

## YELLOW-BELLIED SAPSUCKER

*Sphyrapicus varius*



Rows of freshly drilled holes oozing with sap are a sure sign of a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. This colorful, animated woodpecker uses its long, brush-tipped tongue to lap up sap and the insects entrapped in it. Known primarily in Pennsylvania as a migrant, it is also a characteristic breeding species of northern-tier forests. Its breeding range covers much of forested Canada and the northern United States, south in the Appalachian Mountains to northern Georgia (AOU 1983).

The Yellow-bellied Sapsucker breeds mostly in northern hardwood forests at elevations above 1,500 feet (457 m), especially in moist woods near water and swampy areas. Sapsuckers can be found in pastures, orchards, forest edges, and clearcuts where some trees remain. Understandably, this species prefers softwoods—such as birches, red maple, tulip poplar, cherries, pines, and aspens—but it punctures other trees as well (Todd 1940; pers. obs.). It has a notorious preference for apple trees (Todd 1940; Hall 1983), not only in yards and orchards but also in the remnants of lumber camps and communities now in the deep woods (pers. obs.). Sapsuckers excavate nest holes in either dead or live trees, often choosing trees with softened centers. Pairs may dig several holes before completing one (Tyler 1939b; Harrison 1975).

Poole (unpub. ms.) summarized the bird's breeding range as "rather rare and locally distributed throughout the Canadian Life Zone and sporadically in the upper-Transition Life

Zone." Todd's (1940) evaluation in western Pennsylvania was very similar. Several observers reported this species breeding in the Poconos and the North Mountain area, including Eagles Mere and Harvey's Lake (Stone 1891, 1900; Dwight 1892; Harlow 1913; McGrew 1918; Street 1976). Todd (1940) commonly found nesting sapsuckers in Potter, Clinton, and Warren counties, as well as at Pymatuning Swamp. Farther south, the sapsucker was more locally distributed with reports from Somerset (Todd 1940) and Fayette counties (Burleigh 1932).

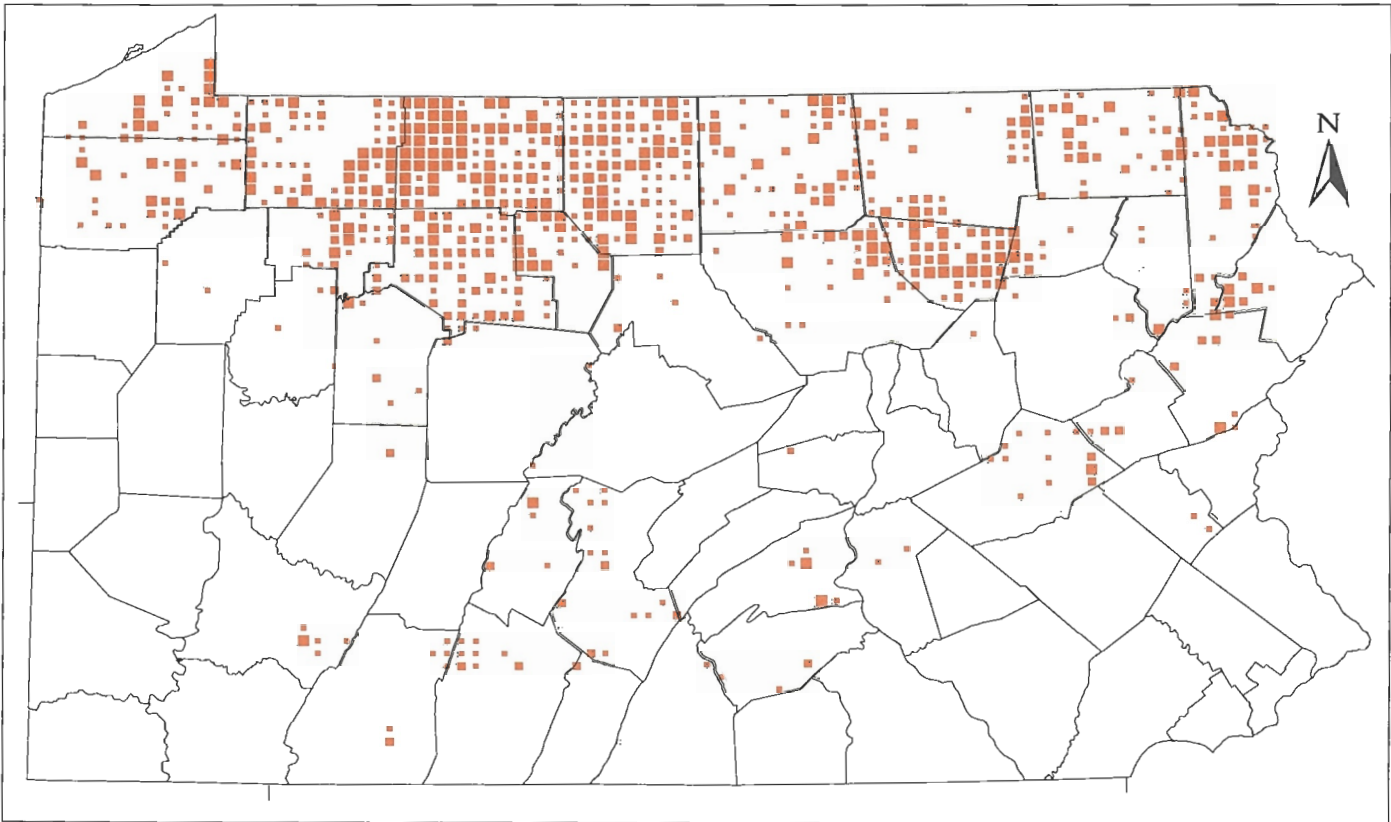
Poole (unpub. ms.) believed the sapsucker "formerly nested in localities in which it is unknown as a breeding species." The initial Species of Special Concern List classified this woodpecker as status undetermined because of its apparent decline (Gill 1985a). Contrary to these misgivings, Pennsylvania BBS data indicated a yearly increase of 8.8 percent in the number of sapsuckers on routes from 1966 to 1987 (unpub. data; see graph). However, generalities about sapsucker populations must be regarded carefully, because so few sapsuckers (average = 0.53 birds per year) were observed on BBS routes or reported in recent literature.

