

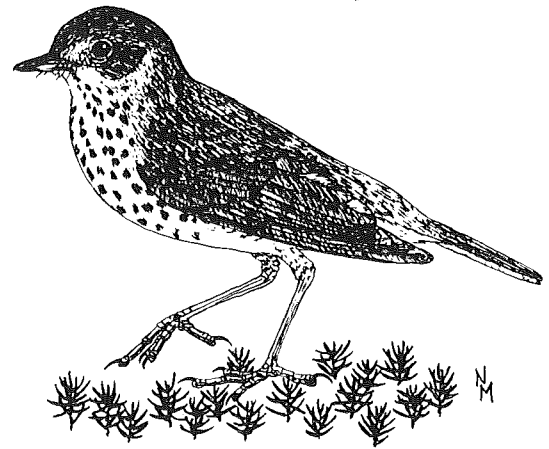
Hermit Thrush

Catharus guttatus

The Hermit Thrush, considered by many to be the finest songster in North America, is Vermont's state bird. Although its flutelike song can be heard throughout much of the state during spring and summer, probably only a small fraction of the state's populace has actually seen the species. The Hermit Thrush is, however, easily recognized by its rufous rump and its habit of raising and lowering its tail after alighting or when alarmed. Early proponents of the Hermit Thrush as a state symbol may have been inspired by its ethereal song, a series of ascending and descending bell-like notes, which may also have inspired one of this bird's colloquial names—American nightingale.

The Hermit Thrush, one of the first woodland species to return to Vermont each spring, usually arrives between April 7 and April 21, nearly a month before many of its congeners. Unseasonably warm weather during the early spring of 1976 brought a first arrival on March 18 (RVB, Spring 1976). Autumn migrants consistently peak between October 10 and 18. Occasionally, Hermit Thrushes attempt to overwinter in Vermont; they are known to visit feeding stations (Bull 1974).

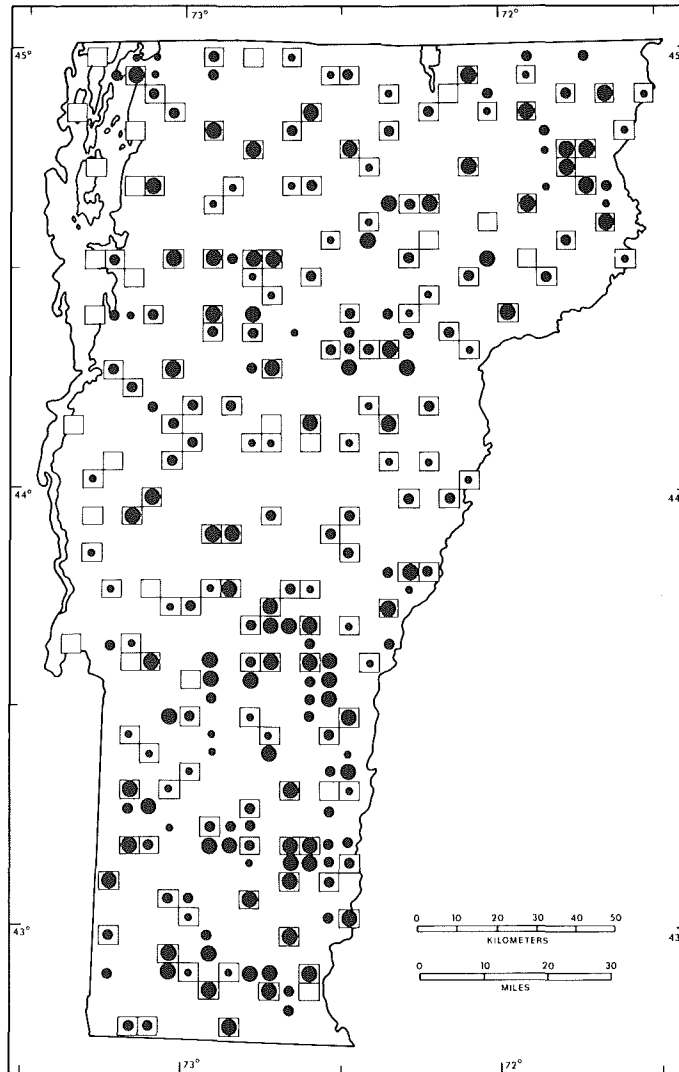
Although often thought of as a species of mixed hardwood and boreal forests of the mountainous regions, Hermit Thrushes may be found in a variety of woodland types. They are more often associated with dense coniferous or mixed deciduous-coniferous woodlands than with pure deciduous forest (Dilger 1956b). Noon et al. (1979) reported that the species may be more frequently encountered in disturbed and successional habitats than in mature habitats; the former may include margins of old burns, margins of lakes and bogs, or pioneer stands of aspen, white birch, and cherry that have become established as part of old field succession. Because they share habitats with several closely related thrushes, Hermit Thrushes provide excellent examples of



niche partitioning (Dilger 1956a, 1956b). Interspecific competition reportedly determines many of the observed habitat relationships among birds in the Northeast (Noon 1981); nonetheless, many habitats support two or three species, indicating that coexistence is possible and that breeding habitat requirements are satisfied by a broad range of communities.

The Hermit Thrush is sparsely but widely distributed throughout Vermont, and is probably only excluded from portions of the Champlain Lowlands by lack of suitable habitat. Vermont breeding-bird mapping studies of suitable edge and second-growth communities (Williamson 1972, 1975; Nicholson 1973, 1974, 1975; Carpenter 1973) yielded Hermit Thrush densities of 5 to 18 pairs per 40.5 ha (100 a). Wood Thrush and Veery densities in these communities were generally twice those of Hermit Thrushes. Perkins and Howe (1901) and Fortner et al. (1933) alluded to the species' abundance and widespread distribution throughout Vermont. Davenport (1907) wrote that the Hermit Thrush was probably the most common thrush in Bennington and Windham counties.

Normally a ground nester, the Hermit Thrush may occasionally build its nest low in a small tree. The nest is a compact cup of mud and coarse fibers with a fine lining. From 3 to 6, usually 3 to 4, pale blue eggs are laid (Harrison 1978). Of 9 Vermont clutches, 4 had 3 eggs and 5 had 4 eggs.



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 155 (86%)

Possible breeding: 45 (29% of total)
 Probable breeding: 54 (35% of total)
 Confirmed breeding: 56 (36% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	18	58	12
Green Mountains	53	98	34
North Central	16	84	10
Northeast Highlands	15	95	10
East Central	18	95	12
Taconic Mountains	13	81	8
Eastern Foothills	22	92	14

Hermit Thrushes are infrequent hosts to Brown-headed Cowbird eggs (Friedmann 1963). The nesting season is prolonged, with Vermont dates for 14 nests with eggs ranging from May 13 to August 17; 7 of these nests were found between May 23 and June 6. The extended breeding period would probably allow Hermit Thrushes to raise a second brood, but this has not been documented. Four nestling dates for Vermont range from June 10 through August 10, and five fledgling dates fall between June 10 and July 17. Incubation, performed by the female, lasts 12 days; the young fledge after a similar length of time. Hermit Thrushes are relatively difficult to confirm

because of their retiring nature. Most Atlas Project confirmations in Vermont were based on adults feeding young or on fledglings.

Severe winter weather in the southern U.S. may cause significant losses of birds. A decline in Hermit Thrush numbers on 1977 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Breeding Bird surveys was probably related to the severity of the previous winter (BBS 1966-79; Robertson 1977). The species' numbers have increased gradually since that time. With much of Vermont reverting to forest, this species will probably continue to inhabit the state.

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