

## Gray Jay

*Perisoreus canadensis*

The Gray Jay is something of a paradox. Though primarily an inhabitant of northern conifer forests and surviving poorly near human settlements, it is at the same time extraordinarily curious and will behave boldly toward humans who penetrate its boreal habitat. Its soft plumage, short bill, and silent, gliding flight are unjay-like characteristics. The cool, coniferous forests of the Northeast Highlands and a small section of the North Central region constitute its very restricted range in Vermont. These two areas are currently being extensively clear-cut; consequently, Vermont's small population of resident Gray Jays is nominated for Species of Special Concern status in the state.

The Gray Jay's eastern range dips from Canada down to northern New York State and northern New England. Historically it has been recorded as a rare and limited breeder in the northern section of Vermont (Perkins and Howe 1901; Allen 1909; Spear 1976). However, breeding notes on the species did not exist until 1975, when 2 adults were seen feeding 2 to 3 fledged young on June 28 in Ferdinand (G. F. Oatman, pers. observ.). Only three other breeding confirmations exist for Vermont, all from Ferdinand: on June 13, 1976, 2 adults were seen feeding several fledglings (ASR, G. F. Oatman and W. Scott); on June 12 and June 29, 1978, young were seen being fed near Moose Bog (ASR, C. Schultz); and on March 31, 1981, adults were observed working on a nearly completed nest at Moose Bog (ASR, C. Schultz and D. Cargill). The Island Pond Christmas Bird Count, which covers a large part of the species' Vermont range, provides an index to its population. In the 10 years of the count from 1974 to 1983, the following Gray Jay counts were made: 6, 6, 3, 10, 11, 7, 9, 7, 27, and 4 (CBC 1974-83).

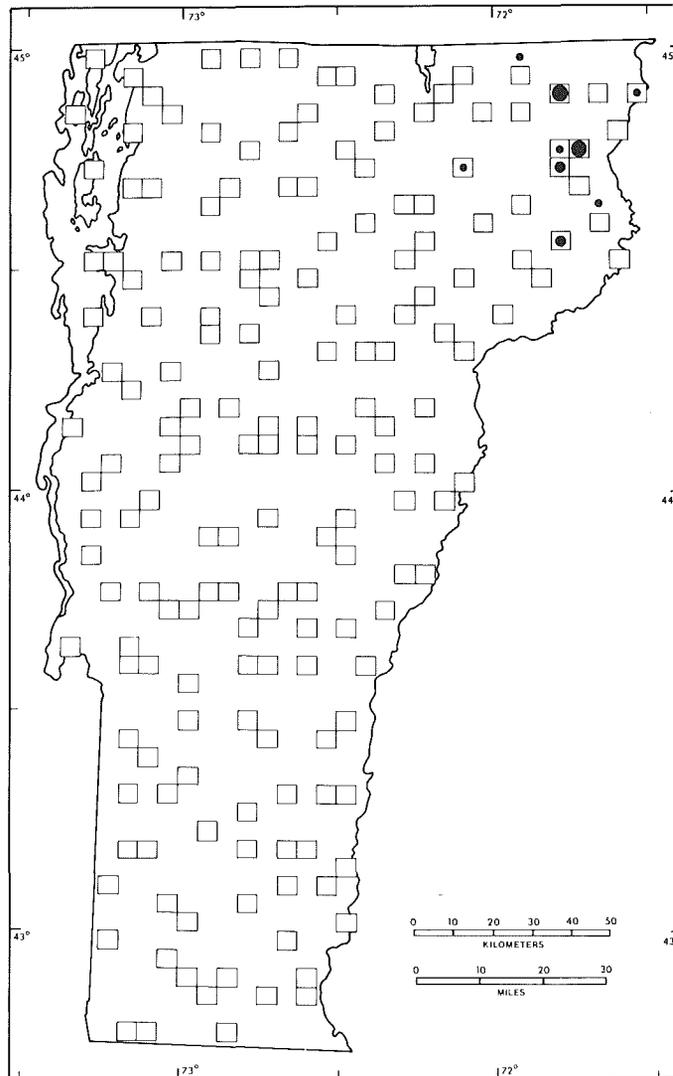
Gray Jays usually winter in or near their breeding territories, though individuals may wander southward during some winters,



and large irruptive flights are known to occur (Bent 1946). There are infrequent winter reports from most sections of Vermont.

Few North American birds have received such a variety of colorful nicknames as the Gray Jay; many of them point to the jay's fondness for scavenging camp scraps: Camp Robber, Venison Bird, Meat Bird, Moose Bird, Canada Jay, Whiskey John, Whiskey Jack. The latter two do not reflect its drinking tastes but, rather, are a corruption of its Algonquin and Ojibwa Indian names, Whiska-tjon and Wiskejak (Bent 1946). As omnivores, Gray Jays will take almost anything that seems edible. Insects seem to constitute their principal food in summer; this diet is supplemented by small mammals and the eggs and young of other birds (Ouellet 1970; Goodwin 1976). Later in the season berries and seeds are taken, both from the ground and from trees. These birds will also carry off such inedibles as matches, pencils, and plug tobacco (Terres 1980).

Gray Jays have the largest salivary glands of any passerine bird (Bock 1961); apparently this is an adaptation to facilitate food storage. Food to be hidden is formed into a bolus, coated and permeated with sticky saliva so that it adheres better to conifer needles, the forks of branches, crevices or holes, or old squirrel nests (Goodwin 1976). The jay hides a great deal of food when it is plentiful. This habit may partly account for



**No. of priority blocks in which recorded**

TOTAL 7 (4%)

Possible breeding: 3 (43.0% of total)

Probable breeding: 2 (28.5% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 2 (28.5% of total)

**Physiographic regions in which recorded**

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	0	0	0
Green Mountains	0	0	0
North Central	1	5	1.4
Northeast Highlands	6	38	86
East Central	0	0	0
Taconic Mountains	0	0	0
Eastern Foothills	0	0	0

its ability to sustain young in early spring before vegetable and animal life are abundant. Nesting normally begins in February and March (Goodwin 1976). Gray Jays become very quiet and retiring during the nesting period.

The fairly bulky nest is placed 1–9 m (4–30 ft)—usually 2–5 m (6–15 ft)—up on a horizontal branch or upright crotch. It is 15–25 cm (6–10 in) in diameter, constructed of twigs, bark, leaves, grass, or moss, and lined substantially with softer materials. Two to 5 (usually 3 to 4) grayish white eggs, spotted or speckled with brown,

are laid; the female incubates for 16 to 18 days (Bent 1946; Goodwin 1976). Both parents provide partly digested food for the young (Goodwin 1976). Young are fledged at about 15 days of age (Bent 1946).

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