

Northern Pintail

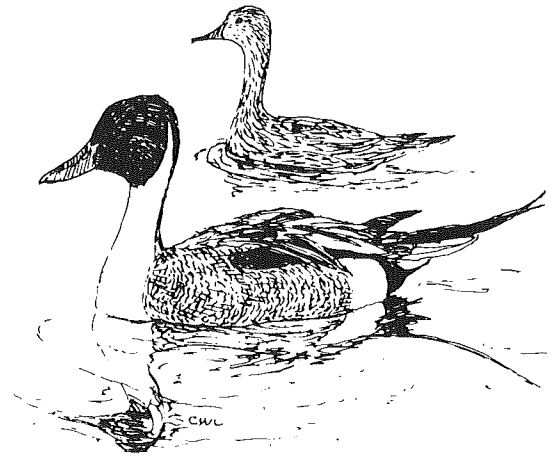
Anas acuta

Circumpolar in its breeding range, the Northern Pintail is among the most abundant of the world's waterfowl. From 1955 to 1973 the species' North American population averaged about 6.2 million (Bellrose 1980). Most pintails nest in the arctic, with the prairies of the interior second in preference. However, the species is tolerant of a wide array of climates and may be found breeding across the entire continent (Bellrose 1980).

According to Hildén (1964) the Northern Pintail appears to prefer open terrain, thriving best in treeless areas with shallow, slow-moving waters, such as lakes, ponds, and placid rivers. In Vermont the species is associated with the larger wetlands of the Champlain Lowlands, and has been known to utilize islands in Lake Champlain for nesting. Unlike the American Black Duck, this species' habitat preferences tend to restrict it geographically to the open Champlain Lowlands.

The earliest spring migrant Northern Pintails return to Vermont in mid March, or even by late February if ice is out of the state's major rivers. Numbers usually peak late in March or in early April. Pintails are less common during the autumn migration; however, they occur throughout the season, and often remain in small numbers into the winter. Occasional Northern Pintails may overwinter with American Black Ducks and Mallards on stretches of open water on Vermont's major rivers.

Given the sleek shape of Northern Pintails on the wing, aerial courtship chases involving several drakes and a single hen may be spectacular, with twisting high-speed manoeuvres. On the water, several drakes will swim closely around a hen, crowding her and vying with each other, standing erect in the water, their long necks arched so that their bills touch their breasts, and their long tails pointing upward (Kortright 1942). Pairing begins in late December and January, and continues into the spring migration

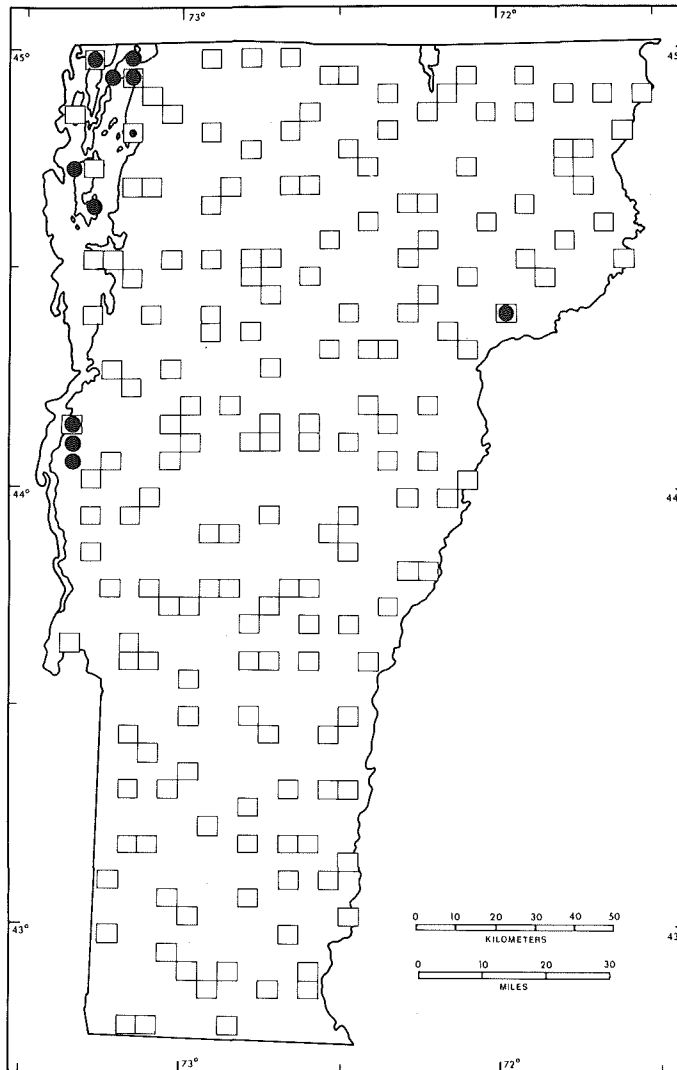


during February and March. Most returning Northern Pintails are already paired (Bellrose 1980; Johnsgard 1975).

Northern Pintails tend to locate their nests farther from water than other ground-nesting ducks. Distance from the water averaged 50 m (164 ft) in one study (Keith 1961), and nests may be found up to 1.6 km (1 m) or more from water (Bellrose 1980). Nests are more exposed than those of most other ducks. The species often selects sites in open areas where vegetation is either low or sparse (Bellrose 1980). Miller and Collins (1954) found that 70% of the nests of the Northern Pintail were in vegetation no more than 30 cm (12 in) high, and that more than half were not hidden on one or both sides. Northern Pintails nested within the large Ring-billed Gull colony on Young Island on Lake Champlain during the Atlas Project. Vermeer (1968) reported on pintails nesting under similar circumstances in Alberta.

The nest is usually a hollow scraped in the ground, scantily lined with surrounding vegetation to which some down is added. Clutch size may range from 3 to 14 eggs, and averages about 8 (Bellrose 1980). An egg date of May 17 was recorded by Vermont Atlas Project workers for two nests in 1977; clutch sizes in these nests were 9 and 10 eggs respectively. The eggs range from yellow-green to creamy white in color. The incubation period is 22 to 23 days (Fuller 1953).

The Northern Pintail is not mentioned in



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	4	13	80
Green Mountains	0	0	0
North Central	0	0	0
Northeast Highlands	0	0	0
East Central	1	5	20
Taconic Mountains	0	0	0
Eastern Foothills	0	0	0

early Vermont bird lists (Perkins and Howe 1901; Fortner et al. 1933). In 1976, Spear considered it an "uncommon to limited" migrant and rare in summer, with breeding occurring only irregularly. Bull (1974) cited releases of Northern Pintails by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation at three wildlife refuges in 1959, an event that may have had some bearing on the establishment of Vermont's subsequent breeding population. Another potential source for the Vermont population may be the small population in the St. Lawrence valley of Quebec.

The species was observed in 5 priority and 6 non-priority blocks during the Atlas

Project. The majority of these blocks were in the Champlain Lowlands, where all but 3 of the blocks in which the species was located were in or near state or federal wildlife refuges. The record of nesting from Stiles Pond in Waterford appears to have been an isolated incident, as there has been no subsequent breeding reported from there. All but one record of confirmed breeding referred to the sighting of a brood accompanied by a hen.

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