

Rufous-sided Towhee

Pipilo erythrophthalmus

Another occupant of brushy successional and edge habitats, Rufous-sided Towhees are widely distributed summer residents within Ohio. During the Atlas Project, they were found in every county and 721 priority blocks (94.4% of the statewide total). Towhees were recorded from every block in the Unglaciaded Plateau and Illinoian Till Plain regions, and were missed in only one block in the Glaciaded Plateau region. Their representation declined slightly to 85.3 and 89.7% of the Lake Plain and Till Plain blocks respectively. They became locally scarce within the intensively farmed lands of western and central Ohio, particularly portions of Van Wert, Paulding, Putnam, and Williams counties in the northwestern corner of the state.

The relative abundance of Rufous-sided Towhees on Ohio's Breeding Bird Surveys exhibits a similar pattern. They are most numerous in the Unglaciaded Plateau region where suitable habitats are widely available. Their numbers decline somewhat in the Illinoian Till Plain and Glaciaded Plateau regions. Substantially fewer towhees occur in the Lake Plain and Till Plain regions where nesting habitats are locally distributed and very small numbers are recorded on these surveys.



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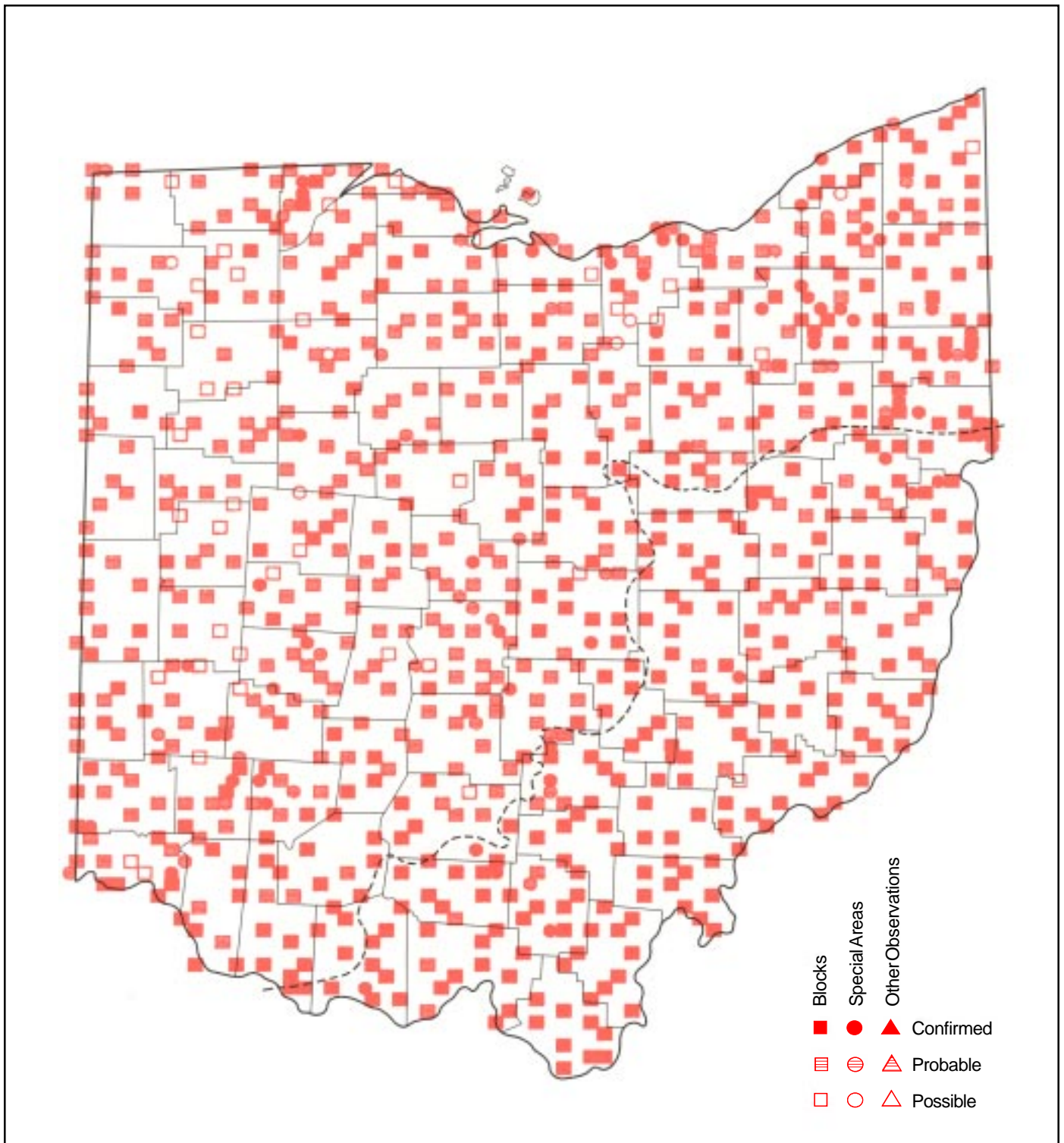
Rufous-sided Towhees have always been widespread summer residents in Ohio. Jones (1903) noted they were found wherever suitable habitats were available. In the mid-1930s, Hicks (1935) cited breeding records from every county, with the greatest numbers along the Allegheny Plateau. Within unglaciaded Ohio, they were most numerous north through Hocking and Athens counties but were only slightly less common along the remainder of the plateau (Hicks 1937). Their numbers were already declining in portions of central and western Ohio where agricultural activities had eliminated most suitable habitats and towhees were becoming locally distributed (Hicks 1935).

