

Least Flycatcher

Empidonax minimus

Flycatchers of the genus *Empidonax*, with the exception of the Yellow-bellied, cannot be distinguished with certainty in the field except by song or calls. There are visual differences among them, but individual variations are sufficient that fall birds, if silent, will be recognized only as *Empidonax* (species) unless measured by bird-banders in the hand. The relationships among the various species that occur in the U.S. and in Mexico are quite complex and have yet to be satisfactorily established.

The Least Flycatcher is an eastern species, breeding as far south as New Jersey and North Carolina (in mountains), west to British Columbia and Montana, and north to the Yukon, northern Ontario, and the prairie provinces. It winters from northern Mexico to Panama (AOU 1983).

The Least Flycatcher's habitat requirements are not as rigid as those of other members of its genus; consequently, it is more generally distributed. It is found in open deciduous woodlands and is often abundant around orchards, gardens, towns, and parks. It does not favor heavy woods or extensive conifer stands, and is therefore less numerous at higher elevations. Breckenridge (1957) found that the species appears to select habitat with open midstories and fewer branches and tall saplings.

The Least Flycatcher reaches Vermont from its wintering grounds in early May (early date, April 29) and becomes conspicuous by its constant singing about the middle of the month. Fall departures are more difficult to ascertain, as was noted, since these flycatchers cannot be accurately identified when silent. However, most fall *Empidonax* flycatchers are undoubtedly Least Flycatchers, by far the commonest species. Late banding records from the Vermont Institute of Natural Science show a range of departure dates from September 11 to October 1. Migration studies of the Least Flycatcher in Ontario (Hussell 1981) discov-

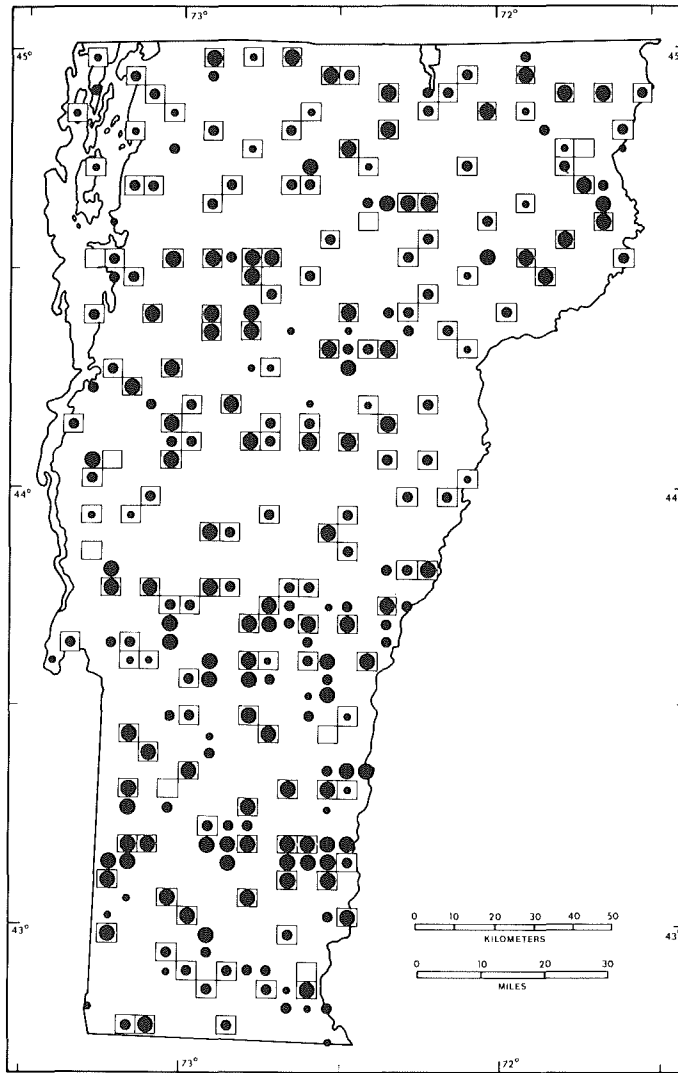


ered that in the spring migration the males preceded the females by an estimated six days. In the fall no differences in timing of migration existed between sexes; however, fall migration by immatures averaged at least a month later than that of the adults.

The Least Flycatcher was found nesting in all seven physiographic regions of the state. Breeding was confirmed in more than half of the priority blocks in the Green Mountains, Taconic Mountains, Northeast Highlands, and Eastern Foothills; confirmation was lowest in the more open Champlain Lowlands, occurring in fewer than one-quarter of the priority blocks.

The earliest state record for nest building is May 15; Least Flycatchers have been seen building as late as June 26. Completed nests with eggs have been found as early as May 20 and as late as June 29. Eighteen records from Vermont show the size of the clutch ranging from 2 to 4 eggs. The first reported date for a nest with young was June 19, the latest Atlas Project record was for July 9; however, these dates are undoubtedly not inclusive. Recently fledged young have been reported on six dates between June 28 and August 3.

The nest is a rather deep, thinly walled cup about 7 cm (2.75 in) across, made of bark fibers and weed stems. It is lined with fine grass and hair, and placed firmly in a



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 171 (96%)

Possible breeding: 24 (14% of total)
 Probable breeding: 72 (42% of total)
 Confirmed breeding: 75 (44% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	28	90	16.0
Green Mountains	54	100	31.5
North Central	18	95	10.5
Northeast Highlands	15	94	9.0
East Central	19	100	11.0
Taconic Mountains	15	94	9.0
Eastern Foothills	22	92	13.0

crotch of a tree or on a branch between 1.6 and 6.6 m (5 to 20 ft) high, occasionally 0.7 to 19.7 m (2 to 60 ft) high (Harrison 1978). Deciduous trees are typically chosen for nest sites; birches, maples, and apples are frequently used in Vermont. The flycatcher's diet consists of small insects and spiders, usually taken off leaves while hovering (Sherry 1979). The Least Flycatcher prefers to forage beneath the canopy rather than from the treetops like some of its relatives (Sherry 1979).

Studies by Sherry (1979) in New Hampshire uncovered interspecific competition between the Least Flycatcher and the Ameri-

can Redstart (*Setophaga ruticilla*), two unrelated passerines that forage similarly. Coexistence of the two seems to be controlled by the more plastic, adaptable behavior of the redstart, as well as by slight differences in their habitat preferences and life history characteristics.

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