

## American Goldfinch

*Carduelis tristis*

The American Goldfinch is a bird of edge and brush, preferring naturally open swamp and marsh vegetation, man-made clearings, road edges, orchards and pastures, forest fringes, and open uplands with their scattered shrubs and saplings (Nickell 1951).

The American Goldfinch, though considered a permanent resident in Vermont, varies greatly in numbers from season to season. Some individuals summer in Vermont for breeding only and in winter move to more southern areas (VINS bird-banding data). Those goldfinches that remain in Vermont in winter or arrive here from farther north may be seen wandering erratically in flocks or alone near feeders. Spring and fall migrations peak between April 15 and May 15 and between August 15 and September 15 (Woods 1981), with some movement occurring into mid November. Christmas Bird Count records indicate the greatest average winter concentrations of goldfinches in the Champlain Lowlands and the least in the Green Mountains and the North Central region (CBC 1978-82).

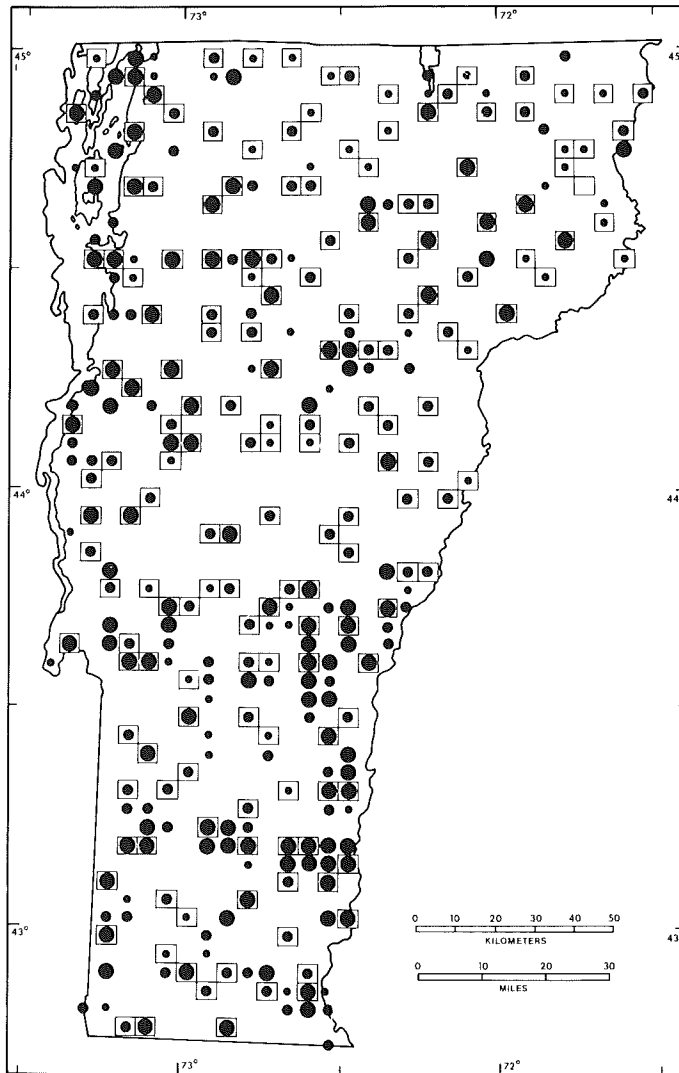
In contrast to most songbirds, the American Goldfinch may delay establishing territory up to 2 months following pair formation in May or early June (Drum 1939; Stokes 1950). Two distinctive courtship behaviors of the American Goldfinch are the extended, canarylike warbling given by the male from prominent perches and the prolonged pursuit of a single female by several males. The approximate boundaries of the breeding territory are defined by song-flights of the male, who may defend it from other goldfinch males (Drum 1939). While defending his territory, the male may be heard singing a shorter, warbling song from prominent perches around the territory (Stokes 1979). Females defend the immediate nest area from other female goldfinches. Territorial delineation and defense wane when nest building is completed.

The timing of nest building activity, from



the last week in June well into late summer, coincides with the ripening of thistle seeds and other composites (Nickell 1951). Nest material includes fibrous matter from the bark of vines and the stems of milkweed that the female gathers and forms into a supporting basket, which is cradled in the crotch of three or four upright slender branches of a tree, shrub, or herbaceous plant. The bowl is neatly and compactly lined with thistle and cattail down (Nickell 1951). Nest height above the ground varies according to the chosen habitat; 0.9-1.8 m (3-6 ft) in shrubs and forbs, 2.4-4.6 m (8-15 ft) in bushes and saplings (Stokes 1950), and up to 13.8 m (45 ft) in mature trees (Nickell 1951). Whereas nest building in July may average 13 days, it requires less than half this time by late August (Stokes 1950).

Incubation, by the female, of the 4 to 6 smooth-shelled, pale bluish white eggs lasts from 12 to 14 days (Stokes 1979). Dates for 6 Vermont clutches range from June 30 to August 17. During incubation, the male is most attentive, feeding the begging female a regurgitated supply of white, milky seed cereal (Bent 1968). By the 8th day after hatching the nestlings are very active, calling loudly and standing upright in anticipation of the parent's arrival. At this time the young begin defecating on the nest edge, where their excreta may cling and harden; earlier,



**No. of priority blocks in which recorded**

TOTAL 178 (99%)

Possible breeding: 37 (21% of total)

Probable breeding: 74 (41% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 67 (38% of total)

**Physiographic regions in which recorded**

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	31	100	17
Green Mountains	54	100	30
North Central	19	100	11
Northeast Highlands	15	94	9
East Central	19	100	11
Taconic Mountains	16	100	9
Eastern Foothills	24	100	13

the parents removed the fecal sacs (Stokes 1950). Nine nestling dates from Vermont range from July 15 to September 19. Fledging occurs after 10 to 16 days, and fledglings are able to fend for themselves after another 2 weeks (Stokes 1950). Eight Vermont fledgling dates range from July 26 to October 2.

The American Goldfinch was considered a common bird in Vermont by early authors (Thompson 1853; Fortner et al. 1933). It is still common today, as Atlas Project workers found goldfinches in all but one of the 179 priority blocks. Goldfinches were confirmed as breeders in only 38% of the priority

blocks; nest building, performed by the female, constitute 35% of the breeding records. Both figures reflect Atlas Project fieldwork before most breeding activity for this late nesting species occurred.

ROY W. PILCHER