

Louisiana Waterthrush

Seiurus motacilla

True to its name, the Louisiana Waterthrush shares with its northern cousin an innate fondness for water and is rarely found more than a few yards from a brook or river. The two species are seldom present in the same area, however, as the Louisiana prefers rushing waters, while the Northern Waterthrush inhabits alder swamps, bogs, and the margins of ponds. This behavioral difference may be partly a result of interspecific competition; south of the Northern's range the Louisiana Waterthrush may also be found in swampy, standing-water habitats. In Vermont, where the Louisiana reaches its northern breeding limit, habitat segregation is quite distinct.

The Louisiana, which winters from central Mexico and the West Indies south to northern South America, is one of the earliest warblers to return to Vermont each spring. Males set up streamside territories in the last week of April; April 24 at West Dummerston is the earliest Vermont arrival on record (Bent 1953). Males arrive up to nine days before their mates (Eaton 1958). Louisiana Waterthrushes lay claim to quarter-mile sections of a stream, singing from horizontal branches high above the water and challenging all conspecific intruding males. Their song is loud and ringing, perhaps to be heard above the spring torrents. Songs are rarely given on the ground or when in pursuit. Unlike the Northern Waterthrush and the Ovenbird, a twittering evening flight song is rarely given by the Louisiana. Eaton (1958) has provided an excellent study of the species' life history in New York.

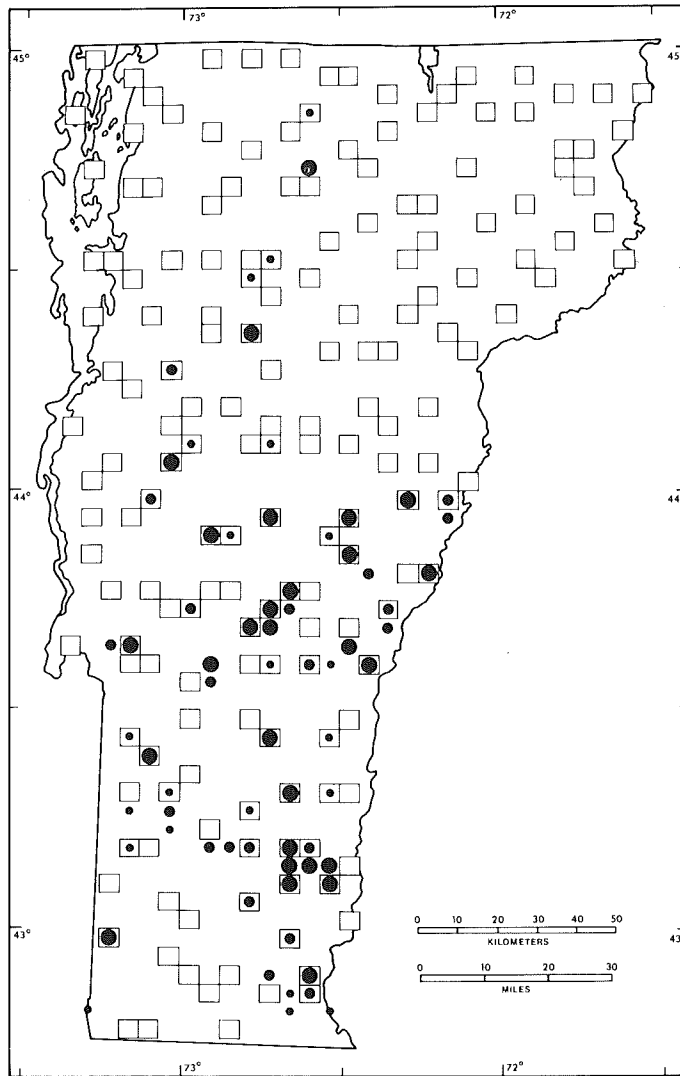
Like the Northern, the Louisiana teeters head to tail like a Spotted Sandpiper, bobbing almost constantly while walking along the stony streambed. It pauses periodically to flip wet leaves with its bill as it searches for aquatic prey.

The Louisiana Waterthrush typically places its nest in an excavated cavity beneath an overhanging bank. The base of an up-



rooted tree may provide another likely nesting site. The bulky nest is constructed by both adults from dead leaves, moss, and rootlets, and is lined with grass. Only four nest records exist for Vermont, dating from mid May to June 23. Four to 6 white eggs speckled with brown or gray are laid. The female is a tight sitter. Incubation by the female takes 12 to 14 days. She may feign injury along the streambed if flushed from the nest. The male may feed the female on the nest toward the end of incubation, and assists in feeding the young. The young fledge at 10 to 12 days of age (Eaton 1958; Forbes and O'Regan 1960). Fledglings may require up to 4 weeks to attain independence. All six Vermont fledgling dates fall between June 12 and June 29. Louisiana Waterthrushes depart early, and usually have left Vermont by the first week in August.

The current distribution of the Louisiana Waterthrush in Vermont clearly reflects its southern origin and predilection for streams with steep gradients. It is rare to absent from the northern end of the state and in the Champlain Lowlands, where the streams are sluggish and where streamside woodlands have in general been replaced by agricultural fields. Although most numerous in the Green Mountains, it is absent from the extreme southern portion of that region, where boreal habitats predominate. It occurs most regularly in the Green Mountains along the border of that region and the Eastern Foot-hills in the southeastern portion of the state.



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL	46 (26%)
Possible breeding:	14 (30% of total)
Probable breeding:	11 (24% of total)
Confirmed breeding:	21 (46% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	1	3	2
Green Mountains	18	33	39
North Central	0	0	0
Northeast Highlands	0	0	0
East Central	6	32	13
Taconic Mountains	6	38	13
Eastern Foothills	15	62	33

An early nester occurring in low densities (e.g., 4 pairs per mile of suitable stream), the Louisiana was easily overlooked by many observers who initiated their Atlas Project efforts in mid June, by which time Louisianas have largely fallen silent. Low density and early breeding probably also explain why only 2 of 27 confirmations were of nests with eggs or young. Fledglings and adults with food for the young accounted for other confirmations.

Many early ornithologists failed to distinguish the Louisiana from the Northern Waterthrush. Consequently, older references yield little insight into its historical distribution and status in the northeast and in

Vermont. The suspicion that the species may have increased and extended its range in recent decades is supported by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Breeding Bird survey data (BBS 1966-79), which demonstrate an increase in sightings in Vermont since 1970. Data from other northeastern states, meanwhile, indicate that the populations have remained stable. It will be the job of future observers to ascertain whether this species' distribution remains static in Vermont.

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