

Rusty Blackbird

Euphagus carolinus

Breeding Rusty Blackbirds are invariably found near water: bogs, beaver ponds, lake shores, and swampy woodlands. They are summer inhabitants of boreal coniferous forests from Alaska through Canada, north to the tree line. In the lower forty-eight states, they breed only in northern New England and New York. Vermont Rusty Blackbirds are local and uncommon summer residents in the Northeast Highlands, the North Central region, and the Green Mountains. Most references state that in Vermont Rusty Blackbirds nest only in the north (Forbush 1925; AOU 1957; Bent 1958). The Atlas Project expanded the known Vermont nesting range of the Rusty Blackbird to near the southern border of the state, demonstrating that these birds will breed wherever pockets of suitable high boreal forest are found. The species' distribution seems to depend on the availability of suitable habitat.

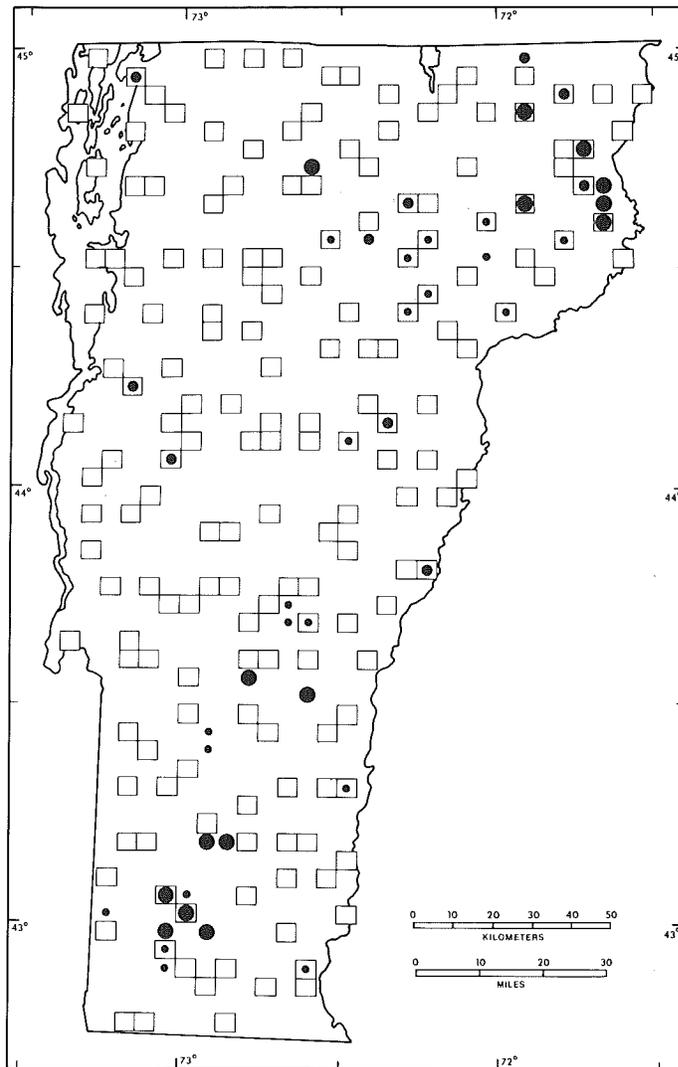
Rusty Blackbirds return to Vermont as early as mid March, or as soon as the ice begins to melt on shallow woodland pools. Migration occurs primarily during the first two weeks of April, when birds pass through the state rather quickly. At this time they may frequent cultivated fields as well as wet woods, and are sometimes seen in large numbers. They are made conspicuous by their squeaks and whistles as they walk and feed. When flushed, they fly in unison to nearby leafless treetops, calling noisily. Rusties often associate with Red-winged Blackbirds, Common Grackles, and Brown-headed Cowbirds. Breeding territories are established by early to mid May, when pairs become solitary. Rusties are among the earliest spring migrants to reach their breeding grounds. The same birds return to the same nesting locations year after year (Harrison 1975).

The nest is frequently placed in a thick growth of spruce or balsam, often over water, at a height of 0.6–3.0 m (2–10 ft)—occasionally higher. Sometimes the nest is located in deciduous shrubs such as sweet-



gale, willows, alders, or buttonbush. It is a bulky but tight nest of twigs, dried grasses, *Usnea* lichens, dead leaves, and mud. The well-made inner cup is composed of fine twigs, and invariably contains green grasses that soon rot and then harden (Kennard 1920). Nests are so well constructed that they frequently last for years, but they are used only once (Harrison 1975). The 4 to 5 smooth, oval eggs are a pale bluish green, blotched with grays and browns. One brood is produced annually. Incubation begins with the first egg, is performed solely by the female, and takes about 14 days (Kennard 1920). The male feeds the female until the eggs hatch, at which time both sexes feed the young. When disturbed the adults are conspicuous, and nesting birds may easily be located by their harsh *chack* calls. The young are ready to leave the nest in 13 days and are soon able to care for themselves. Bull (1974) recorded egg dates from the Adirondacks from May 7 to June 15, nestlings from May 30 to July 8, and fledglings from July 2 to 24. There are four egg dates from Vermont: April 28, May 5, May 25, and June 9. For Vermont there are also two nest-with-young dates, May 29 and June 8, and three dates for fledged young, from June 28 to July 10.

By midsummer Rusty Blackbird families begin to move about in small feeding flocks.



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 27 (15%)

Possible breeding: 13 (48% of total)

Probable breeding: 8 (30% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 6 (22% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	2	6	7
Green Mountains	4	7	15
North Central	7	37	26
Northeast Highlands	7	44	26
East Central	3	16	11
Taconic Mountains	0	0	0
Eastern Foothills	4	3	15

As the season advances, they wander to more open situations and form increasingly large gatherings. Migration in Vermont begins in September and continues to late October. In the fall Rusty Blackbirds are not as confined to water and will often frequent farmlands. At that time of year Rusty Blackbirds are in their rusty and buff plumage; this phase lasts until the following spring, by which time the brown feather edges have become worn and the males have assumed their glossy blue-black plumage and the females their dull slate coloration.

Rusty Blackbirds winter south to Texas and Florida, occasionally as far north as

southern New England and, rarely, Vermont. Rusty Blackbird populations in Vermont appear to have changed little in the last 50 to 75 years.

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