

The Eastern Towhee (formerly called the Rufous-sided Towhee) is a declining species that inhabits dense, low, shrubby edge habitat in the Hudson Valley.

Conservation Status

Throughout its range, the Eastern Towhee has experienced major population declines during the past 30 years, particularly in the northeastern portion of the range. However, it is not listed as Endangered or Threatened by New York and is not found on the Audubon WatchList. Partners in Flight lists it as a Species of Regional Concern in Bird Conservation Regions (BCR) 13, 14, 28, and 30, and of Continental and Regional Stewardship in BCR 28. Breeding Bird Survey results for New York State reflect a drastic decline over the last four decades. Breeding Bird Atlas data show a reduced distribution in the Hudson River Valley.



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Identification

This large sparrow is about 8" long, slightly smaller than a robin. The male is black above, with a white patch in the wings, and white below, with rusty sides, a buffy undertail, and a red eye. The female and juvenile are brown above, but otherwise resemble the male. The song consists of two short notes followed by a higher, emphatic trill, generally described as "drink-your-teeee."

Habitat

This species inhabits forest and swamp edges, pine barrens (such as the Albany Pine Bush), woodlands, regenerating clearcuts, power line rights-of-way, open woodlands with a well-developed understory, old fields, overgrown pastures and fencerows, riparian thickets, and other brushy habitats.

Nesting

The nest is either placed on the ground hidden among dense, woody vegetation or above the ground in a tangle of low shrubs or vines. It is built by the female and is a substantial cup made of grass, bark shreds, rootlets, and pieces of dead leaves.

Food

The towhee eats insects such as caterpillars, spiders, beetles, and ants, as well as snails and small salamanders, weed and grass seeds, acorns, small fruits, and berries. It typically forages on the ground in dense, low vegetation with leaf litter by scratching forward and back with both feet.

Threats

- Loss of habitat due to suburban development.
- Loss of shrubland habitat due to forest succession and changes in agriculture practices.
- Predation of eggs and nestlings by Blue Jays, foxes, domestic and feral cats, coyotes, snakes, skunks, raccoons, or other small mammals.
- Parasitization of nests by Brown-headed Cowbirds.

Management Recommendations

- Promote habitat management or enhancement activities that increase the amount of open-canopied, shrubby habitats.
- Create open-canopied, shrubby secondary forests by clearcutting, thinning, and developing forest-dividing corridors.
- Institute controlled burning regimens that favor shrubby understory vegetation.
- Preserve blocks of pine barren habitat with techniques including fire management.

This management summary is adapted from Greenlaw 1996 and NatureServe 2008.

For additional information, see the following references:

Bell, J. L., and R. C. Whitmore. 1997. Eastern Towhee numbers increase following defoliation by gypsy moths. *Auk* 114:708-716. <http://elibrary.unm.edu/sora/Auk/v114n04/p0708-p0716.pdf>

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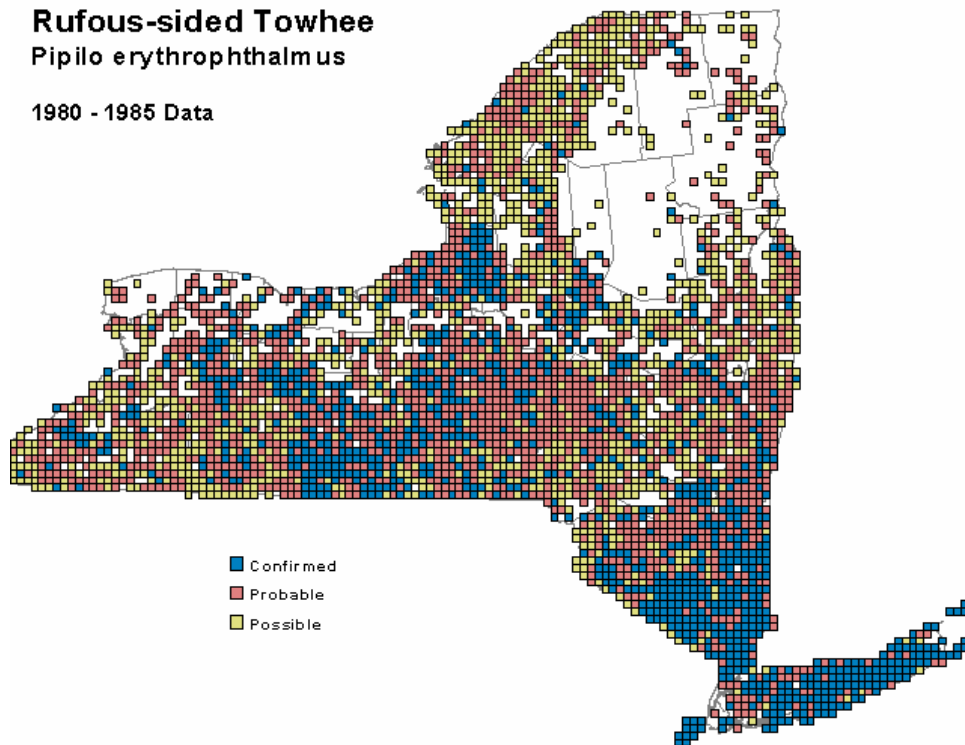
NatureServe. 2008. NatureServe Explorer: An online encyclopedia of life [web application]. Version 7.0. NatureServe, Arlington, Virginia. Available <http://www.natureserve.org/explorer>. (Accessed: January 15, 2009).

