

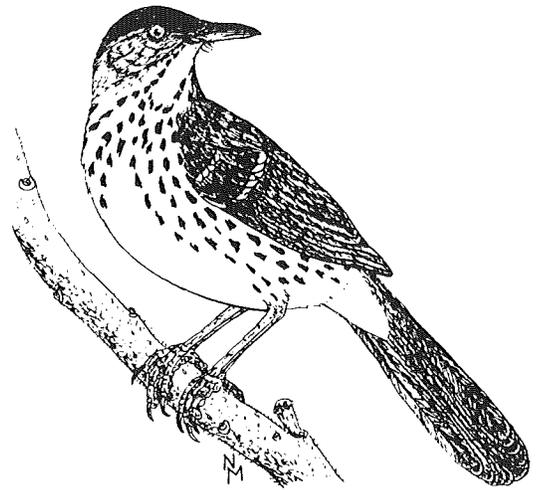
Brown Thrasher

Toxostoma rufum

The Brown Thrasher is the shiest member of the mimic thrush family (Mimidae) to breed in Vermont. Less well known for its vocal abilities than the boisterous Northern Mockingbird, the Brown Thrasher is nonetheless an accomplished songster and mimic of other birds (including the Northern Flicker, Tufted Titmouse, Wood Thrush, and Northern Cardinal). The thrasher's loud territorial song, generally distinguishable from that of the mockingbird because it has fewer repetitious notes, is given from the top of a shrub or low tree. A soft, more complex whisper song given while the bird is hidden may also be heard, particularly early in the breeding season (Schafer 1916; Graber et al. 1970).

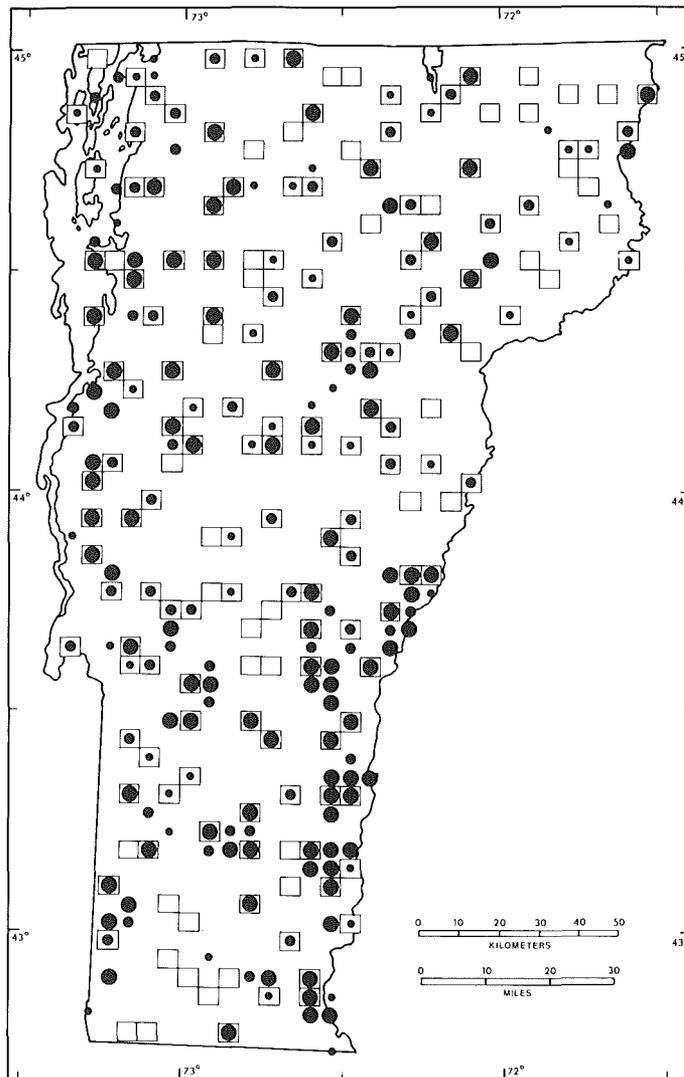
Although a few hardy Brown Thrashers linger in the Northeast each year past the usual mid October departure date, few successfully overwinter. Thrashers are among Vermont's earliest migrant songbirds to return, arriving during the third week of April from their wintering grounds in the southeastern U.S. They probably commence breeding in Vermont early in May, as they do in New York (Bull 1974), before many other migrant passerines have returned. They prefer shrubby, overgrown fields for breeding habitat, but forest edges and hedgerows may also be used.

The bulky, basketlike nest lined with rootlets is usually placed in a thorny and/or very dense shrub 0.6–2 m (2–7 ft) above the ground, occasionally as high as 4.6 m (15 ft). Although ground nests are uncommon, early nests tend to be built lower than those started later in the breeding season (Graber et al. 1970). *Viburnum* and hawthorn are commonly used nest supports in New York (Bull 1974). From 4 days to 2 weeks may separate nest initiation and egg laying. From 3 to 6 (usually 4 to 5) brown-speckled, bluish white eggs are laid early in the morning on consecutive days (Graber et



al. 1970). Clutches completed early in the breeding period tend to be larger. Vermont egg dates range from May 24 to June 16 (eight records). Both parents incubate the clutch for 12 to 14 days, and the nestlings fledge in 9 to 14 days. Data from Illinois (Graber et al. 1970) indicate that most Brown Thrashers are not double-brooded; late nests probably represent renesting attempts. Fledgling success has been found to be low, averaging 41% (Mayfield 1961). Although thrashers aggressively defend their nests, predation is probably the leading cause of reproductive failure. The Brown Thrasher is the largest passerine regularly victimized by the Brown-headed Cowbird (Terres 1980), but the incidence and success rate of parasitism is apparently low (Graber et al. 1970).

The Brown Thrasher is generally distributed throughout Vermont, but reaches its greatest abundance in the lower elevations of the Champlain Lowlands and Connecticut River valley. It was found in 75% of all Atlas Project priority blocks. Atlas Project workers in the Green Mountains and Northeast Highlands encountered thrashers infrequently. Although Brown Thrashers in the Northeast have been decreasing by nearly 3% per year according to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Breeding Bird surveys, no significant population change has occurred



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 135 (75%)

Possible breeding: 33 (24% of total)

Probable breeding: 40 (30% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 62 (46% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	29	94	2.2
Green Mountains	31	57	2.3
North Central	16	84	1.2
Northeast Highlands	7	44	5
East Central	15	79	1.1
Taconic Mountains	15	94	1.1
Eastern Foothills	22	92	1.6

in Vermont (Robbins 1982b). Territory mapping studies in farm and second-growth edge habitat in Vermont have recorded up to 12 pairs per 40.5 ha (100 a) (Williamson 1972).

The Brown Thrasher was probably rare in Vermont before land was cleared for agriculture; clearance greatly increased the acreage of disturbed edge community available. The thrasher's status appears to have changed little in the past century, although in the early 1900s, when pasture was abandoned, the species probably flourished. The maturation of existing shrub and for-

est areas in Vermont may reduce Brown Thrasher populations slightly in the future, but the species adapts well to man's proximity and will probably continue to thrive in suburban and agricultural districts.

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