

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

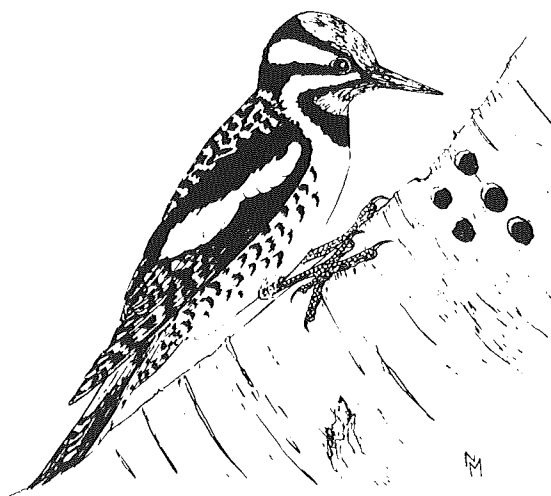
Sphyrapicus varius

Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers breed from Canada south to the northern Great Plains, Missouri, Indiana, New York, and southern New England, and in the mountains to Tennessee and Georgia (Short 1982). In Vermont, spring migrants arrive in late March if the weather is mild, but most appear around the second week in April. In the fall, most migrate by the second week in October. Wintering sapsuckers are found in the southern sections of the breeding range south to the southern U.S., the West Indies, and Central America as far as Panama (Short 1982).

Nesting Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers prefer deciduous or mixed deciduous-coniferous forest and woodlots. Advanced second-growth forests of aspen, paper birch, white pine, hemlock, and American beech are used considerably by this species in Vermont.

In the spring, the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker's calling and distinctive drumming are conspicuous. Drumming begins rapidly and then slows, sounding like a telegraph message: *dr-r-a-da, da-da, da* (Kilham 1962). The calls are varied; two that are frequently heard are a high-pitched *kwee-urk, kwee-urk*, delivered in sets as one bird calls to another or announces his territory, and a *c-waan* or *view* (Lawrence 1967) given when the birds are disturbed (Kilham 1962). Early in the breeding season, sapsuckers engage in courtship flights during which a snipelike winnowing sound is produced by the wings.

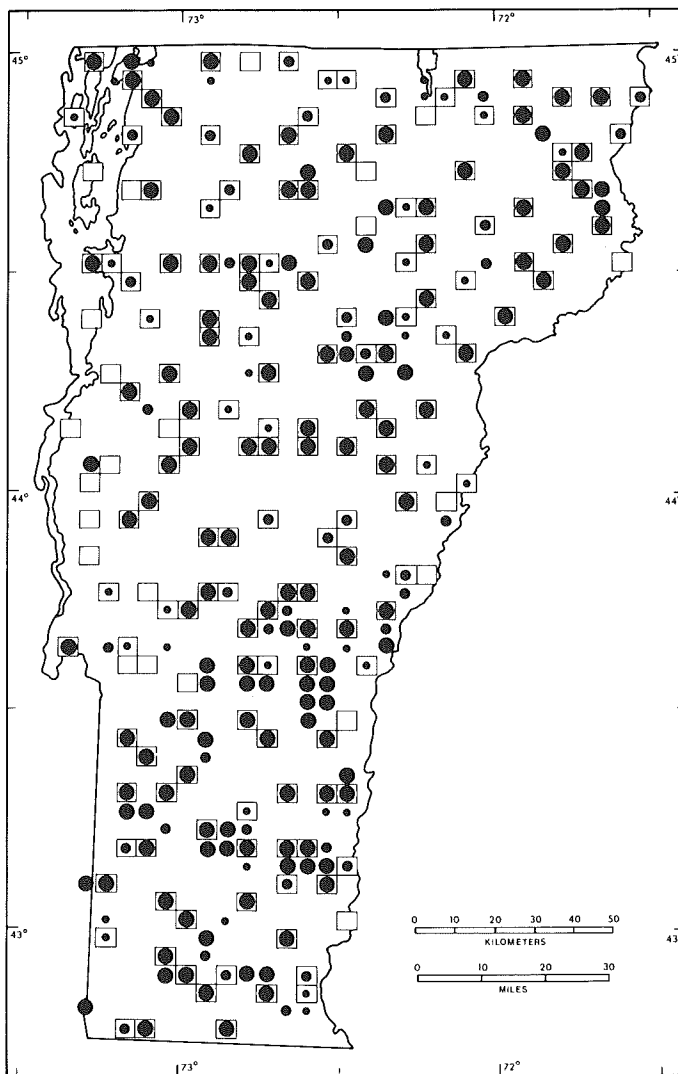
Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers select nest sites in early May. They excavate new cavities each year, often using the same fungus-infected aspen for up to seven years (Kilham 1971a). In time, these trees resemble "tenement houses" (Kilham 1971a), and flying squirrels may use abandoned cavities. Competition with Hairy Woodpeckers for nest sites might be greater if it were not for the presence of flying squirrels (see the Hairy



Woodpecker species account). Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers appear to coexist harmoniously with flying squirrels (Kilham 1971a).

There are 11 records of nests with eggs in Vermont, with dates ranging from May 12 to June 20. Nestling dates range from June 4 to July 17 (41 records), and fledgling dates range from June 24 to July 13 (9 records). Of 27 Yellow-bellied Sapsucker nest cavities in Vermont, 18 were in aspens, 4 in American beeches, 3 in red maples, 1 in an unidentified maple, and 1 in a hemlock. Kilham (1971a) reported that Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers in New Hampshire will nest in aspens, beeches, and butternuts infected with the tinder fungus (*Fomes igniarius*). This fungus affects only the heartwood, leaving sapwood intact. Lawrence (1967) observed that Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers prefer to nest in live trees. Nest predators include raccoons and red squirrels.

The sapsucker's presence may be indicated by a series of small, evenly spaced holes that appear to spiral around the boles of some trees. Sapsuckers consume both the sap that drains from these holes and insects attracted to the sap flow. Trees used for foraging include birch, basswood, apple, hickory (Williams 1975), and aspen. Insects taken include moths, beetles, and ants (Lawrence 1967). Insects mixed with sap are brought to nestlings. In late summer and fall, sap-



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 156 (87%)
 Possible breeding: 28 (18% of total)
 Probable breeding: 24 (15% of total)
 Confirmed breeding: 104 (67% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

| | no. of priority blocks | % of region's priority blocks | % of species' total priority blocks |
|---------------------|------------------------------|--|---|
| Champlain Lowlands | 21 | 68 | 13 |
| Green Mountains | 52 | 96 | 33 |
| North Central | 17 | 89 | 11 |
| Northeast Highlands | 15 | 94 | 10 |
| East Central | 18 | 95 | 12 |
| Taconic Mountains | 12 | 75 | 8 |
| Eastern Foothills | 21 | 88 | 13 |

suckers dine on berries; poison ivy berries are a favorite (C. Fichtel, pers. observ.). Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are known to feed at the sapwells drilled by Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers (Lawrence 1967).

The Yellow-bellied Sapsucker breeds in all seven physiographic regions of Vermont. Percentages of their occurrence indicate that sapsuckers are uniformly distributed throughout Vermont's physiographic regions, with lowest numbers in the Champlain Lowlands. The species is fairly common in Vermont, concentrated at higher elevation woodlands (W. J. Norse, pers. ob-

serv.). Confirmation of breeding was high; most confirmations were of young in the nest cavity. Food calls of the young are loud, and consequently nests are easy to locate.

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