

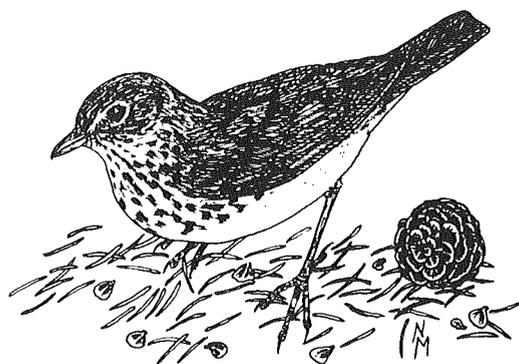
Swainson's Thrush

Cartharus ustulatus

The Swainson's Thrush is a common but relatively inconspicuous breeder in the mixed coniferous-deciduous forests of Vermont's higher elevations. It typically occurs in habitats just below those occupied by the Gray-cheeked Thrush. Holmes and Sawyer (1975) concluded that the Swainson's Thrush was physiologically less well adapted to cool mountaintop climates than the Gray-cheeked Thrush. This explanation only partly accounts for the habitat segregation observed, since Swainson's Thrushes at northern latitudes may occupy more rigorous environments than those occupied by Gray-cheeked Thrushes at the southern edge of their breeding range. Able and Noon (1976), on the basis of their studies in Vermont and New York, hypothesized that interspecific aggression reinforced spatial competitive exclusion in Gray-cheeked and Swainson's thrushes. Noon (1981), after conducting song playback experiments, concluded that the thrushes responded more strongly to songs of conspecifics. He further concluded that interspecific interactions contributed little to habitat selection of these species.

The Swainson's overlaps the Veery and Hermit Thrush in its habitat selection at the lower elevations. Morse (1972) concluded from studies in Maine that the Hermit Thrush was dominant over the Swainson's. The elevation at which the Swainson's breeds has proven remarkably consistent; on Camels Hump, for example, it was found at 700–1,100 m (2,296–3,608 ft), while on Mt. Mansfield it was present at 750–1,100 m (2,460–3,608 ft) (Able and Noon 1976). In Canada the species is more widespread and apparently occupies niches that are filled by the Veery and the Hermit Thrush at more southern latitudes.

The breeding range of the Swainson's Thrush extends from northern Alaska and Canada southward through mountains to California, Colorado, and West Virginia. At the southern limit of its range it is extremely local. The species winters in South America,

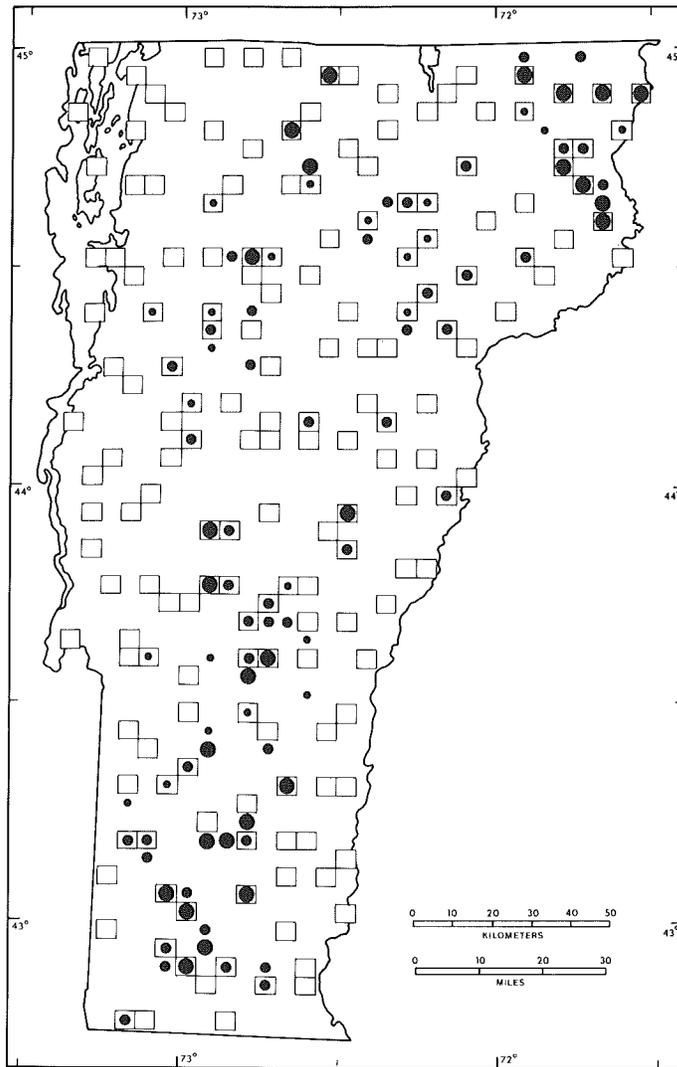


returning to Vermont in mid May. Migration may still be ongoing in early June, however. The species is most widely distributed in Vermont in the North Central, Green Mountain, and Northeast Highland regions, reaching its greatest frequency of occurrence in the latter region. There were records from all of the Atlas Project physiographic regions in the state, but possible breeding records from the Champlain Lowlands as well as from other lower elevation blocks may well represent late migrants.

The Swainson's Thrush may be found in both undisturbed and selectively logged woodlands. The species prefers areas with openings in the canopy that facilitate its habit of hawking for passing insects (Noon 1981). Prime territories are dense thickets near streams. Although they share woodlands in Vermont with several ground-foraging thrushes, Swainson's Thrushes flycatch frequently, thus reducing, presumably, interspecific competition (Dilger 1956b, Noon 1981).

Since it breeds in mountainous areas in Vermont, the Swainson's Thrush is less well known to most observers than more common members of its family. The Swainson's song, an ascending spiral, is nonetheless an integral part of the dawn symphony in the Green Mountains.

The nest, a compact structure of moss, leaves, twigs, and mud lined with finer material, is well hidden next to the tree trunk, 0.6–2.1 m (2–7 ft) above ground. Nest building has been observed as early as May 21. Three to 5 bluish eggs, speckled with reddish brown, are laid; they are incu-



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 64 (36%)
 Possible breeding: 17 (26% of total)
 Probable breeding: 28 (44% of total)
 Confirmed breeding: 19 (30% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

| | no. of priority blocks | % of region's priority blocks | % of species' total priority blocks |
|---------------------|------------------------------|--|---|
| Champlain Lowlands | 5 | 16 | 7.2 |
| Green Mountains | 26 | 48 | 40.2 |
| North Central | 10 | 53 | 15.2 |
| Northeast Highlands | 12 | 75 | 18.2 |
| East Central | 6 | 32 | 9.0 |
| Taconic Mountains | 4 | 25 | 6.0 |
| Eastern Foothills | 3 | 12 | 4.2 |

bated by the female for 10 to 13 days. Nests with eggs have been found in Vermont between June 8 and 26. Both parents tend the young, which leave the nest in 10 to 12 days. Fledglings have been observed as late as August 10. Swainson's Thrushes frequent lower elevations during migration, and may be found in some numbers in berry-laden forest thickets in the fall. Most have departed Vermont by October 20.

The Swainson's Thrush has apparently always been a relatively uncommon inhabitant of Vermont forests. Although agricultural clearing in the 1800s may have caused the species' distribution to contract, actual data are wanting. Today the Swainson's is widely

distributed, and is probably most abundant at the higher elevations of the Green Mountains.

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