

Willow Flycatcher

Empidonax traillii

The Willow Flycatcher was recently distinguished from the Alder Flycatcher; formerly, both were known as one species called "Traill's Flycatcher" (see Alder Flycatcher species account). The single identity clouded the history of the Willow Flycatcher in Vermont before the split.

The Willow Flycatcher's original range was south of the Alder Flycatcher's. The Willow's range is extensive in the West and Southwest, the Ohio River valley, and the Mississippi River drainage; recently its range has expanded into the Northeast. There are now large areas of overlap or sympatry in the ranges of the two sibling species. The Willow Flycatcher apparently began to spread into Vermont from the south and southwest during the 1960s. It now breeds mainly at lower elevations in the Champlain Lowlands, Connecticut River valley, Eastern Foothills, and Taconic Mountains. Both Willow and Alder flycatchers have been found singing side by side at the West Rutland Marsh, Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area, and, occasionally, at higher locations such as South Londonderry along the West River.

The Willow Flycatcher is found in dry upland pastures thickly overgrown with hawthorn and shrubs, in dense roadside growth, and along streams and lake edges in grassland areas where shrubs are available for nesting. Generally, the Willow Flycatcher is found in drier locations than the Alder, but these distinctions do not always hold.

The Willow winters farther south than the Alder, migrating to Peru and Argentina (Gorski 1969, 1971). Willow Flycatchers also arrive late in the spring, not reaching Vermont until around May 20; many do not appear until June. The species' fall departure date, obscured by the difficulty of identifying silent *Empidonax* flycatchers, is probably late August to early September.

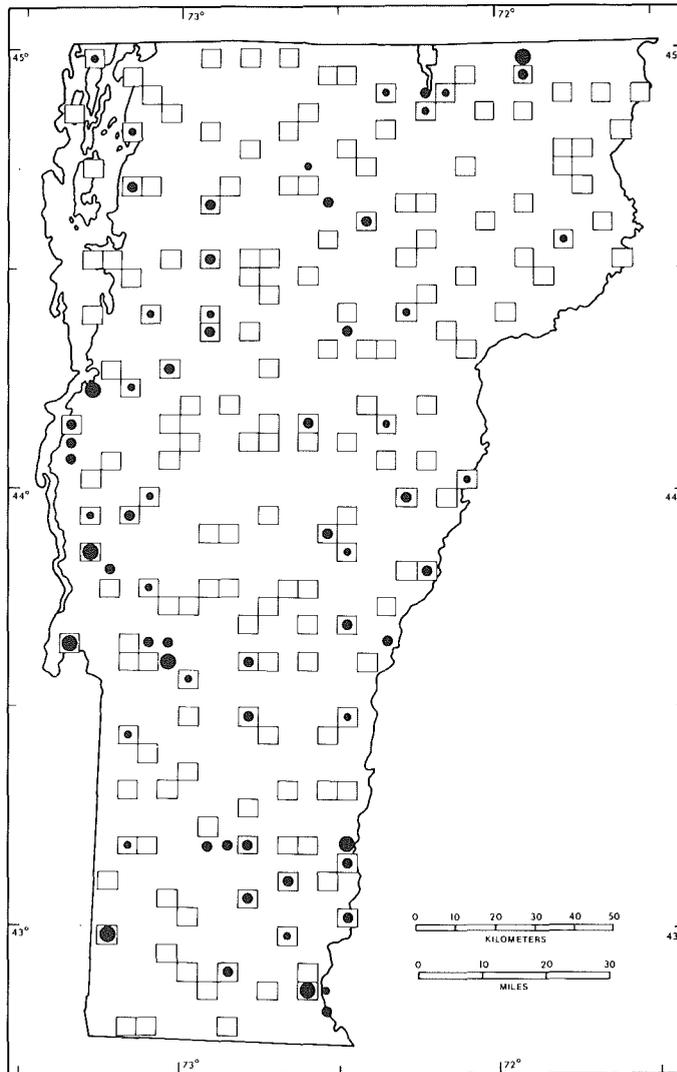
The Willow Flycatcher's nest is neat and compact, while that of the Alder is coarse,



loose, and untidy. The Willow's nest is saddled on a tree limb, as much as 6 m (20 ft) from the ground, while the Alder's is usually in a fork of a shrub only 0.6–1.2 m (2–4 ft) up. Differences in nidification provided key points in the research by Stein (1958, 1963) that resulted in the division of "Traill's Flycatcher" into two species. Willow Flycatchers probably commence nesting in early June in Vermont, although no nests have been discovered before June 23. Three nests found had 3 to 4 white, brown-spotted eggs, a typical number for this species. Incubation of the clutch lasts 13 to 15 days (Harrison 1978). July 13 is the only nestling date for Vermont.

The Willow Flycatcher is an aggressive species, and it may be expanding its range at the expense of its close relative. It is not clear, however, whether or not expansion is occurring in Vermont. The Willow seems to be spreading through the valley areas—the Lake Champlain and Connecticut River valleys—while the Alder seems to be holding its own in the Green Mountains and Northeast Highlands. Both species occurred in 135 (75%) of all priority blocks, but occupied the same block in just 20% of these 135 blocks.

Unless an observer is familiar with the Willow Flycatcher's buzzy song—a dry, disyllabic *fitz-bew*, a whistle imposed on



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 47 (26%)

Possible breeding: 21 (45% of total)
 Probable breeding: 22 (47% of total)
 Confirmed breeding: 4 (8% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	13	42	28.0
Green Mountains	9	17	19.0
North Central	4	21	8.5
Northeast Highlands	2	12	4.0
East Central	4	21	8.5
Taconic Mountains	5	31	11.0
Eastern Foothills	10	42	21.0

a buzz—this species may be easily overlooked. Willows were recorded in only 26% of the priority blocks in the state. Confirmations proved difficult to obtain, probably because of the species' retiring manner and preference for dense shrubbery. Only 8% of the priority block records resulted in confirmations. The confirmations were concentrated at the lower elevations.

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