

Prairie Warbler

Dendroica discolor

The Prairie Warbler belies its name by inhabiting various forest-edge habitats of the eastern U.S. and Canada, including low scrub and secondary growth, clearings, woodland edges, open woodlands with low undergrowth, and roadside thickets (Chapman 1907; Bent 1953; Harrison 1978). Bent (1953) described the Prairie Warbler as "one of the birds that has benefited by settlement of the country, for the clearing away of the forest has provided suitable habitats for it in brushy clearings and open sproutlands." In Vermont, Atlas Project data show the species to be using abandoned fields and pastures on dry hillsides almost exclusively. Nolan (1978) found Prairie Warblers invaded abandoned fields several years earlier than the Blue-winged Warbler.

The males leave their wintering grounds (Florida to Nicaragua) in March and usually arrive in Vermont during the third week of May. A territory is set up—most often the same as that of the previous year (Nolan 1978)—of around 1.5 ha (3.7 a), depending on population density and vegetation. The species is most easily located at this time by its song, a thin, ascending series of buzzy *zee, zee, zee*'s (similar to the song of the Field Sparrow with which it associates); the song is given by the male, with his head thrown back, usually from a high exposed perch. Females, arriving a few days after the males, "seem to select the nest site" (Nolan 1978).

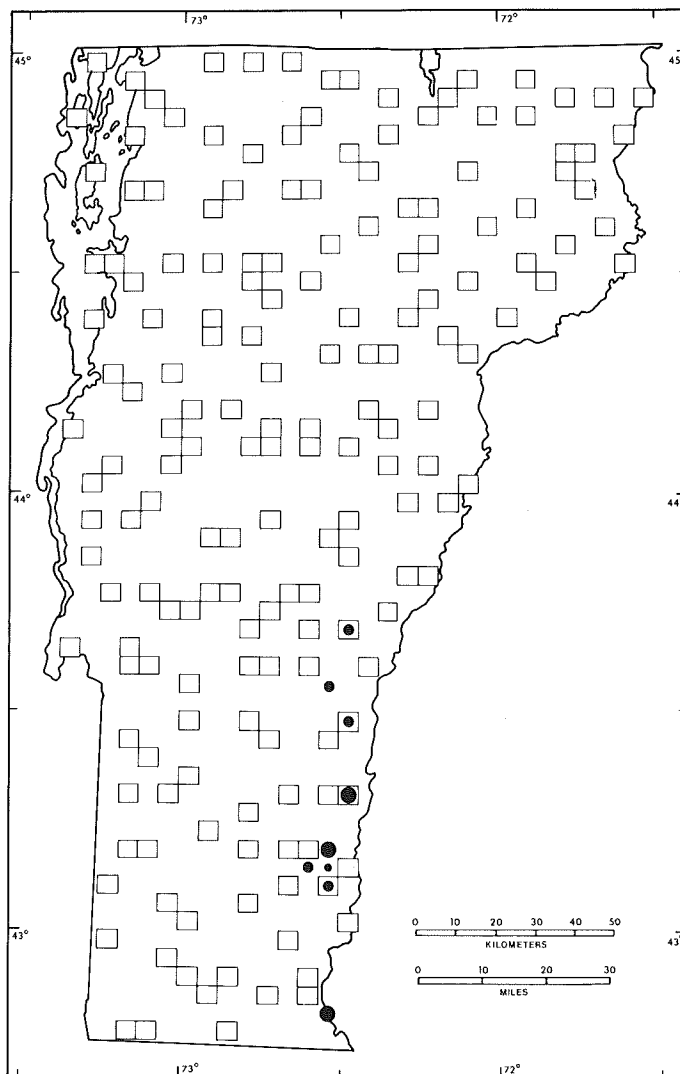
The nest—a compact cup of plant down and bark shreds woven with fine grasses, bound with spider silk, interwoven with supporting vegetation, and lined with hair, grasses, and feathers—is attached to bushes and briars 0.3–3 m (1–10 ft) above the ground (Harrison 1975). Prairie Warblers reuse nest sites with some regularity.

The 3 to 5 eggs (commonly 4) are normally laid on consecutive days shortly after dawn; the pair spends much time together during this period (Nolan 1978). Incubation takes 12 to 13 days, and young leave the



nest in about 10 days (mean dependency is about 40 days). Nolan observed that unhatched eggs were left in the nest. Vermont's limited nesting statistics correspond closely to those given by Bull (1974) for New York State: egg dates, May 25 to June 29; nestlings, June 19 to July 4; fledglings, June 30 to July 14. Two of the three Atlas Project confirmations were made in late June when adults were found feeding young (FY); the third was a broken-wing act (DD) observed in the Brattleboro area on July 9. Both the male and female feed young; caterpillars make up the largest portion of the diet (Nolan 1978; Moore 1980). Nolan observed that females usually flew straight to the nest after foraging. Also he found that during all times of the breeding season the foraging grounds of the Prairie Warbler on the study area seemed more diversified than those of any other species.

Historically, "prior to the arrival of European man in North America, shrub habitats and therefore Prairie Warbler populations were much less generally distributed than they are today" (Nolan 1978). In the early 1860s, Stearns and Coues (1893) considered the Prairie Warbler limited in summer to the Alleghenian fauna, and hence seldom if ever found north of Massachusetts. Bagg and Elliot (1937) reported the species to be established in the Connecticut River valley about 1870. The earliest records for Ver-



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 4 (2%)
 Possible breeding: 0 (0% of total)
 Probable breeding: 3 (75% of total)
 Confirmed breeding: 1 (25% 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	0	0	0
Northeast Highlands	0	0	0
East Central	0	0	0
Taconic Mountains	0	0	0
Eastern Foothills	4	17	100

mont came from Bennington on May 8 and 9, 1919 and May 3, 1932 (Ross, Field notes). There is also a sight record from Woodstock (Bagg and Elliot 1937). Bent in 1953 defined the breeding range as north to central New York (Schenectady) and southern New Hampshire (Concord and Manchester), but the first confirmation of breeding in Vermont was not made until 1971 when an adult with food for young was discovered near Saxtons River (D. P. Kibbe, pers. comm.).

The Prairie Warbler's breeding distribution in Vermont is confined to the Eastern Foothills, where it is an uncommon nester. Since at least 1972 a colony in Springfield

has occupied a dry, south-facing hillside in an abandoned pasture overgrown with juniper, hardhack, cedar, sumac, ash, and apple seedlings (B. Lavaas, pers. comm.); in 1976 eight singing males were present. Perhaps the greatest concentration of Prairie Warblers in Vermont occurs in Pleasant Valley near Saxtons River, where they are generally distributed for 6 to 8 miles along dry shrubby slopes covered with young pines and maples. In abandoned pastures along Vermont's lower Connecticut River valley the species is an uncommon nester; probable nesting has occurred as far north as Woodstock and Quechee.

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