

Gray Catbird

Dumetella carolinensis

The distinctive mewing of the aptly named Gray Catbird is a familiar sound around most rural Vermont residences during the spring and summer. A common denizen of moist shrub and edge habitats throughout the state, the catbird generally returns in the first week of May from its wintering grounds along the Gulf of Mexico. Although common in the seral brushlands and thickets that pervade Vermont's abandoned farmlands, the catbird shuns unbroken woodlands and is rarely found in coniferous habitats. It will, however, frequently place its nest in a conifer. Equally at home in streamside alder swales or brushy fencerows, the species has probably always been common in the state, although it undoubtedly benefited from the arrival of settlers, who converted mature forests to seral stages more to the catbird's liking. Highest breeding densities in Vermont, 49 pairs per 100 ha (20 per 100 a), have been recorded from streamside habitats (Farrar 1973). During late summer and the fall migration, which extends from September through the third week of October, it may be one of the most abundant species in areas of berry bushes.

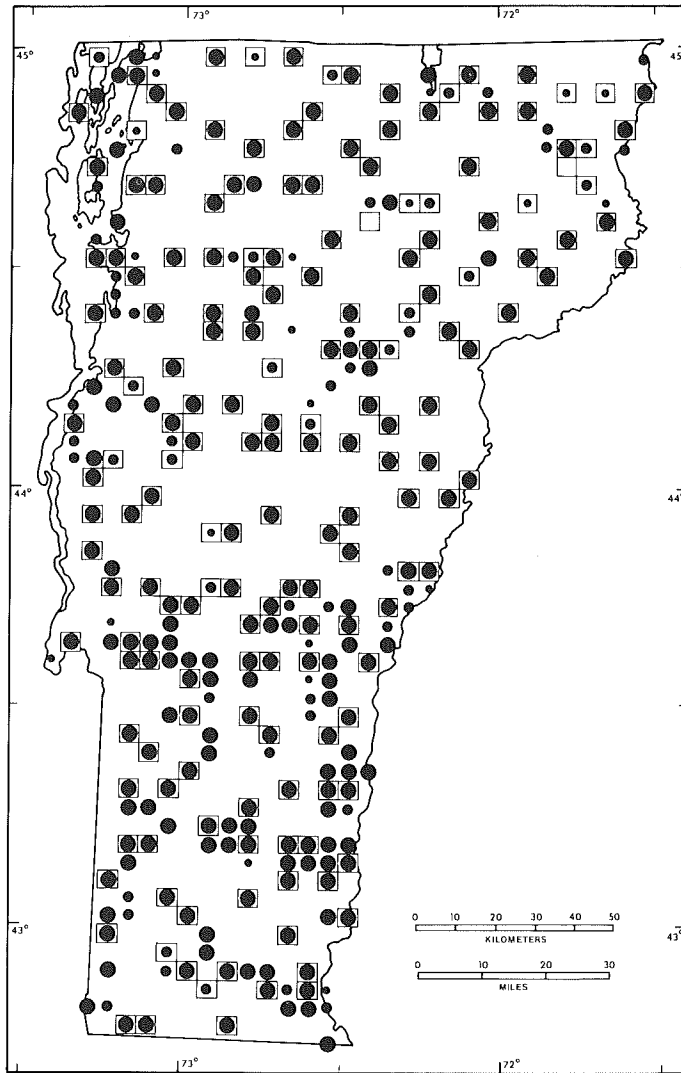
The song, given from atop a shrub as the male sits hunched over with tail depressed, is deliberate. The catbird's repertoire is more limited than that of the Brown Thrasher or Northern Mockingbird. Like the latter, Gray Catbirds may occasionally sing at night (Graber et al. 1970). A very soft song is also given in autumn (Schafer 1916; Terres 1980). Territorial songs diminish sharply toward the end of the breeding season, only to be replaced by cat calls and *cluck* alarm notes.

Males return a week or more before the females to establish territories by loud singing. Courtship behaviors include chasing, high squeaky singing, and visual displays of fluffed body feathers. Nesting commences in mid May and extends through June into July. Vermont dates for nests with eggs extend from May 14 through July 28 (26 records); 17 of these nest dates fall between



May 20 and June 8. Renesting may account for some of the later nests; however the species is known to produce double (Nickell 1965) and, rarely, triple broods (Harrison 1978). There are three early July records of nest-building activity in Vermont, indicating that at least second broods are attempted in the state. Although the male assists in nest site selection, most, if not all, of the building of the final nest is done by the female (Stokes 1979). The bulky nest, which takes 5 to 8 days to construct, is hidden in a viney tangle, thorny shrub, or dense conifer 1–3 m (3–10 ft) above ground. It frequently contains a large amount of grapevine both in the nest wall and lining, and is virtually indistinguishable from the nest of the Northern Mockingbird. The female incubates the clutch of 2 to 6 (usually 4) dark, greenish blue glossy eggs for 12 to 15 days. Of 19 Vermont clutches, 13 had 4 eggs and 4 had 3 eggs.

Although the male does little of the nest construction and does not assist in incubating, he guards the nest area against predators and cowbird parasitism in the female's absence (Slack 1976). Cowbird eggs are frequently ejected from parasitized nests (Rothstein 1974; Scott 1977) if the male's guard has been circumvented. The male also undertakes a majority of the feeding activities during the 11-day nestling period, while the female divides her efforts between feeding, brooding, and shading the young (Johnson



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 177 (99%)

Possible breeding: 7 (4% of total)
 Probable breeding: 18 (10% of total)
 Confirmed breeding: 152 (86% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	31	100	18
Green Mountains	54	100	30
North Central	18	95	10
Northeast Highlands	15	94	8
East Central	19	100	11
Taconic Mountains	16	100	9
Eastern Foothills	24	100	14

and Best 1982). Nests with young in Vermont have been observed between June 11 and July 27. If disturbed, the young may fledge as many as 3 days prematurely (i.e., at 9 days of age). Fledgling Gray Catbirds may be found in Vermont from June 19 through August 3 (16 records). Nesting success is relatively high (61%-70%) (Slack 1976), a fact that may account for the species' frequently phenomenal fall abundance in Vermont's bottomland thickets.

Although nests are relatively easy to find by watching the adults, most (63%) Atlas Project confirmations in Vermont were attributed to parents carrying food for young. Since both parents are relatively aggressive

near the nest, they may be readily observed especially when young are present. Few species' records in the Atlas Project rivaled the 86% confirmation rate of the catbird in the priority blocks in which it was recorded.

DOUGLAS P. KIBBE