

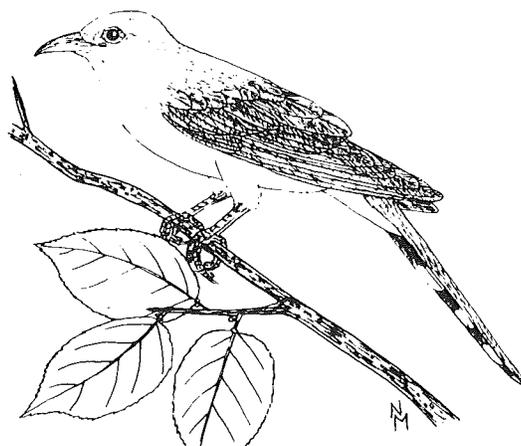
Yellow-billed Cuckoo

Coccyzus americanus

The Yellow-billed Cuckoo breeds from the latitude of the Great Lakes south to the Greater Antilles and Central America. In the western U.S., however, the bird is scarce and local, as it depends on increasingly rare riparian habitats. Common and widespread in the Southeast, the Yellow-billed is less frequent in the Northeast, where it is a denizen of brushy fencerows, overgrown pastures and orchards, and, especially, riparian thickets.

The Yellow-billed Cuckoo's New England distribution has long been a puzzle. A century ago Samuels (1880) described the species as "very irregularly distributed through New England as a summer visitor." Recently Spear (1976) listed the species' nesting status as uncertain in Vermont. The most recent—and most detailed—range map (Peterson and Peterson 1980) shows the species to be absent from most of Vermont, occurring only in the extreme south and in the northwest corner, which forms the tip of a range "thumb" extending east from southern Ontario.

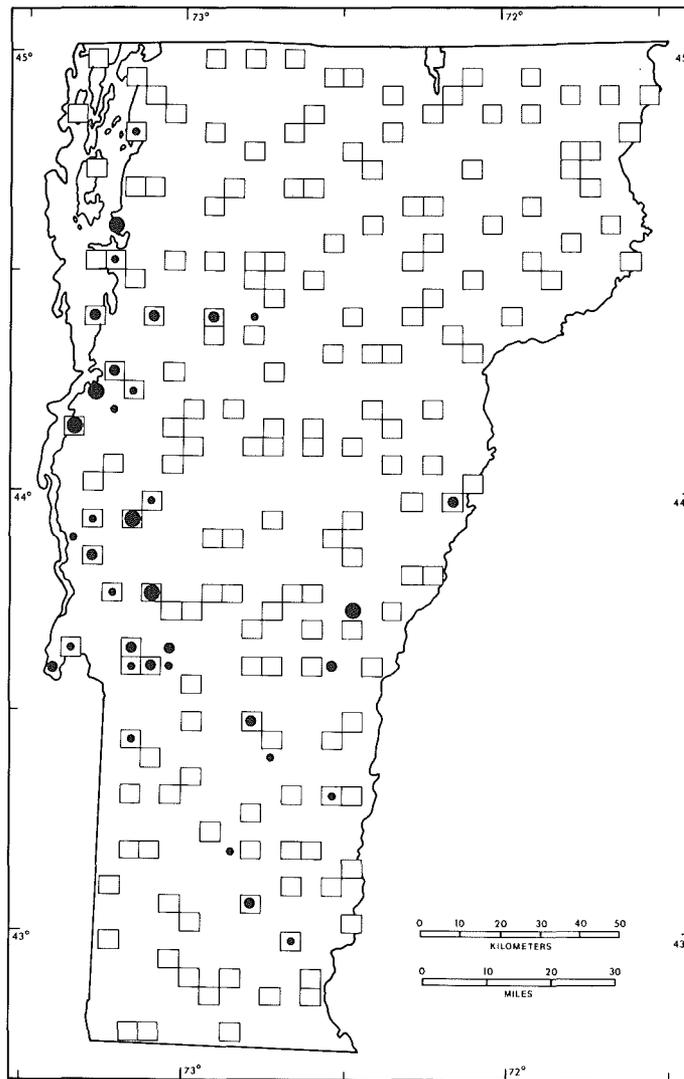
The Vermont Atlas Project data paint a different distribution picture for breeding cuckoos. Yellow-billeds are absent from the higher mountain elevations and from the Northeast Highlands and North Central region, all but absent from the Eastern Foothills and East Central region, and very scarce in the southern Green Mountains and along the western Quebec border. They are somewhat more numerous in the southeastern foothills and in the southern Connecticut River valley, and are most numerous in the west central part of the state, in the Taconic Mountains and (particularly) the Champlain Lowlands. Indeed, 24 of the total 36 Atlas Project records (including those for non-priority blocks) were recorded in a strip 134 km (83 mi) long by 21 km (13 mi) wide extending along Lake Champlain from Fair Haven and West Rutland north to St. Albans Bay and Fairfield. This narrow strip in the Champlain Lowlands



produced 8 of the state's 13 probable records and 5 of 6 confirmed records: copulation at Dead Creek in Panton; nest building bordering the Cornwall Swamp in Salisbury; a nest with 3 eggs at Jones Brook in Brandon; and two observations of food being carried—one over Lewis Creek in Ferrisburg, the other in a floodplain forest in Milton. The sixth confirmation was based on a used cuckoo nest found in a swampy area of Woodstock, where a Yellow-billed Cuckoo had been seen and heard earlier in the year.

There is very little in the literature about the early stages of reproduction in this species. One report of courtship feeding exists, in which the female held an insect in her bill through two copulation acts (Pistorius 1981). Nest type and construction, nest placement, clutch size, and egg color are similar to those of the Black-billed Cuckoo, with minor exceptions: the Yellow-billed seems to favor vine-covered nest sites, and its nest may, on average, be slightly smaller and less substantially built and lined than that of its near relative. The Yellow-billed Cuckoo incubation period is generally given as 14 days, but at one nest 4 eggs, laid on consecutive days, hatched 9 days after laying (Potter 1980).

Several anomalies in the reproductive behavior of cuckoos—especially their often interrupted egg-laying sequence and the wide variation of laying dates from year to year—have led Hamilton and Hamilton (1965) to



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 24 (13%)

Possible breeding: 11 (46% of total)

Probable breeding: 10 (42% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 3 (12% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	11	35	46
Green Mountains	5	9	21
North Central	0	0	0
Northeast Highlands	0	0	0
East Central	1	5	4
Taconic Mountains	6	37	25
Eastern Foothills	1	4	4

conclude that breeding by this bird is adjusted to local food resources, which may be appraised during a postmigratory period of wandering. When the birds detect a suitable caterpillar hatch or cicada emergence, their reproductive system somehow times egg laying to coincide with peak prey abundance. Nolan and Thompson (1975) supported these contentions on the basis of fieldwork, and theorized that egg production, triggered by an insect outbreak, might find females ready to lay but without a nest, leaving no alternative but to deposit eggs in the nests of other birds.

Most of the few Yellow-billed Cuckoos

breeding in northern New England vacate the area in September, and most late fall records are for early October. A sighting on November 7, 1977 in Fairlee (RVB, Fall 1977) was matched by a November 16 observation reported for inland New York (Bull 1974). The birds winter in South America as far south as Uruguay.

ALAN PISTORIUS