NYS BREEDING BIRD ATLAS COMPARATIVE DATA

Rufous-sided Towhee

Pipilo erythrophthalmus

1980 - 1985 Data

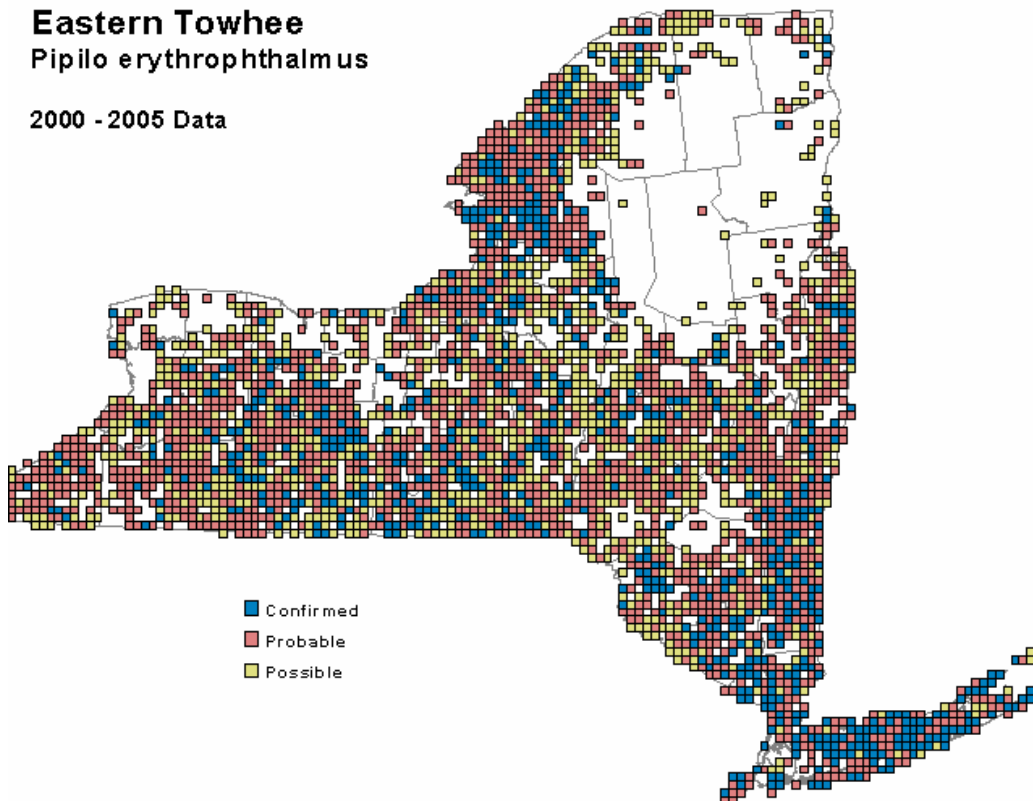


- Confirmed
- Probable
- Possible

Eastern Towhee

Pipilo erythrophthalmus

2000 - 2005 Data



- Confirmed
- Probable
- Possible