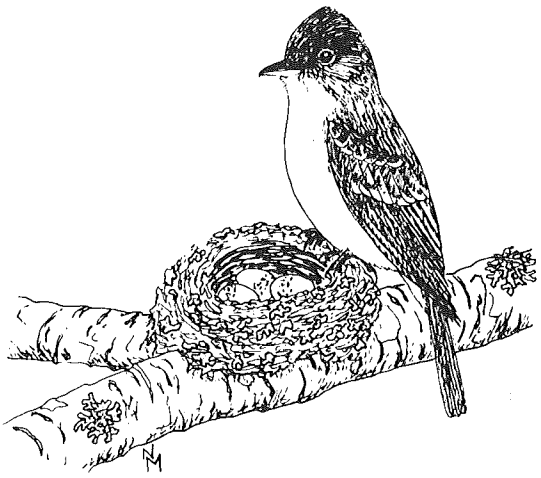
Eastern Wood-Pewee

Contopus virens



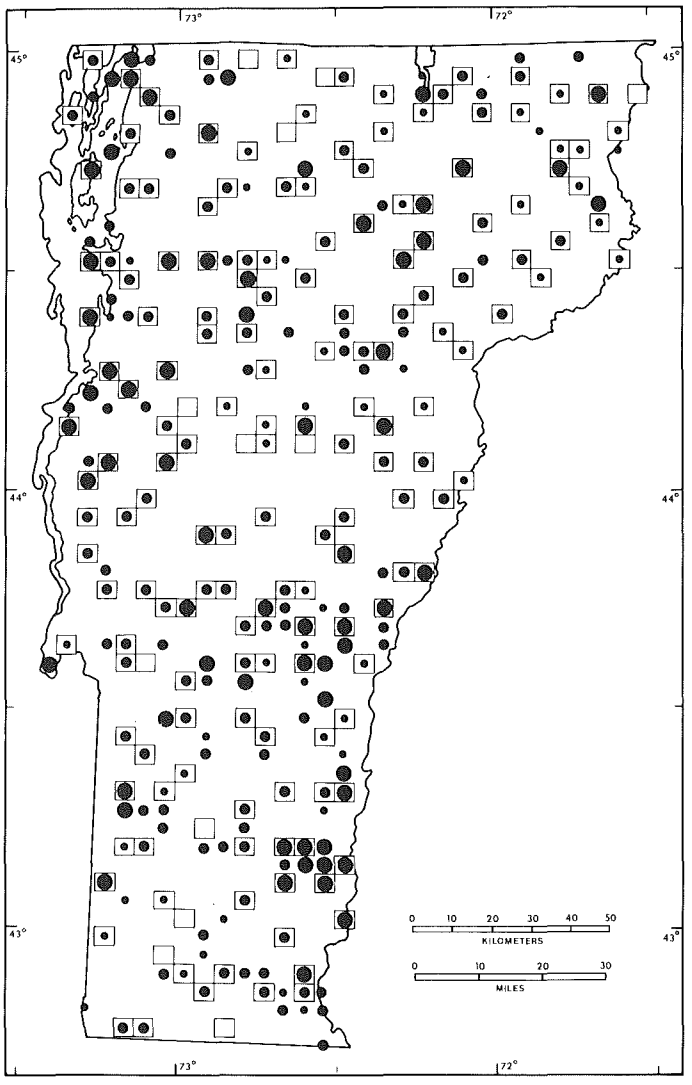
Eastern Wood-Pewees inhabit clearings in and at the edges of forests and woodlots, stands of shade and fruiting trees, and open woodlands with sparse canopy layers. The species is rare or absent in exclusively spruce-fir forest. In a study of flycatcher habitat selection in eastern North America, Hespenheide (1971) found that few pewee territories had uniform vegetative cover, and concluded that the Eastern Wood-Pewee is essentially an edge species.

The Eastern Wood-Pewee's plaintive three-note whistle is the first indication of the species' presence for most observers. This modestly plumaged flycatcher tends to forage at high levels in trees and therefore may be difficult to see. Fortunately, its long aerial forays after flying insects make it easier to see than some more abundant birds (e.g., the Red-eyed Vireo). This species is difficult to confirm as a breeder. A patient observer may obtain breeding confirmation by keeping a careful watch on a pair until one member, usually the female, reveals the nest's presence. Active nests accounted for 33% of all Atlas Project breeding confirmations, parents with food accounted for another 33%, and dependent young for 23%.

The Eastern Wood-Pewee arrives in Vermont during mid May, often by the third week of the month. It is among the latest migrants to return to Vermont, largely because it catches insects on the wing during the breeding season. Nest building commences in early June. Six dates for nest construction in Vermont range from June 1 to June 11; a few pairs may start nests in late May. The nest is a delicate structure of fine plant fibers held together with spider webbing and cocoon silk, and decorated with bits of birch bark and lichen. The nest is usually placed on a branch fork well out from the trunk of a deciduous tree, and resembles a knot on the limb. Fifteen Vermont nests were placed 5.5–16.8 m (18–55 ft) above the ground, with the average height being 10 m (33 ft).

The wood-pewee's eggs are white with a wreath of reddish to purplish brown spots about the large end. Clutch size ranges from 2 to 4 eggs; the norm is 3 (Bent 1942). All recorded Vermont clutches contained 3 eggs. The incubation period lasts from 12 to 13 days (Bent 1942). Seven Vermont dates for nests containing eggs range from June 10 to June 27; fledgling and nestling dates suggest that eggs may be found in Vermont nests from late May to mid July. Ten dates for nestlings from Vermont range from June 14 to August 2. The young remain in the nest from 15 to 18 days (Bent 1942). Three dates for dependent young in Vermont are between June 20 and July 5. The autumn migration appears to peak in mid to late August, and a few birds remain until late September in most years.

Eastern Wood-Pewees probably experienced a late nineteenth century population decline, as did other woodland birds at the height of land clearing, but had recovered enough by the turn of the century for Perkins and Howe (1901) to consider the species a common summer resident. Forbush (1927) described it as a "common summer resident except on the higher elevations of northern New England." Atlas Project data indicates that this is still true today, as wood-pewees were located in only 85% of the priority blocks in the Green Mountains, compared to 94% to 100% of blocks in all other regions. In Vermont, the Eastern Wood-Pewee



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 167 (93%)

Possible breeding:	41 (24.5% of total)
Probable breeding:	81 (48.5% of total)
Confirmed breeding:	45 (27.0% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	30	97	18
Green Mountains	46	85	28
North Central	19	100	11
Northeast Highlands	15	94	9
East Central	18	95	11
Taconic Mountains	15	94	9
Eastern Foothills	24	100	14

averaged between 4 and 6 birds per route on U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Breeding Bird surveys between 1966 and 1979 (BBS, 1966–79), and it showed no significant population changes during that period (Robbins 1982b).

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