

Cape May Warbler

Dendroica tigrina

The Cape May Warbler is a scarce to uncommon breeder in the Northeast Highlands and North Central region of Vermont, where nesting pairs are widely scattered and highly localized. Like the Bay-breasted and Tennessee warblers, the Cape May is largely restricted to the northern coniferous forests of the boreal zone, but unlike the other two, the Cape May is adapted to breeding in more southerly, marginal extensions of that zone and is therefore a regular part of Vermont's avifauna.

Breeding from northeast British Columbia and Alberta across much of the northern part of the continent, the Cape May's range extends in the eastern U.S. south to southern Maine, northern New Hampshire, northeastern Vermont, and northeastern New York. Only four records of Vermont breeding existed before the Atlas Project; two of them (on Mt. Killington in 1888 and in Sandgate in 1975) were well south of the Cape May's usual range. Atlas Project confirmation was obtained in one block in the Northeast Highlands and in three blocks in the North Central region.

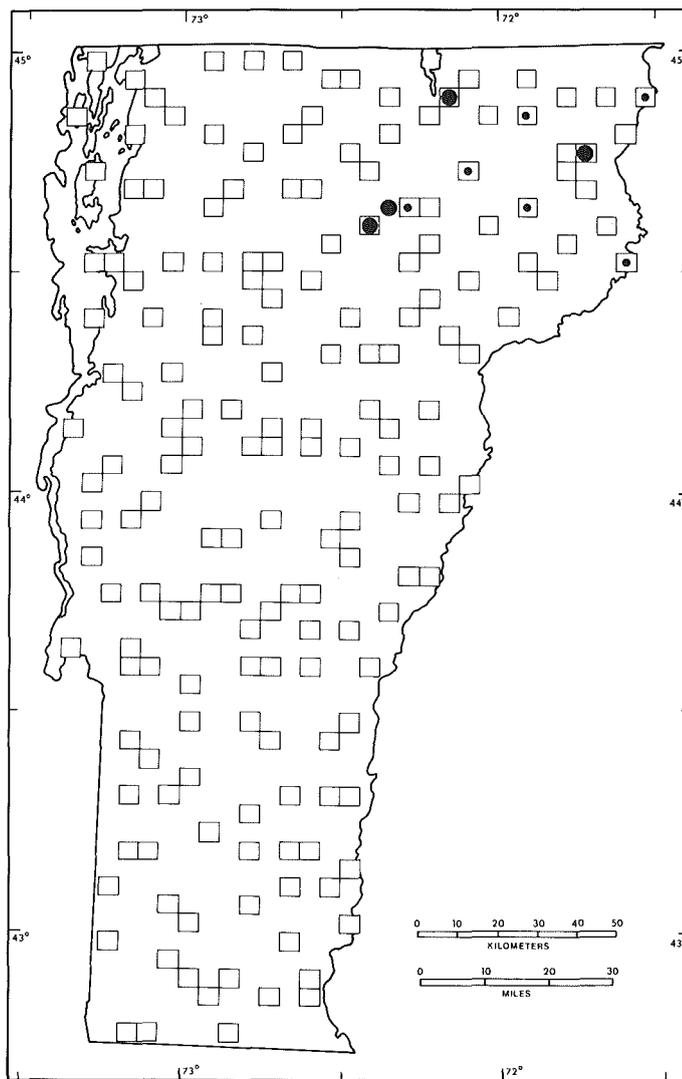
Like the Bay-breasted Warbler, the Cape May undergoes noticeable population fluctuations, at least some of which seem to result from increases in areas infested with spruce budworms. Wilson (1808-14) named the species from a specimen shot at Cape May, New Jersey and given to him in 1811; the Cape May was not reported there again until nearly a century later (Reilly 1979). In 1925 Forbush stated that the Cape May was extremely rare in New England in his boyhood, but seemed to become more common beginning around 1909.

The Cape May's favored Vermont habitat consists of dense stands of fairly small spruces (black spruces or second-growth stands of other spruces) growing in damp places where bogs, clearings, or roads provide openings. The densest state populations are, not surprisingly, in the black spruce-balsam fir forests east of Island Pond, where



a high count of four to five singing males was made on June 18, 1975 in one 1.6-2 ha (4-5 a) area (G. F. Oatman, T. S. Will, W. Scott, pers. observ.). Metcalf (1977) found 22 pairs per 40.5 ha (100 a) in a territory-mapping study near Wolcott. In its preferred habitat the Cape May is not overly difficult to locate if the observer knows its song, as males sing quite persistently (up to 8 to 12 times per minute), usually from the top of a tall spruce.

Actual confirmation of breeding is difficult because the nest is usually placed in a dense terminal foliage clump near the top of a tall spruce, and because the fledglings seem to keep well out of sight within the foliage of tall conifers. The nest, comparatively large for a warbler, is made of sphagnum moss, fine twigs, and grasses, and is lined with feathers, hair, or fur (Reilly 1979). The 4 to 9 (usually 6 to 7) creamy white eggs are spotted with browns and grays; the incubation period and age when the young first fly are still unknown (Terres 1980). Eggs have been found only once in Vermont: a nest with 3 eggs was found in July 1975 in a spruce in Sandgate (H. Toolan, pers. comm.). Adults were seen feeding young on June 21 near Moose Bog in Ferdinand (ASR, C. Schultz). On their breeding grounds, Cape Mays forage for insects and their larvae, spiders, and harvestmen, both within the interior of conifers and on terminal branches of the canopy. They also dart out after flying insects occasionally, and in



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 9 (5%)

Possible breeding: 6 (67% of total)

Probable breeding: 0 (0% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 3 (33% 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	0	0	0
North Central	4	21	44.5
Northeast Highlands	5	31	55.5
East Central	0	0	0
Taconic Mountains	0	0	0
Eastern Foothills	0	0	0

fall migration they have been known to puncture grapes and to take mulberries and other berries (Bent 1953). In migration Cape Mays often appear in quite low trees and bushes; they remain partial to conifers.

Most Cape Mays seen in Vermont are migrants, uncommon to scarce in both spring and fall. Spring migration normally begins between May 6 and 12 and peaks between May 14 and 26. Migrants normally disappear from May 25 to 28 (extreme date, June 1). Fall migration usually begins around August 15-20 (extreme date, August 3), and peaks between August 27 and September 10. The last autumn migrants are normally reported from September 14 to October 1

(extreme date, October 6). A Cape May found in the Essex, New York portion of the Ferrisburg Christmas Bird Count circle on December 14, 1974 is a remarkable and noteworthy record, though seen just outside of Vermont. As the Cape May is subject to fluctuations in population, numbers seen in migration may vary considerably from year to year (RVB 1973-81).

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