

## Black-billed Cuckoo

*Coccyzus erythrophthalmus*

The Black-billed Cuckoo breeds from central Alberta across southern Canada to Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island; in the U.S. it breeds as far west as Wyoming, and south to Missouri and North Carolina. It is found in a wide variety of habitats, including dry pastures with fencerows, brushy hillsides, and broken hardwood and mixed woodlands, as well as river bottom thickets and marsh edges.

Vermont provides fine Black-billed Cuckoo habitat, and in some years the species may be found—albeit thinly distributed—anywhere in the state away from the higher mountain elevations. Cuckoos are not easy birds to confirm; statewide only 24% of priority block sightings resulted in confirmation. Black-billeds are easy to locate in May, thanks to their familiar monotonic *cucucu* song, delivered in a series of 2 to 5 notes with brief pauses between series, by night as well as by day. Once nesting is under way, however, they quiet down and become furtive, skulking, and reclusive birds, seen briefly, if at all, while slipping into the depths of a woodland.

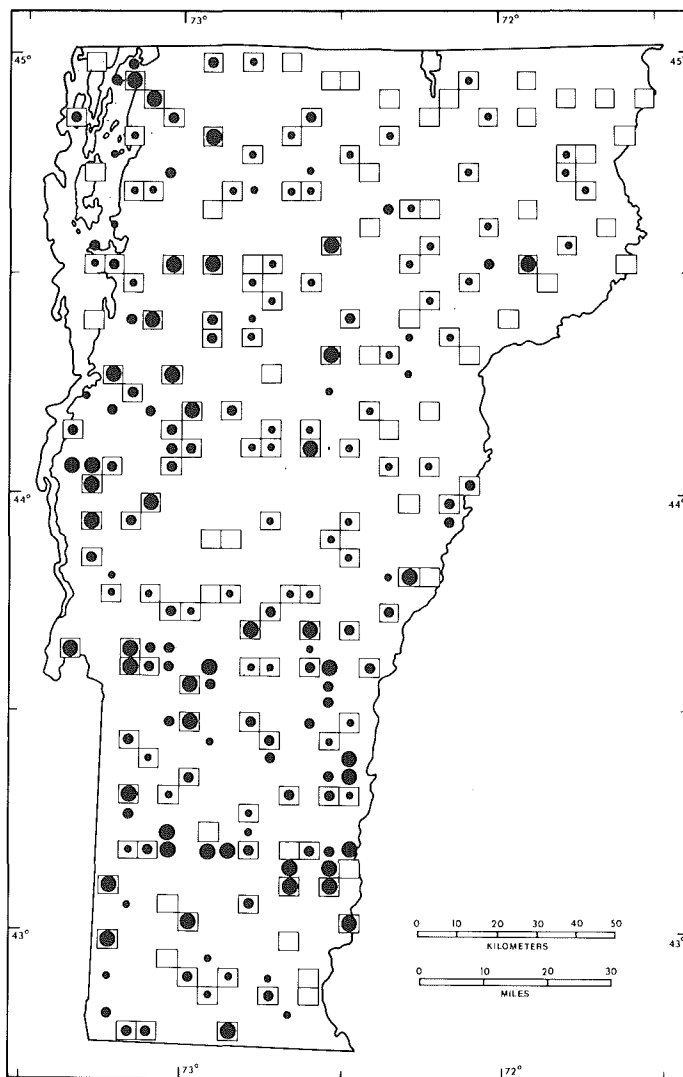
Black-billed Cuckoo numbers vary from year to year, depending, apparently, on the abundance of their favorite insect prey. One reference called this bird “wholly insectivorous” (Martin et al. 1951), but according to most researchers it takes some wild fruit and small animal prey as well (Pearson 1936; Terres 1980). Caterpillars are the usual favorite food. Examination of 121 stomachs of this species turned up 2,771 caterpillars (Forbush 1913), most of them of the destructive hairy variety (tent caterpillars, fall webworms, mourning cloak caterpillars, and tussock moths, including gypsy moths). Few birds will touch these hairy caterpillars—cuckoos’ stomachs are said to become “so felted with a mass of hairs and spines that it obstructs digestion,” whereupon the birds shed the stomach lining and grow a new one (Forbush and May 1939). The cuckoos’ appetite for this fare endeared



them to early “economic ornithologists,” whose praises for the most part overcame earlier objections to the birds as cowards and habitual nest robbers (Samuels 1880; Bent 1940).

Black-billed Cuckoos nest in a wide variety of shrubs and trees, both deciduous and coniferous. Nests are typically 0.6–3 m (2–10 ft) above the ground, but occasionally lower or higher; this species has been known to nest on the ground in herbaceous cover, though such a site is exceptional. The nest is a loosely constructed platform of twigs (sometimes with an admixture of bark strips or rootlets or burrs), either unlined or fairly substantially lined with leaves, grass, catkins, pine needles, and/or fern material. Clutches contain 2 to 4, most commonly 3 eggs (rarely, as many as 8, but larger clutches probably involve two or more females); eggs are a dull, light blue-green, and are typically darker and slightly smaller than the similar eggs of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo. Egg dates from Massachusetts and New York (Bent 1940) and from Maine (Palmer 1949), together with Vermont Atlas Project data, suggest that the majority of clutches in these latitudes are initiated during the first 2 weeks of June. Six Vermont records for eggs range from June 7 to July 25.

Young cuckoos, hatched coal-black and nearly naked, grow at an astonishing rate on a diet of regurgitated caterpillars. A week after hatching (which is often asynchro-



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

TOTAL 134 (75%)

Possible breeding: 62 (46% of total)

Probable breeding: 40 (30% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 32 (24% of total)

**Physiographic regions in which recorded**

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	27	87	20
Green Mountains	41	76	30
North Central	13	68	10
Northeast Highlands	5	31	4
East Central	13	68	10
Taconic Mountains	16	100	12
Eastern Foothills	19	79	14

nous) they may be climbing about on limbs near the nest; they hasten feather development by using their bills to strip the covering from their quill feathers. The Black-billed Cuckoo is generally considered single-brooded in the northern parts of North America; late summer egg records for the Northeast may be the result of a breeding cycle skewed by erratic local prey populations (see the Yellow-billed Cuckoo species account). Although the Black-billed species usually builds its own nest "as every other self-respecting bird does" (Gladden 1936), the family tendency toward brood parasitism appears sporadically; eggs have been found in nests of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo,

Eastern Wood-Pewee, Cedar Waxwing, Gray Catbird, Wood Thrush, Yellow Warbler, and Northern Cardinal.

In spring, Black-billed Cuckoos arrive in Vermont in mid May. An April 20, 1977 arrival in Weathersfield (RVB, Spring 1977) was exceptional, besting even the inland New York record of April 25 (Bull 1974). Fall migration peaks are small in this solitary species, but records suggest that most migrants move through Vermont in September; wintering grounds are in northwestern South America. Sightings of Black-billed Cuckoos are rare in Vermont after mid October.

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