

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture October 27th, 2010.
Joe Morlan is not responsible for these notes, any errors or omissions in them are mine.

Vireos

Vireo is a Latin word which means I am green.

Most of the vireos have green in their plumage somewhere.

The vireos are found only in the Americas. When you get into the tropics, which is the origin of the vireos, there are incredibly many different species. Some of them have the name Greenlet. Some of them are almost shrike-like. The genetics have indicated that there in fact is a connection between shrikes and vireos. This seems odd because shrikes are essentially Old World birds while vireos are strictly New World birds. There are no vireos in Eurasia, other than the occasional vagrant.

All vireos are foliage gleaners. They creep around the branches and leaves and pick soft bodied insects, particularly things like inch worms. All species of vireos build a cup shaped hanging nest, sort of like an oriole nest, but much shallower. The shape of the nest is generally spherical. Neatly woven often from a fork on a horizontal branch.

The males often sing all day long. Somebody listened to a Red-eyed Vireo once a whole day and wrote down how many times it sang. That is in the Guinness book of world records. You could probably get the same result with any other vireo. All of them sing more or less constantly.

Vireos sometimes sing in the non-breeding season.

During the day both sexes may incubate the eggs. The males are rather notorious for singing while they are incubating the eggs, which makes the nest unusually easy to find if you can locate the singing vireo. The thing about singing vireos is that you can never locate them because they move very, very slowly and they tend to stick to the canopy or to the shade, depending on the species. Because they are rather slow moving some of them could be described as lethargic. They are actually much more difficult to see than warblers which tend to be much more active and jumping.

A fairly thick bill with a hook at the tip. Reasonably thick and arched, tip looks relatively blunt.

A generally large-headed look, and the head looks rounded. You can see the neck as being narrower than either the head or the body. A lot of warblers and especially things like kinglets don't look like that, they are much more compact.

The legs or toes are usually blue-gray, no other songbirds tend to have blue-gray colored legs.

The legs have plates or scales on the front.

They can be divided up into two groups:

Those with spectacles and wing bars.

Those with an eye brow and no wing bars.

Black-capped Vireo

OCCURRENCE

Found in the Texas hill country where it occupies scrub oak. It needs a habitat of hills that are fairly extensively covered with scrub oak. That scrub oak grows to about the size of a human. It covers these hill sides or used to until most of these hills have been developed for housing.

Joe's experience with Black-capped Vireo in Texas has never been all that thrilling. He could hear them singing constantly deep in the scrub oak and only get brief views if any.

No CA records.

FIELD MARKS

Male and female similar, female a little duller.
A bold white area around the red eye.
Whole crown black.

White-eyed Vireo**OCCURRENCE**

Fairly widespread in the eastern US where it occurs primarily in deciduous forests. It is tolerant of a variety of habitats but tends to prefer edges. Best located by hearing the song.
Fairly common to common throughout most of its range, becoming abundant in southern Florida where it occurs year round in mangrove swamps. Resident populations to the south and east, most of the other populations are migratory.
There are quite a few spring records for CA, mostly in coastal CA. One or two winter records.

FIELD MARKS

The white eye is difficult to see unless you have a very good view of the bird. Mostly you get more distant views.

The immature birds are said to have a dark eye but the eye becomes white pretty quickly. Spectacle yellow, which is very unusual for a vireo. The yellow is most evident in the lore area. Then there is a little break and then there is a little bit of yellow that wraps around the iris.

Gray face.

Yellow along the flanks which frequently extends across the breast, usually not meeting in the middle but being separated as yellow patches. The throat, upper chest, belly and undertail coverts are usually white.

Otherwise the bird is a plain drab olive or olive green color.

VOCALIZATIONS

The song is very syncopated. An introductory "chick" that sounds like a Hairy Woodpecker, then a jumble with a "whee-o" in the middle, followed by a "chick" again: "Chick-up-a-whee-o-chick"

Thick-billed Vireo**OCCURRENCE**

Caribbean, particularly in the Bahamas. Occasionally reported in Florida. Most of those reports are misidentified White-eyed Vireos.

FIELD MARKS

Bill a little bit heavier than in White-eyed Vireo.

Yellow in the lores. Two pieces of white behind the eye. A break above, a break behind. Sibley has a better illustration of the pattern around the eye than the Nat Geo. In Sibley the wings look darker on Thick-billed than on White-eyed, that is wrong, they are the same. Neither should the legs be shorter than on White-eyed.

Another field guide that shows the Thick-billed Vireo's eye pattern correctly is the American Bird Conservancy's Field Guide "All the Birds of North America", an underrated field guide.

Dark eye.

Yellow-throated Vireo

OCCURRENCE

Quite common in the eastern US in broad leafed forests.

A very rare vagrant to CA in migration, most records in spring. In some cases it has stayed through the summer and there may be some winter records. It is just common enough to have been removed from the review list by the Records Committee. Barely over four records per year for the last ten years. Over a hundred records total.

Joe thinks it moves more slowly than any other vireo.

FIELD MARKS

Entire spectacles yellow.

Eye dark.

Breast and throat bright yellow.

Back greenish.

Rump and upper tail coverts gray.

Wing bars bold and white.

Big bill, white wing bars, bright yellow underparts, greenish back - it can remind you of a Western Tanager.

There are people who have a problem with Sibley's painting, Joe never saw what was so wrong with it.

More likely to be confused with a Pine Warbler than with any other vireo. Pine Warbler is a reasonably robust warbler. Most claims of wintering Yellow-throated Vireos in the gulf states are actually misidentified Pine Warblers, which winter routinely in the gulf states. Both have white wing bars. Both have a yellowish spectacled effect though that of the Pine Warbler is slightly different. Both have an unstreaked back, which is generally brown on Pine Warbler. Pine Warblers have tail spots on the underside of the tail, vireos do not.

Another bird that can be confused with the Yellow-throated Vireo is the much larger Yellow-breasted Chat. Another bird which winters in the gulf states and has spectacles. Bright yellow on the throat and on the breast. It does not have wing bars.

VOCALIZATIONS

A question and answer song with the phrases going up and down, similar to the song of the Cassin's Vireo, but usually much slower. Most of them will drive you crazy as you are listening, going "we-reep" and then pausing for a long time before giving the answer "we-reoo".