

Three-toed Woodpecker

Picoides tridactylus

The Three-toed Woodpecker (formerly the Northern Three-toed Woodpecker) reaches a southern limit of its range in northeastern Vermont and breeds there in only minuscule numbers. The approximately 311 sq km (120 sq mi) area in the Northeast Highlands, bounded on the north by Great Averill Pond and on the south by South America Pond, constitutes the present Vermont range of this species. Clear-cutting now threatens the black spruce-balsam fir forests these woodpeckers require, and the Three-toed is a candidate for Species of Special Concern status in Vermont.

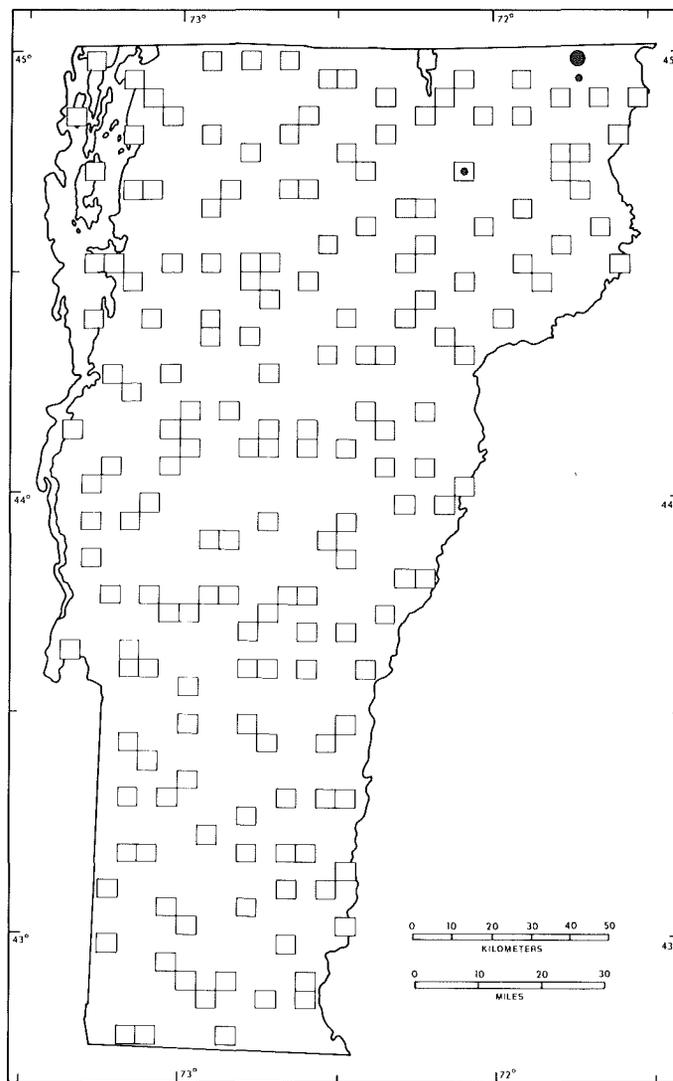
The Three-toed is found in the boreal forest zone across the entire Northern Hemisphere, though it is locally distributed and nowhere very numerous. Largely sedentary, it is less prone to winter wandering than its close relative, the Black-backed Woodpecker. Standing dead conifers in the lower, wetter portions of black spruce-balsam fir forests constitute its rather specialized eastern habitat. Dead or dying conifers are necessary to its livelihood; though the Three-toed takes a few ants, weevils, spiders, wild fruits, acorns, and the inner bark of some trees, wood-boring beetles and caterpillars that attack dead or dying conifers constitute approximately 75% of its food (Bent 1939; Terres 1980). Originally this species depended on the natural mortality of northern conifers resulting from disease, fire, and flooding. Today it can be found in coniferous areas burned over by forest fires or flooded by beaver dams. Man's activities, especially logging, may also have produced favorable habitat. The "avenue" or "lane" cutting that was practiced in the Island Pond area until 1977 left margins of dead or dying spruces which both species of three-toed woodpeckers frequented.

There were only three summer reports of the Three-toed during the five years of the Atlas Project: 1 confirmation and 2 possibles. On July 16, 1981, 2 adults fed a



single juvenile between Great Averill and Little Averill ponds; an adult was also seen in the same area on August 3, 1978 (ASR, L. N. Metcalf). An adult male on Wheeler Mountain, near Lake Willoughby, was seen on June 12, 1978 (ASR, E. Cronin). Only 10 additional reports from the Northeast Highlands since 1928 were located (G. F. Oatman, pers. comm.); their dates ranged from October 5 to early April, and all were from the Island Pond area. Some of these reports are probably of winter wanderers from nearby areas of New Hampshire or Quebec. It is also probable that this species was once more numerous in Vermont than at present. Forbush (1927) suggested that its numbers in New England were reduced when much of the region's original spruce forest was logged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There are four old (1902-28) Vermont reports of Three-toeds at higher elevations in the Green Mountains, some of them from the summer.

The best way to locate either of the two three-toed woodpecker species is by walking or driving slowly through appropriate habitat, listening carefully for the tapping sounds of feeding woodpeckers, or, in spring and summer, for courtship drumming. Any tapping should be traced to its sources, as tapping by either species is quite difficult to distinguish from that of other woodpeckers.



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 1 (0.6%)

Possible breeding: 1 (100% of total)

Probable breeding: 0 (0% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 0 (0% 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	100
Northeast Highlands	0	0	0
East Central	0	0	0
Taconic Mountains	0	0	0
Eastern Foothills	0	0	0

The Three-toed's drumming is distinctive, however: unlike that of most other woodpeckers, Three-toed drumming slows down toward the end; intervals become longer between taps. Once located, Three-toed Woodpeckers are extremely easy to observe, as they show almost no fear of man, even near their nest hole. Although Three-toeds are often described as using an angular bill motion to strip or flake bark pieces from conifers, most Three-toeds seen in the Island Pond area tapped straight into the wood, much in the manner of a Hairy or a Downy Woodpecker.

The nest hole is usually placed 1.5–1.5 m

(5–50 ft) high in a stump or other dead or dying tree, often near water. The entrance hole is about 4 cm by 5 cm (1 3/4 by 2 in), and the cavity about 25–38 cm (10–15 in) deep (Bent 1939; Terres 1980). Four eggs seem to comprise the normal clutch; both sexes perform incubation, which takes about 14 days (Harrison 1975). No nesting data are available for Vermont, but data for Maine may be roughly applicable: nest construction began on May 31; 2 eggs were observed in the nest on June 5 and June 9; food was observed being carried into the nest cavity on June 16 (Palmer 1949).

G. FRANK OATMAN