During subsequent decades, towhee populations probably continued to decline in Ohio's farmlands, although these declines were poorly documented. Since 1965, their numbers have declined on Breeding Bird Surveys throughout eastern North America including Ohio (Robbins, C. S., et al. 1986). Habitat loss is the primary cause of these recent declines, while severe winter weather during the late 1970s produced noticeable short-term reductions in their population levels.

Most breeding towhees occupy brushy woodland edges and openings, disturbed woods with dense undergrowth, and abandoned fields in shrub/sapling stages of secondary succession. They prefer habitats where dense brushy thickets are interspersed with openings dominated by herbaceous vegetation, such as the red cedar-dominated habitats in the southwestern counties. Narrow shrubby corridors along fencerows and roadsides are generally avoided. Most pairs inhabit dry hillsides and mesic fields, although a few occupy brushy swamps in the northeastern counties (Williams 1950). They have also been found along the edges of residential areas near Dayton (Mathena et al. 1984).

Early in the breeding season, towhee nests are normally placed on the ground at the base of a small tree or bush. Later nests are usually elevated at heights of 1–5 feet in dense brushy cover (Campbell 1968, Trautman 1940). Within southern and central Ohio, nest construction begins during the second half of April and clutches may be produced during the last week of the month. The first fledglings have appeared by May 20, and most first broods of young towhees leave the nest by June 10–15 (Trautman 1940, Mathena et al. 1984). The initiation of nesting activities is delayed by 1–2 weeks in the northern counties where most nests with eggs are produced by May 10–15 and the young fledge during the second half of June (Phillips 1980, Williams 1950). Towhees regularly produce two broods annually. Late nesting attempts are responsible for nests with eggs through July 12 and recently fledged young into the first half of August (Trautman 1940).

Confirmed breeders provided the majority of Atlas Project reports with records from 381 priority blocks. The "30" code was used in 284 blocks, primarily within the Unglaciaded Plateau (157 blocks), Glaciaded Plateau (58 blocks), and Till Plain (35 blocks) regions. Other confirmed records included adults carrying food for young in 35 blocks, 27 reports of recently fledged young, 18 active nests, and the distraction displays of adults in 15 blocks. Probable breeders provided most of the remaining Atlas Project records, primarily territorial males and pairs in suitable habitats.



Analysis of Block Data by Physiographic Region

| Physiographic Region | Total Blocks Surveyed | Blocks with Data | % with Data | Regional % for Ohio | Ave. # Individ per BBS Route (1982–1987) |
|----------------------|-----------------------|------------------|-------------|---------------------|--|
| Lake Plain | 95 | 81 | 85.3 | 11.2 | 0.8 |
| Till Plain | 271 | 243 | 89.7 | 33.7 | 0.7 |
| Ill. Till Plain | 46 | 46 | 100.0 | 6.4 | 5.2 |
| Glaciated Plateau | 140 | 139 | 99.3 | 19.3 | 4.5 |
| Unglaciated Plateau | 212 | 212 | 100.0 | 29.4 | 8.8 |

Summary of Breeding Status

| No. of Blocks in Which Species Recorded | | |
|---|------------|--------------|
| Total | 721 | 94.4% |
| Confirmed | 381 | 52.8% |
| Probable | 303 | 42.0% |
| Possible | 37 | 5.1% |