

## Alder Flycatcher

*Empidonax alnorum*

The Alder Flycatcher is a widely distributed Nearctic species that breeds from Alaska and northwestern Canada east through the northeastern U.S. The southern limit of its range in the Northeast is somewhat south of Vermont, extending at higher elevations into the Appalachians. The older literature on this species and the Willow Flycatcher is clouded by the fact that until recently the two forms were considered one species called "Traill's Flycatcher." The bird now known as the Willow Flycatcher was considered the western subspecies; its range was to the south and west of the Alder's, from the Mississippi drainage to California and the Southwest, and there was little apparent overlap between the ranges. In the last 50 years the Willow Flycatcher has spread dramatically north and east and in some areas may be replacing the Alder.

The habitat of the Alder Flycatcher is generally composed of upland alder swamps, brushy stream banks, and boggy, shrubby boreal coniferous forest regions (Aldrich 1953). In Vermont, the Alder Flycatcher is usually found at higher elevations, inhabiting primarily alder and willow swamps. Despite their preference for somewhat different habitats, Alder and Willow flycatchers may be found singing side by side (*way-bee-o* and *fitz-bew*, respectively) in both the West Rutland Marsh and Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area. Research by Stein (1958, 1963) indicated that the two forms were separated more by differences in voice and nidification than by morphology.

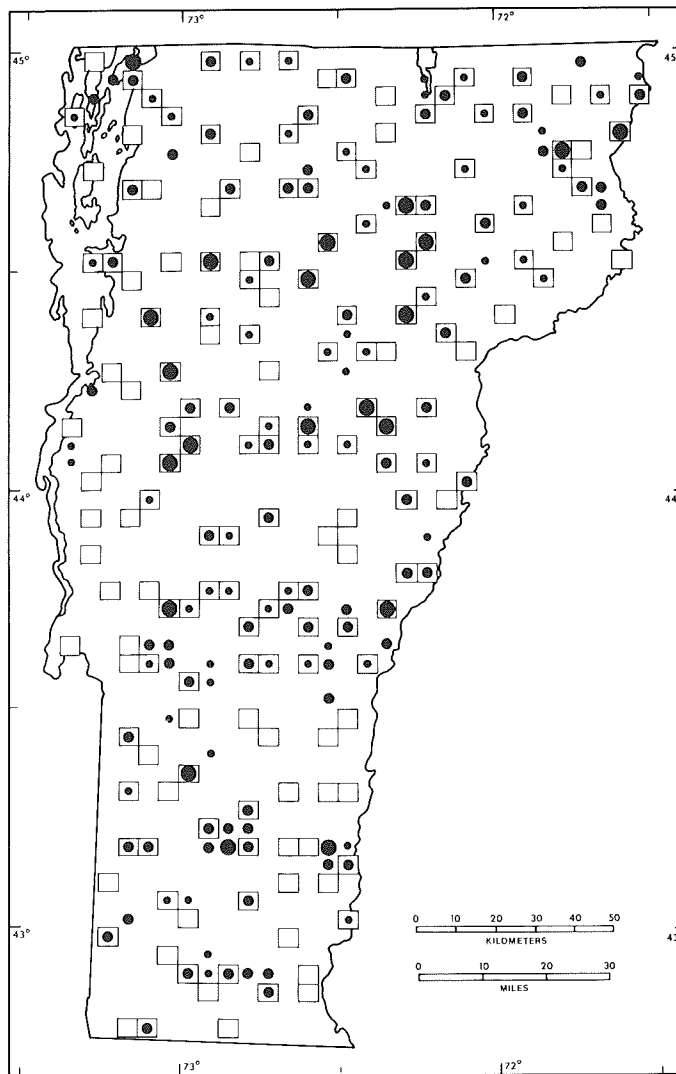
The Alder Flycatcher's nest is a coarse, loose, untidy structure similar to a Song Sparrow's, usually 0.6–1.2 m (2–4 ft) above the ground on the upright fork of a swamp shrub or, occasionally, in a fern clump. The nest is suspended above the crotch, rather than set down in it like that of the Least Flycatcher. The 7.6–8.9 cm (3–3.5 in) nest is loosely woven, with many hanging ends, generally of grasses, weed stems, and bark; it is lined with a well-constructed cup of fine



grass and fiber. The loose structure, dangling nest material, and low nest placement were diagnostic criteria that Stein (1958) found distinguished the Alder's nesting behavior from the Willow Flycatcher's. The clutch consists of 3 to 4 creamy white eggs, usually with a few brown dots. Incubation takes 2 weeks, and the young fledge in an equivalent period of time. Arrival dates indicate Alders generally arrive slightly ahead of or concurrent with Willow Flycatchers. Alder nests with eggs have been found from June 2 to June 30; the only fledgling dates are for June 25 and 26.

The Alder Flycatcher winters from Mexico to Panama, generally farther north than its sibling species, the Willow Flycatcher, and is one of the later arrivals in spring; it usually does not appear until late May (an early date is May 17). Since neither species can be identified with certainty when silent, the Alder's fall departure is more uncertain. Singing generally stops by August 1, and most Alders are gone by the first of September. Seventy-four percent of the "Traill's Flycatchers" banded at the Vermont Institute of Natural Science between 1970 and 1983 were recorded between August 16 and September 2; extreme dates are August 2 and September 30.

The Alder Flycatcher was found to be relatively well represented in all the physiographic regions except the Eastern Foot-hills and Champlain Lowlands. Lower ele-



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

TOTAL 115 (64%)

Possible breeding: 43 (37% of total)

Probable breeding: 53 (46% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 19 (17% of total)

**Physiographic regions in which recorded**

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	14	45	12.0
Green Mountains	40	74	35.0
North Central	18	95	16.0
Northeast Highlands	11	69	9.5
East Central	13	68	11.0
Taconic Mountains	8	50	7.0
Eastern Foothills	11	46	9.5

variations and the absence of boreal habitat presumably account for the species' scarcity in those regions. Because their breeding habitats typically occur as relatively small patches, Alder Flycatchers are nowhere abundant in the state, though they may be locally common in suitable habitat. Unobtrusive, with a weak song, they are easily overlooked. Although Stein (1958, 1963) suggested that the expansion of the Willow Flycatcher into the Northeast has been at the expense of the Alder, Atlas Project results indicate little evidence that the Alder's range is contracting. Perkins and Howe (1901) considered the "Traill's Flycatcher" (presumably the Alder) an uncommon resi-

dent in Vermont. The Willow Flycatcher has only become evident in the state in the past two to three decades, however, and displacement of the Alder may not yet be apparent. The two species were found coexisting in 40 survey blocks; whether either or both species will continue to occur in these blocks remains to be seen. In any event, Atlas Project data provide an excellent standard against which to measure future distributional changes.

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