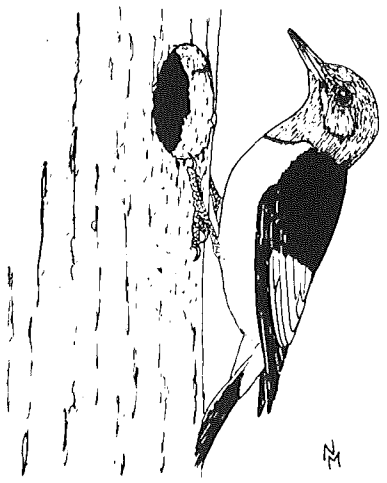
Red-headed Woodpecker

Melanerpes erythrocephalus



Red-headed Woodpeckers breed throughout the southeastern U.S., north to southern Canada, and west to Montana, Colorado, and New Mexico. They spend winters primarily in the southern portion of the range, though some birds occasionally winter in northern sections. Declining numbers for the species have caused concern along the Atlantic Coastal Plain in the Southeast and locally within other regions (Arbib 1982). Declines are believed to result from a number of factors, among them competition with European Starlings for nest cavities (Bull 1974); firewood cutting, clear-cutting, and agricultural practices (Arbib 1982); and mortality as a consequence of collisions with cars while the birds are stooping for insects along roads (Bull 1974). This woodpecker is proposed for Species of Special Concern status in Vermont.

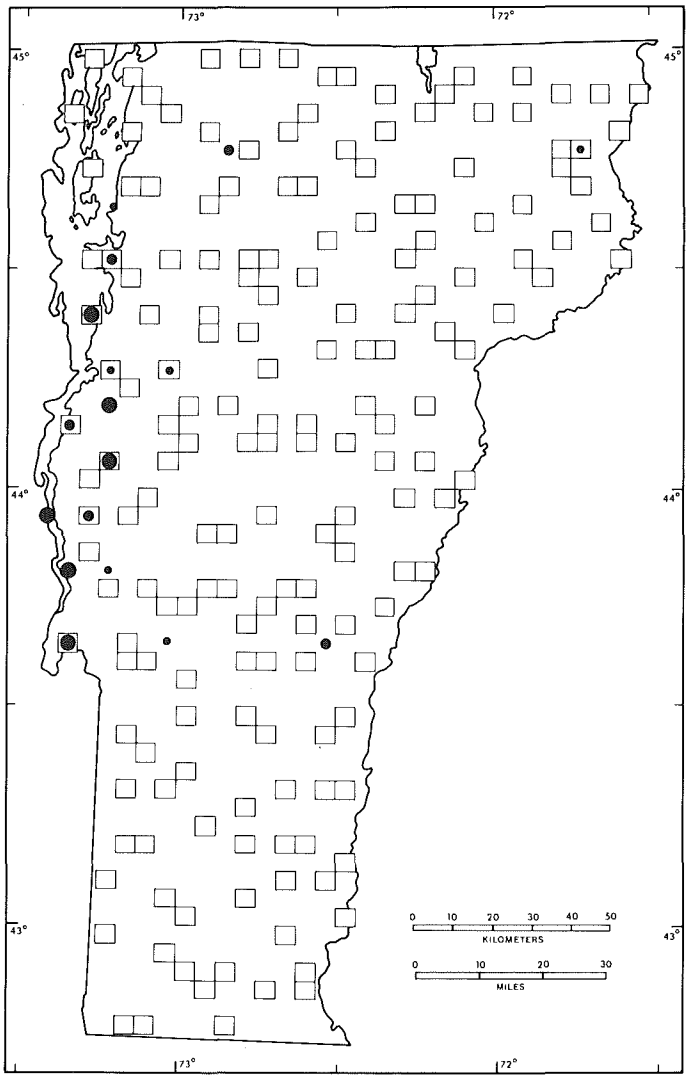
Occurrence of the species in Vermont is mentioned as early as the mid-nineteenth century by Thompson (1853), who stated that "although at present by no means rare in Vermont, [it] is much less common than formerly." In the early twentieth century, Red-headed Woodpeckers were uncommon summer residents (Perkins and Howe 1901). Ross (1927) noted that this woodpecker was declining around Bennington, in his opinion because its preferred trees were being cut down. Forbush (1925) believed that Red-headed Woodpeckers were uncommon to rare in eastern Vermont and common in the western part of the state.

As is obvious from the species map, Red-headed Woodpeckers' nesting activity in Vermont is nearly restricted to the Champlain Lowlands; all confirmations were in this region. Most occurrences were in the Champlain Lowlands.

Limited nesting information is available for Red-headeds in Vermont. Nests with young were seen on June 13 and July 5; fledged young were seen on July 11. In New York, egg dates range from May 16 to June 19, nestling dates from May 31 to August 26, and fledgling dates from July 5 to September 15 (Bull 1974). The average clutch contains 4 eggs, and incubation lasts for 12 days (Jackson 1976). More so than other woodpeckers, Red-headeds obtain much of their food by flycatching or stooping; they are known to flycatch for adult beetles and to stoop for grasshoppers (Jackson 1976). Graber et al. (1977) mentioned densities from 9 to 12 birds per 40.5 ha (100 a) in bottomlands, and 25 birds per 40.5 ha (100 a) in suburban residential habitat.

Summer Red-headed Woodpecker habitat in the Champlain Lowlands includes "open fields liberally dotted with dead elm stubs" (ASR, A. Pistorius), "open farmland interspersed with deciduous windows" (ASR, J. J. Allen), and "mainly open [fields], reverting to natural grasses with scattered bushes and dead trees" (ASR, R. Pilcher). Near Fairfield, a pair was observed in an open, wooded pasture from early July until mid September (ASR, D. Flack). In the Northeast Highlands an adult was observed near a road in an area of cut-over, mixed hardwood-conifer forest (ASR, G. F. Oatman).

Two distinct breeding habitats are evident. One habitat is open, upland meadow or short-grass areas, such as pasture or residential zones with a savannalike dispersion of large deciduous trees or groves of such trees. In these areas at least a few snags or large, dead limbs are necessary. Another habitat is open bottomland swamps or fringes



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 9 (5%)

Possible breeding:	3 (33.3% of total)
Probable breeding:	3 (33.3% of total)
Confirmed breeding:	3 (33.3% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	8	26	88.5
Green Mountains	0	0	0
North Central	0	0	0
Northeast Highlands	1	6	11.5
East Central	0	0	0
Taconic Mountains	0	0	0
Eastern Foothills	0	0	0

of bottomland forest with numerous snags near or over water.

Both habitat types are well represented in the Champlain Lowlands. As much of Vermont has reverted to second-growth forest over the last half century, the Champlain Lowlands region has served as the main refuge for nesting Red-headed Woodpeckers. Removal of snags and mature trees in open areas or reversion of open habitats to forest will undoubtedly reduce Red-headed Woodpecker nesting habitat in the Champlain Lowlands, and therefore in Vermont, as will removal of snags in open swamp or riparian forests.

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