Northern Oriole

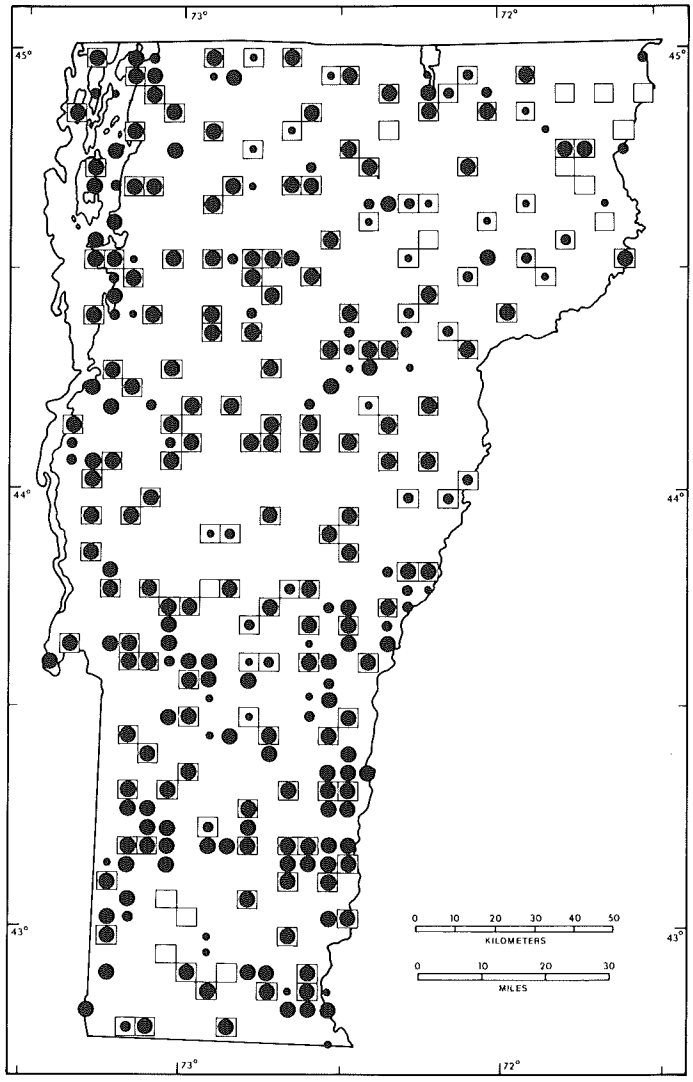
Icterus galbula

The Northern Oriole occurs in two well-marked geographic forms in the U.S. and Canada; until 1973 these were considered separate species: the "Baltimore" Oriole, which occurs east of the Great Plains, and the "Bullock's" Oriole of western North America. Northern Orioles live in open and semi-open areas, principally in riparian situations, at the edge of groves of tall trees or in shade trees in residential areas. The nest is placed at the tip of a branch of the nest tree, often over a lawn, a road, or water. Orioles favor elm trees for nesting, probably because of their pendulous branches. Graf and Greeley (1976) located 66% of 149 Northern Oriole nests around Amherst, Massachusetts in elms. Other trees utilized include cottonwood, aspen, willow, black cherry, birch, and various maples. This species is excluded only from dense forests and elevations above 760 m (about 2,500 ft).

Northern Orioles may be hard to see as they forage in the canopy, but their bright plumage and song call attention to them. The simple, mellow, whistled song generally locates these birds. The species' tendency to nest in residential areas and along roadways simplifies surveying efforts. The characteristic hanging nest is often found during the breeding season; 45% of the Atlas Project confirmations in Vermont were of active nests. Parents carrying food to their offspring provided 20% of the confirmations. Just before and after fledging, the loud begging calls of the young facilitate breeding confirmation; an additional 20% of the confirmations resulted from observers detecting fledglings. The nest is so well made that it usually survives at least one winter; for this reason the Northern Oriole offers the classic used-nest confirmation.

Northern Orioles return to Vermont during the first week of May. Males often appear almost simultaneously all over the state at the middle or end of the week; females return after their mates. Nest building is under way by the middle of May, when orioles are frequently seen on the ground gathering material to weave into their nests. These intricate, saclike structures are woven from plant fibers and lined with plant down. The eggs are grayish to pinkish white, irregularly scrawled with black or dark brown; the clutch numbers from 4 to 6 eggs. The average number of eggs in eight Vermont clutches was 4.5. Nests are placed 2–18 m (7–60 ft) above ground (Bull 1974). The average height of 7 Vermont nests was 6.5 m (21 ft). Egg dates for 11 Vermont nests range from May 29 to June 17; a date of July 3 from Winhall appears to be exceptional. The incubation period lasts 12 to 14 days (Bent 1958). Nestling dates for 12 Vermont nests range from June 12 to July 2. The nestling period lasts from 11 to 14 days (Bent 1958). Fledglings have been reported from June 19 to July 23 in Vermont (14 dates). Orioles are single-brooded. Singing drops off in July and migration begins later that month. The autumn migration peaks in mid August and is over by early September. A handful of Vermont winter records exist, all involving immatures at feeding stations.

The Northern Oriole is plentiful and widespread in Vermont. Historical references also list the species as common in Vermont. Nicholson (1978) recorded 19 pairs



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 165 (92%)

Possible breeding:	15 (9% of total)
Probable breeding:	17 (10% of total)
Confirmed breeding:	133 (81% 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	19
Green Mountains	48	89	29
North Central	18	95	11
Northeast Highlands	9	56	5
East Central	19	100	11
Taconic Mountains	16	100	10
Eastern Foothills	24	100	15

per 40.5 ha (100 a). Some observers have expressed concern over the toll Dutch elm disease has taken on the favorite nest trees of these birds. Although elms continue to die, orioles remain common. Apparently Northern Orioles are not as dependent on the species of tree in which they build as they are on pendulous branches that protect the nest from entry by most predators (Schaefer 1976). The only areas from which the Northern Oriole was notably absent during the Vermont Atlas Project were the Green Mountains (missing from 11% of the priority blocks) and the Northeast Highlands (absent from 44% of the priority blocks). The dense forest and high elevations of these regions exclude orioles from some blocks. In the Northeast Highlands, the species was limited to major stream valleys.

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