Atlas data revealed that the species was more widespread in Pennsylvania than was formerly documented, especially in the northern tier. Atlas volunteers found sapsuckers in 50 percent of the blocks in the Allegheny High Plateau Section and in 32 percent of the Appalachian Plateau Province, excluding the Pittsburgh Plateau Section. Figure 16, the Major Forest Communities, on page 32 shows that this species nests almost solely in the northern hardwood forests. Volunteers recorded the bird in more than 75 percent of the blocks in Potter, McKean, and Sullivan counties, which are covered by extensive stretches of relatively mature northern hardwoods. Here, the sapsucker can be locally common and outnumber other woodpeckers (pers. obs.). Atlasers discovered that, unlike migrants, nesting sapsuckers are noisily conspicuous, making this species one of the best-represented woodpeckers in the Atlas.

South of the Allegheny Front, the species is rather rare and scattered and not a regular breeding bird. Some records outside the plateaus may represent transient nonbreeders. Most of these seemingly out-of-bounds breeders were found at relatively high elevations. One pair nested in the unusually low and southerly location of the borough of Somerset.

Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers were "confirmed" in 28 percent of the blocks where they were reported, the highest rate of confirmation for any woodpecker except the Northern Flicker. Volunteers confirmed this species most frequently by finding the boisterous fledglings (99 blocks) or "talking trees," the apt nickname for nests with young (42 blocks). This migratory species nests later than resident woodpecker

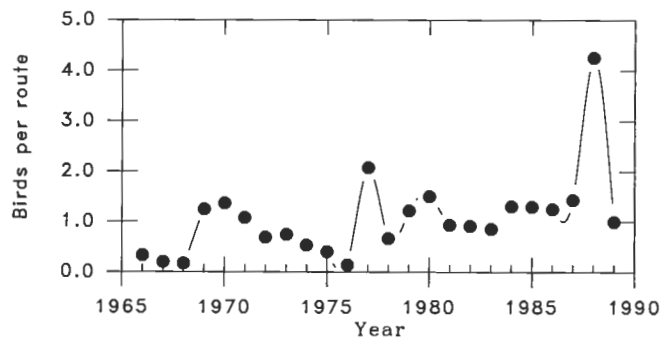
YELLOW-BELLIED SAPSUCKER				Physiographic Regions in Which Recorded		
No. of Blocks in Which Recorded	No.	% of Total	Priority Blocks	No.	% of Region	
	733	15	17	Appalachian Plateau	646	32
<div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div style="width: 10px; height: 10px; background-color: #c00000; margin-right: 5px;"></div> <span>Possible</span> </div>	317	43	34	Pittsburgh Plateau Section	11	1
<div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div style="width: 10px; height: 10px; background-color: #800000; margin-right: 5px;"></div> <span>Probable</span> </div>	209	29	30	Blue Ridge	2	4
<div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div style="width: 10px; height: 10px; background-color: #400000; margin-right: 5px;"></div> <span>Confirmed</span> </div>	207	28	36	Central Lowland	0	0
				Coastal Plain	0	0
				New England	2	4
				Piedmont	0	0
				Valley and Ridge	72	5



species. On average, nests with young were reported on 18 June and as early as 2 June. Fledglings were found as early as 11 June. Most historical records of sapsucker nests in Pennsylvania also occurred in June (Todd 1940).

Although some have considered it a declining species, the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker seems fairly widespread and common in its habitat within Pennsylvania. This may be a mixed blessing because the sapsucker is one of the few destructive birds in this area. Sapsuckers can kill trees, especially young trees around nest sites if they feed repeatedly from them—an unfortunate habit for an otherwise engaging bird (McAtce 1911).

—Douglas A. Gross



POPULATION TREND FROM USFWS BREEDING BIRD SURVEY ROUTES IN PENNSYLVANIA