

Black-backed Woodpecker

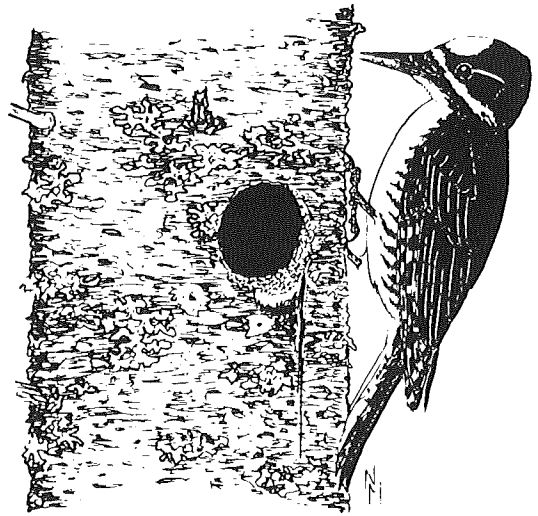
Picoides arcticus

The Black-backed Woodpecker (formerly called the Black-backed Three-toed Woodpecker) is a highly localized and scarce resident of Vermont, where it occurs mainly in the boreal black spruce forest of the Northeast Highlands. The Black-backed is a candidate for Species of Special Concern status in Vermont.

The Black-backed Woodpecker is found across much of the northern part of North America, from central Alaska and the Canadian Pacific to the Atlantic coast, dipping southward in the eastern U.S. to northern Maine, northern New Hampshire, Vermont, and central New York (AOU 1983).

The Black-backed occurs sporadically and quite rarely in coniferous forests at higher and cooler locations in Vermont. Although during the Atlas Project Black-backed were found only in the southern Green Mountains there are older reports from Pico Peak, Mt. Mansfield, and other places along the length of the Green Mountain chain. Old reports exist from several spots in the North Central region, such as Morgan, St. Johnsbury, Bear Swamp in Wolcott, and Groton State Forest. Although this woodpecker takes some ants, spiders, acorns, nuts, and wild fruits, wood-boring beetles and caterpillars that attack dead or dying conifers constitute more than 75% of its diet (Bent 1939; Terres 1980). Originally this species, like the Three-toed Woodpecker, depended on the natural mortality of northern conifers from disease, fire, and flooding for the standing dead timber that furnishes the insects it eats. Black-backed are still found in coniferous areas burned over by forest fires or flooded by beaver dams.

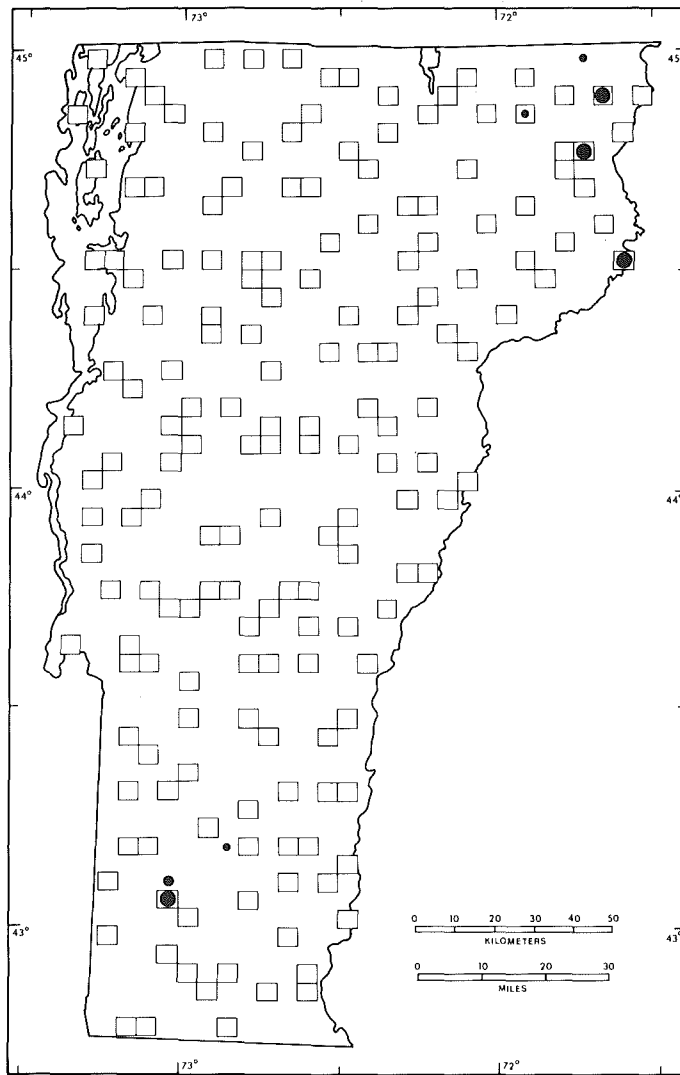
By far the best breeding habitat for the species in the state, and the only state area in which the Black-backed breeds regularly, lies in the roughly 311 sq km (120 sq mi) area in the Northeast Highlands bounded on the north by Great Averill Pond, on the south by South America Pond, on the west



by Norton and Island ponds, and on the east by the Connecticut River. In this region of boreal forest the Black-backed can be found fairly regularly—though not on every visit—where dead or dying conifers (especially black spruce) occur in stands. As many as 5 adult birds have been seen in a single day in this area (G. F. Oatman, pers. observ.).

The Black-backed is a more vocal bird than the Three-toed. Especially during the breeding season, a distinctive sharp *kik* sound, louder than that of the Three-toed, can often be heard and helps to locate breeding pairs. Other soft chucking and rattling calls and a loud, shrill flight call have also been described (Pough 1946).

The Black-backed Woodpecker nests principally where windfalls, fires, flooding, or timbering have produced open areas with plenty of standing dead conifers. The nesting cavity is excavated in a living or dead tree, usually 0.6–4.6 m (2–15 ft) above the ground, but exceptionally up to 24 m (80 ft) high. The entrance hole is about 4–5 cm (1.5–2 in) in diameter, with the lower side often beveled to form a platform for the birds. The cavity is about 25 cm (10 in) deep. A clutch may number 2 to 6 eggs, though 4 is usual. Only 1 brood is produced per season (Bent 1939). No egg dates are available for Vermont, but data for Maine



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 5 (3%)

Possible breeding: 1 (20% of total)

Probable breeding: 0 (0% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 4 (80% 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	1	2	20
North Central	0	0	0
Northeast Highlands	4	25	80
East Central	0	0	0
Taconic Mountains	0	0	0
Eastern Foothills	0	0	0

and New York are probably applicable: in eight records eggs were observed from May 18 to June 12 (Bent 1939). Incubation is performed by both sexes and takes about 14 days (Harrison 1978). The age when the young first fly is still unknown. In Vermont, fledglings have been seen as early as June 24; adults have been seen feeding young in two different nest cavities on July 4 and July 7.

Black-backed Woodpeckers are known to wander away from their breeding territories periodically in winter. In some years such wandering may reach the level of large irruptive flights, and Black-backed may turn

up well south of their normal range, including just about anywhere in Vermont. These events are rare, however; no major irruption has been recorded in Vermont within the past 10 years.

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