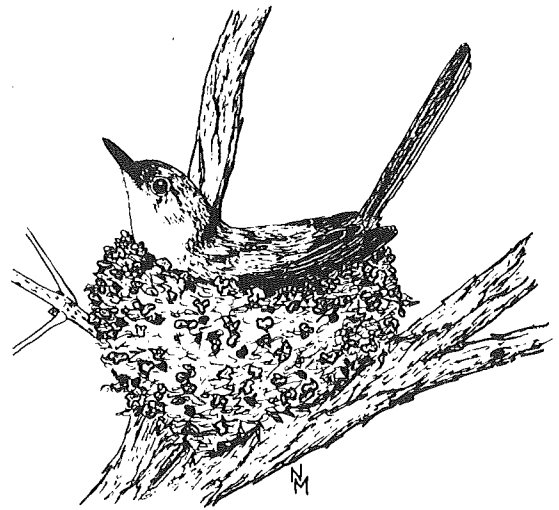


Blue-gray Gnatcatcher

Polioptila caerulea

The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher begins the journey north from its wintering grounds (the southern U.S. to Central America) in early March, usually arriving in Vermont during the last week in April. Its preference for wet bottomland forest and swamp, in the North at least (Grube 1957), has confined it in Vermont almost entirely to the waterways, particularly the Connecticut River drainage system and the Champlain Lowlands. The gnatcatcher is much less particular about its habitat in the far South, where it nests anywhere there are trees suitable for nest sites, from wooded residential sections of cities and towns to well-forested areas (Bent 1949). Although still considered rare in Vermont, its numbers have been steadily increasing as it expands its range northward (RVB 1973-83). The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher now breeds nearly to the Vermont-Quebec border; in July 1978 a pair was observed feeding newly fledged young (FY) on the Barton River in the North Central region (ASR, G. F. Oatman), and in July 1980 a nest with young (NY) was found in the Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge (ASR, E. Ellis and D. Clark).

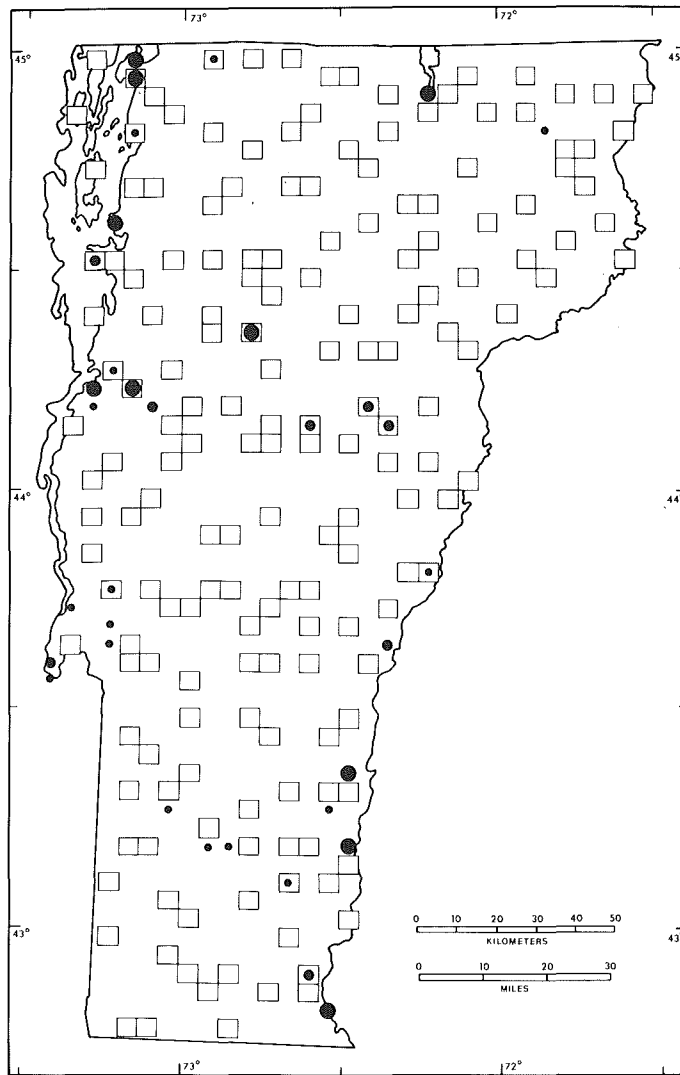
Upon arriving on the breeding grounds the male sets up a 2 ha (4.5 a) territory which it defends (occasionally with the aid of the female) before nest building. Bent (1949) described the nest as "a beautiful, cup-shaped nest, compactly built of plant down and similar materials bound together with insect silk and spider web and covered externally with bits of lichen." Well camouflaged, the nest is saddled on a horizontal limb 1-24 m (4-80 ft) above the ground. Species of nesting trees vary in Vermont: oak, eastern cottonwood, willow, American elm, red and silver maple, butternut, and shagbark hickory are used. The average nest takes 12 to 15 days to complete. If the nest site is abandoned, the gnatcatcher frequently tears the old nest apart and reuses the building materials in a new nest. Root (1969) noted that both members of the pair give a



few calls when approaching and leaving the nest, thus making it easy for observers to find nests during the construction period. Observations in Vermont (where nests are built in May) bear this out.

Three to 6 (commonly 4) eggs are laid on consecutive days, 10 to 14 days after the nest is completed. Incubation, which is shared by the adults, takes about 13 days; young fledge 10 to 12 days later. Brooding and feeding of the young is shared by both parents, although the females apparently assume the most active role with early broods, and the males with fledglings of late broods (Root 1969). Vermont nesting data are scant. Dates for eggs range from May 25 through June 8 (six dates); nestling dates range from May 21 through July 19 (three dates); and fledgling dates are from June 27 to July 1 (three dates). Dates for New York State in Bull (1974) include: egg dates, May 14 through June 17; nestlings, June 1 through July 11; and fledglings, June 28 through July 25. Forbush (1929) wrote that in the greater part of their range gnatcatchers rear only a single brood in a season; two broods are normal in the far South. Bent (1949) noted that both sexes of young gnatcatchers in juvenile plumage resemble the adult female, as they lack the adult male's black forehead.

Before 1864, the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher was believed to occur in New England only when it strayed from breeding grounds in



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 14 (8%)

Possible breeding: 6 (43% of total)

Probable breeding: 5 (36% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 3 (21% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	6	19	43.0
Green Mountains	1	2	7.0
North Central	0	0	0
Northeast Highlands	0	0	0
East Central	3	16	21.5
Taconic Mountains	1	6	7.0
Eastern Foothills	3	13	21.5

southern New Jersey and southern Ontario (Bagg and Eliot 1937). The first mention of the species in Vermont was in 1884, when Cutting (1884) listed it as "rarely seen in the southern part of the state." The first nesting record for Connecticut dates from 1947 (Saunders 1950); the first Vermont nesting record is of a pair nesting in a swampy area of Burlington in May 1954 (GMAS records, N. St. Jacques); sometime between 1965 and 1970 a fallen nest was found in the Sandbar Wildlife Management Area in Milton. Spear (1976) described the species as rare in the Champlain Valley.

Today the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, though still considered rare in the state, is steadily

increasing in numbers. It can be found with some regularity at certain localities, including Sandbar Wildlife Management Area (Chittenden County), Herrick's Cove and Vernon (Windham County), and the Springweather Nature Area in North Springfield (Windsor County), as well as at numerous spots along Lake Champlain (especially in the East Bay area of West Haven, Rutland County). If the present trend continues, the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher should be a permanent part of Vermont's avifauna in the years to come.

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