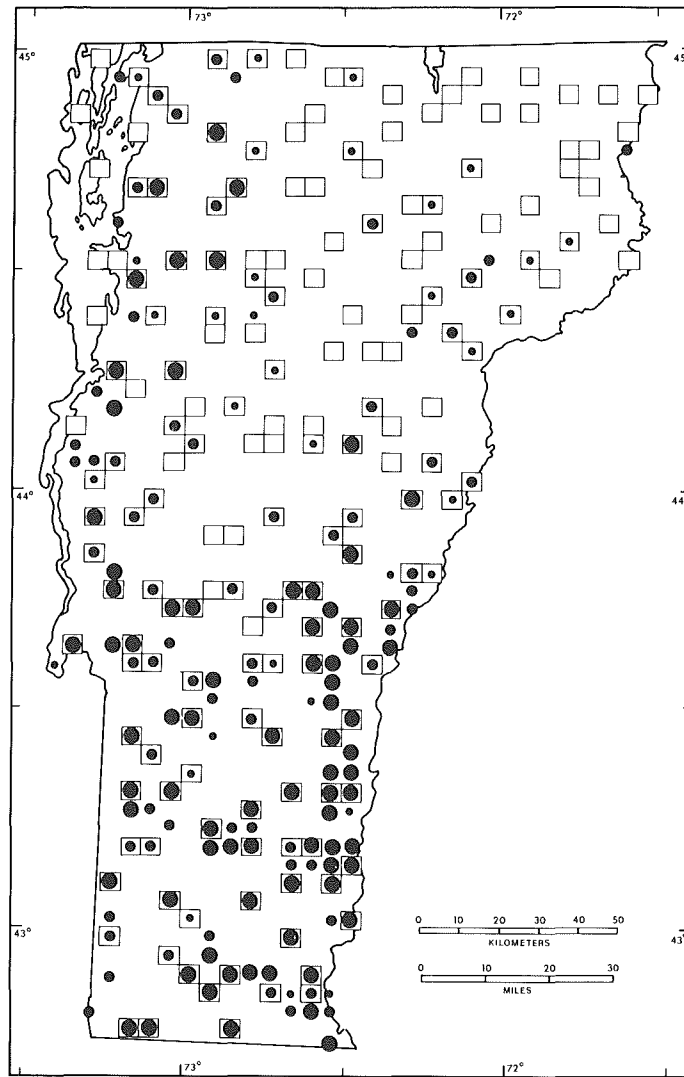
A few towhees return to Vermont in early to mid April, but most generally arrive around the fourth week of April or the first week of May. Nesting commences in mid to late May. The nest is usually built in a hollow in the ground under brush, an overhanging shrub, or herbaceous vegetation. Although large, it is a well-built structure of bark strips, leaves, weeds, and coarse grasses, lined with finer material including fine grass, conifer needles, or hair. On occasion, the nest is built in a shrub or small tree, usually at heights of less than 1.5 m (4.9 ft). Eggs have been reported from May 26 to June 19 (four records). Clutches range in size from 2 to 6 eggs; depending upon local conditions, clutches average from 3 to 4 eggs in size. There are no Vermont records for nests containing young; however, a nestling period from early June to the third week of July may be calculated from the spe-



cies' 12- to 14-day incubation period and 10- to 12-day nestling period. There are nine reported records of dependent young ranging from June 19 to July 30. The late July date for fledged young implies that eggs may be laid into early July.

Over much of its range the Rufous-sided Towhee is double-brooded. Greenlaw (1978) found that in habitats where food was not abundant until late May second broods were rare. Since frosts often persist until late May in Vermont, it seems reasonable that only single broods are usually raised in Vermont. Towhees depart from Vermont in September; a few remain into October, and a rare few are encountered during the winter months, mostly at feeding stations.

The Rufous-sided Towhee is most frequently found in southern Vermont. The species is somewhat localized but common in suitable habitat at lower elevations in the Taconic Mountains and Eastern Foothills, where it was recorded in 100% of the two regions' priority blocks. It is uncommon in the southern Green Mountains, where it occurs in clear cuts and abandoned pastures, and where it is found up to 732 m (2,401 ft). The species has been reported at elevations up to 824 m (2,703 ft) in burns in the Adirondacks of New York (Carleton 1980). Towhees become progressively scarcer to the north and east in Vermont; they can be found throughout the Champlain Lowlands but are uncommon in the northern part of that region. They are apparently absent



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 115 (64%)

Possible breeding: 24 (21% of total)

Probable breeding: 39 (34% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 52 (45% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	22	71	19
Green Mountains	32	59	28
North Central	5	26	4
Northeast Highlands	2	12	2
East Central	14	74	12
Taconic Mountains	16	100	14
Eastern Foothills	24	100	21

from Grand Isle County, and are very scarce in northeastern Vermont. There were no confirmations north of Orange County in eastern Vermont. Towhees were located in only 26% of the priority blocks in the North Central region and 12% of the priority blocks in the Northeast Highlands. The species' distribution was essentially similar in the early twentieth century (Allen 1909). U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Breeding Bird survey data reveal a 5.1% annual rate of decline for the species in Vermont, and a slightly steeper rate of decline for the northeastern U.S. as a whole (Robbins 1982b). This decline appears to be related to loss of habitat as a result of urban devel-

opment and reforestation. In Vermont, the latter trend is undoubtedly contributing to the species' decline.

WALTER G. ELLISON