

Northern Mockingbird

Mimus polyglottos

The Northern Mockingbird, a relative newcomer to much of Vermont, has increased markedly both in numbers and distribution in the state during recent decades. Currently the mockingbird appears to be spreading northward through the Lake Champlain and Connecticut River valleys and laterally along the major drainage systems into the center of the state. Reasons for this recent population growth are obscure. Beddall (1963) identified a warming trend that began about 1900, and decreased hunting as demand from the caged bird trade dropped, as significant factors in the mockingbird's increase in New England. This advance is still occurring, and it will be particularly interesting to compare this species' distribution in 10 or 20 years with that found during the Atlas Project effort. The mockingbird has gained a substantial hold in the Eastern Foothills and Champlain Lowlands, where it was found in 62% and 52% of the Atlas Project priority blocks, respectively. The Taconic Mountains, where mockingbirds were recorded in 38% of the priority blocks, is the only other region that currently supports a significant population.

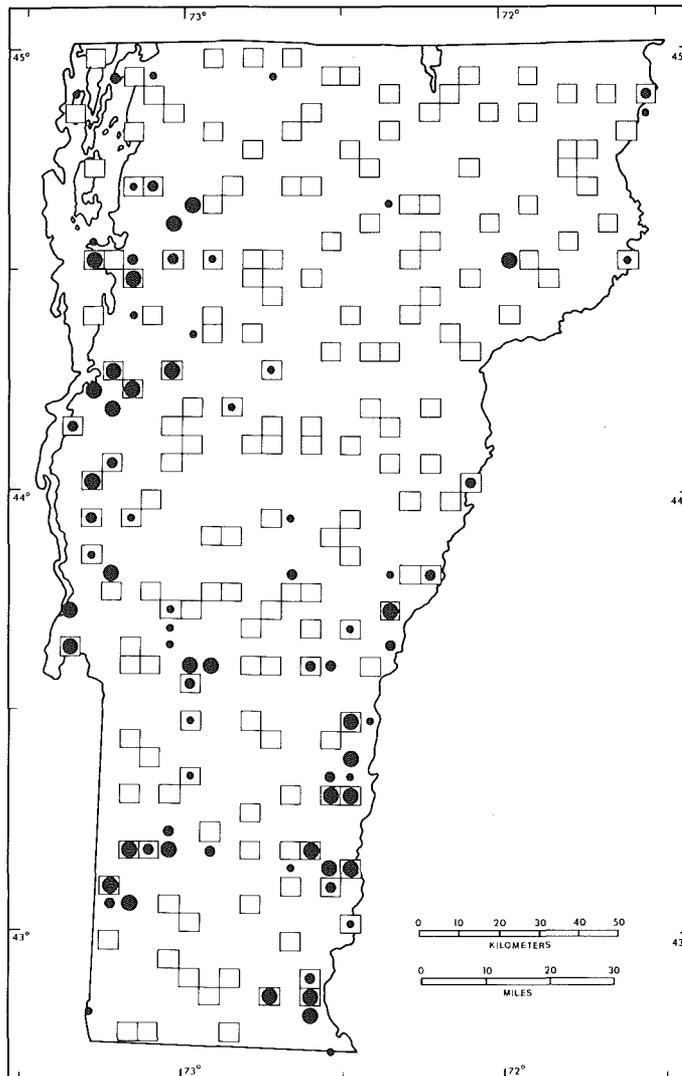
Northern Mockingbirds are well known throughout their range for their vocal abilities. As their name implies, they can mimic almost anything within their hearing. Although they channel most territorial behavior into song, which is given from elevated perches or, occasionally, in flight, clashes on the borders of territories may also result in defiant males sparring for advantage with sideways hops along their disputed boundaries.

Although reputedly permanent residents throughout their range (from southern Oregon east to northern Utah, Wyoming, Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, and south to southern Baja California and the West Indies), wintering mockingbirds in Vermont retreat to the densest cover in the vicinity with the onset of cold weather. Multiflora rose thickets are particularly favored. By



April, males are vigorously announcing their territorial intentions. As unmated males carry nesting material to likely nest sites within their territories (Laskey 1962), nest-building activity may not be absolute proof of breeding. Only three Vermont Atlas Project records were of nest building. In more southerly climates, mockingbirds have been known to raise up to four broods per season.

Early nests are generally placed in conifers (Laskey 1962), whereas later nests may be situated in any available dense shrubbery, such as rose hedges. The compact nest of twigs and leaves lined with rootlets, built by both members of the pair, may be 0.6–3 m (2–10 ft) above the ground—rarely, 15 m (50 ft). Earlier nests tend to be placed lower than later ones. Nests are relatively easy to locate and account for more than half of all confirmations in Vermont. From 4 to 6 blue or green eggs, heavily marked with brown, are laid and incubated by the female. Both incubation and nestling periods normally last 12 to 13 days. Adults are highly defensive during this period. The two Vermont egg dates reported are June 9 and July 1; all Vermont nestling dates, July 7 through August 5, could be of second broods, as could the recorded fledgling dates of July 13 through August 6 (three records). Horwich (1965) indicated that young begin feeding themselves at 17 days of age (4–5 days past fledging), and fledglings may beg until 44 days of age. Early nests in Illinois (Graber et



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 42 (23%)

Possible breeding: 12 (28.5% of total)

Probable breeding: 13 (31.0% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 17 (40.5% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

| | no. of priority blocks | % of region's priority blocks | % of species' total priority blocks |
|---------------------|------------------------------|--|---|
| Champlain Lowlands | 16 | 52 | 38 |
| Green Mountains | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| North Central | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Northeast Highlands | 2 | 12 | 5 |
| East Central | 1 | 5 | 2 |
| Taconic Mountains | 6 | 38 | 14 |
| Eastern Foothills | 15 | 62 | 36 |

al. 1970) had very low (9%) fledgling success; the dearth of early breeding season nesting records in Vermont may result from a similar high failure rate among early nesting attempts.

Although mockingbirds forage extensively on the ground and feed primarily on insects, they are extremely fond of fruits and berries. Wintering birds seem particularly attracted to multiflora rose hips, probably because thickets of this introduced plant provide both food and cover in abundance. The mockingbird's expansion may be related to the success of this planting.

During the fall adults establish wintering territories, either as pairs or as individuals,

and force the young to disperse to unoccupied areas. Banding studies in Tennessee (Laskey 1962) indicated that young may disperse up to 320 km (200 mi) away. Fall dispersal of fledglings may colonize new areas in Vermont. Extralimital sightings of Northern Mockingbirds are more common in the spring, however, in Vermont. Both fall dispersal and short-range spring migration may prove to be factors in this species' northward expansion.

DOUGLAS P. KIBBE