

Northern Flicker

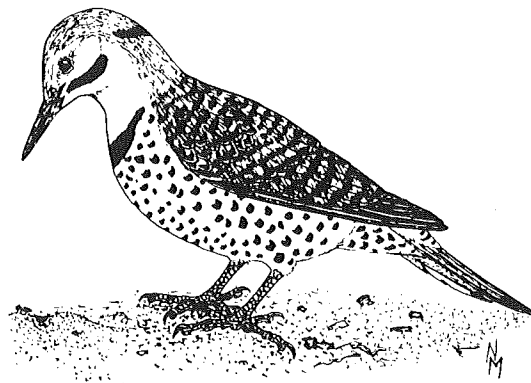
Colaptes auratus

Once considered three species, the eastern "Yellow-shafted," the western "Red-shafted," and the southwestern "Gilded" flickers are now combined by the American Ornithologists' Union into one species called the Northern Flicker (AOU 1983). In the East, the Northern Flicker breeds from Labrador and the tree line south to Florida and the Gulf Coast. The northern and high-elevation populations are migratory; as diurnal migrants, they are much in evidence from hawk lookouts and along the waterways, lake shores, and beaches, where they tend to concentrate. They do not winter in large numbers in Vermont, as they do in the southeastern U.S., but on 1981 Christmas Bird Counts 13 Northern Flickers were seen in Vermont.

Recent U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service breeding bird surveys indicate that the Northern Flicker population in the East has been declining (BBS, 1974-79). There may be several reasons for this decline: recent cold winters in the flicker's main wintering areas (Fahrenheit temperatures down to the teens in northern Florida) may have increased mortality rates among these largely insectivorous, ground-feeding birds; the heavy use of certain pesticides for ant control in the South may be a factor; flicker populations may be limited by competition with other hole-nesting birds for suitable nesting sites. However, L. Kilham (pers. comm.) has stated that Northern Flickers winter well as far north as Maryland, and will feed on berries, corn scavenged in farm fields, and a variety of insects found in old logs; Kilham believes that brief cold spells would have little effect on wintering flickers.

The Northern Flicker favors fairly open country, such as old orchards, woodlots, villages, and suburban areas. It does not occur in heavy forests, and is generally quite adaptable to settled areas.

As with many species, spring arrival dates for Northern Flickers vary widely with the severity of the season; most arrive in Ver-

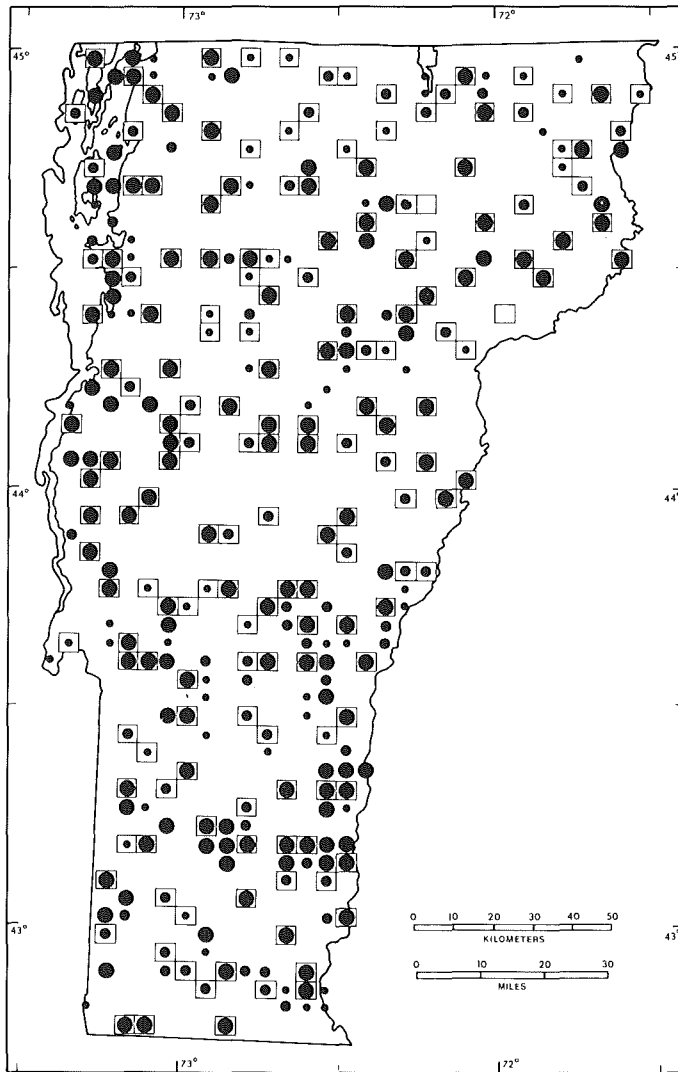


mont in April (March 25 being the earliest date). They are reluctant to migrate to elevated areas when the snow still covers the ground (W. J. Norse, pers. observ.). Most depart in the fall during the second half of September, though stragglers may stay until November. Occasional birds winter over at low elevations.

Nesting data in Vermont include thirteen reports of egg dates, ranging from May 1 to June 20. The clutch generally consists of 6 to 8 white eggs; the incubation period lasts 11 to 12 days (Harrison 1978). For six records of nests with young, dates run from June 13 to July 15. Six dates for fledglings range from June 30 to July 12.

The Northern Flicker nests in a cavity roughly 1-27 m (3-90 ft) from the ground; the entrance hole is about 7-8 cm (2.8-3 in) in diameter. The cavity is excavated by both birds; preexisting sites are often used. Species of trees that are favored include apple, various maples, and elm. Most nests discovered near Winhall, Vermont have been in dead maples (W. J. Norse, pers. observ.). In a large dead sugar maple near Winhall, a pair of Northern Flickers, several pairs of European Starlings, and a pair of American Kestrels utilized different cavities and apparently coexisted amicably.

Flickers feed on terrestrial insects, especially ants. Consequently, they usually forage on the ground, unlike most other woodpeckers. They will also feed on a wide range of wild fruits and berries. They will, when hungry enough, take cracked corn and millet at birdfeeders.



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 177 (99%)

Possible breeding: 29 (16% of total)
 Probable breeding: 45 (26% of total)
 Confirmed breeding: 103 (58% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	31	100	17.5
Green Mountains	54	100	30.5
North Central	18	95	10.2
Northeast Highlands	16	100	9.0
East Central	18	95	10.2
Taconic Mountains	16	100	9.0
Eastern Foothills	24	100	13.6

The Northern Flicker is easily located by listening for its characteristic call notes: the *wick-wick-wick* series is given in the spring, and the slurred *kee-you* note or *kinu*, expressive of mild alarm, is given year-round (Kilham 1983). Like other woodpeckers, the male makes a loud drumming with the bill on hollow limbs, tin roofs, and other potentially noisy surfaces.

The Northern Flicker was confirmed in 58% of the priority blocks in which it was recorded. It is a noisy, conspicuous bird, and its nests are not difficult to find: most flickers were confirmed by finding the nest. The most frequently used code was ON, for observation of the bird entering its nesting

hole. The species was reported and confirmed in all seven Atlas Project physiographic regions. The confirmations were heaviest in less forested regions, such as the Champlain Lowlands (74%).

WILLIAM J. NORSE