

Gray-cheeked Thrush

Catharus minimus

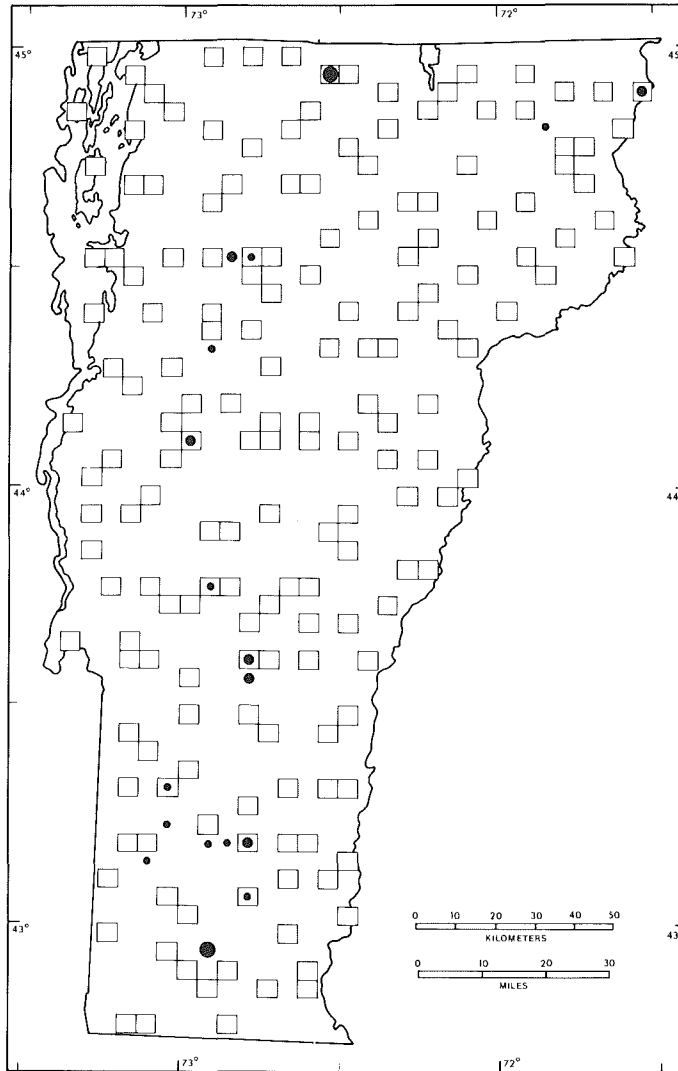
The Gray-cheeked Thrush is the rarest member of the Turdinae subfamily breeding in Vermont. Although the species ranges from northeastern Siberia east to Newfoundland and south to Massachusetts, it is seldom encountered except during migration. Those familiar with its call note may frequently hear migrants passing overhead in late May, but the birds are shy on the ground and seldom sing except on their breeding territories. Banders using mist nets to capture migrants are more likely to be familiar with this species than is the field observer. Gray-cheeked Thrushes may easily be mistaken for their more common, look-alike cousins, the Swainson's and Hermit thrushes, unless cheek and tail color are carefully noted.

Although the Gray-cheeked Thrush occupies a variety of moist boreal forest types throughout northern Canada, the race (*C. m. bicknelli*) breeding in the mountains of the Maritime provinces, northern New England, and eastern New York is extremely selective about its habitat. In Vermont, so near the southern limit of its range, the species is restricted to the dense, often stunted, coniferous stands atop the Green Mountain peaks, generally above 914 m (3,000 ft). Populations in eastern New York and western Massachusetts show similar habitat preferences (Forbush 1927; Able and Noon 1976). Whether the species was as restricted in this part of its range before colonial settlement and agricultural clearing occurred will probably never be known. Since recorded ornithological observations began, the Gray-cheeked Thrush has never been widely distributed in Vermont. Perkins and Howe (1901) and Allen (1909) considered it a rare or uncommon summer resident. Because of its penchant for high altitudes, the species is unrecorded on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Breeding Bird Survey routes or in any Breeding Bird censuses for Vermont published in *American Birds*. Consequently, actual population densities for



Vermont are unknown, and even relative estimates are difficult to obtain. Sabo (1980) found a population density of 9 per sq km and an average territory size of 2.1 per ha (2.4 a) in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. In its preferred habitat the Gray-cheeked is the most frequently encountered thrush, but nothing is known about the amount of habitat necessary to sustain a population of Gray-cheeked Thrushes, or about the size of this species' home range or various other population parameters.

Gray-cheeked Thrushes are the last of Vermont's thrushes to return in the spring. Migrants can often be found at lower elevations into early June. Denizens of dense cover, the males are shy, and their reedlike song, which slurs upward, provides the best clue to their presence on breeding territories during June and early July. Prone to singing in the evening, the species is unique among Vermont's thrushes in having an evening flight song (Dilger 1956b). The nest site is variable; nests may be placed on the ground or in a coniferous or deciduous tree up to 6 m (20 ft) above the ground. Like most of its congeners, the Gray-cheeked usually constructs its nest from grass, mud, moss, and leaves, with little lining. The 3 to 6, usually 4, light green-blue to pale blue eggs are faintly marked with brown. June 22 is the only Vermont egg date available (Allen 1909). Incubation takes 12 to 14 days (Jehl and Hussell 1966; Terres 1980), and the



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 9 (5%)

Possible breeding: 4 (44.5% of total)

Probable breeding: 4 (44.5% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 1 (11.0% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	0	0	0
Green Mountains	7	13	78
North Central	0	0	0
Northeast Highlands	1	6	11
East Central	0	0	0
Taconic Mountains	1	6	11
Eastern Foothills	0	0	0

young may be able to fly at 11 to 13 days of age (Bent 1949). Fledglings sport buff-tipped wing coverts until the fall postjuvenile molt. The timing of fall migration in Vermont breeding populations is poorly known. Not only are the remote mountaintops rarely visited by birders, but the influx of migrant Gray-cheekeds from the extensive Canadian breeding range obscures the departure of local birds. All, however, are gone by the end of September.

Vermont protects some of its higher elevations under its state land-use law (Act 250), thus helping to insure continued nesting habitat for the Gray-cheeked Thrush and

other cohabitants (such as the Blackpoll Warbler) of high-altitude boreal forests. Farther north these species are widely distributed and may be less discriminating in their habitat choice. At the southern limit of their range, however, they are highly selective, and their continued existence in the state depends on the health of these limited, environmentally sensitive areas.

DOUGLAS P. KIBBE