

ILLINOIS DOCUMENTATION FOR UNUSUAL BIRD SIGHTINGS

Submitted to Illinois Ornithological Records Committee (IORC)

**IORC RECORD
NUMBER:**

This form submitted as supporting documentation of (check all that apply):

1990-025

Unusual species; Unusual date; Unusual number;
 Unusual plumage; Unusual breeding record; Christmas Count record; Spring Count record;
 Breeding Census record; Other: _____

1. **SPECIES:** Plumbeous Vireo *Vireo plumbeus* _____
2. **Number of birds:** 1 _____ **Age/sex/plumage:** presumed adult, sex unknown _____
3. **Date(s):** 30 April 1990 _____
4. **Location (include county):** Wooded Island, Jackson Park, Chicago, Cook County, Illinois _____
5. **Observers:** Thomas S. Schulenberg _____

Documenter: Your name: Thomas S. Schulenberg _____

Mailing Address: _____

Email Address: _____

Others agreeing with identification: Well, none – as far as I know, the bird was not seen by any other observer. At the time of the observation, I knew very few other birders in Chicago, other than a few fellow graduate students and the staff at the Field Museum. I knew of Paul Clyne, but had not yet met him. I don't know where Paul was during this period, but he was not birding Wooded Isle that spring (and perhaps was not even in Chicago at the time?). The resident local expert at Wooded Isle was Harriet Rylaarsdam, but I did not encounter her that morning until after I had left or lost the vireo. I told her about it, but I don't know that she ever saw it. I did show the bird to several of the regular Wooded Island early morning birders (i.e., faces that I saw regularly, at least during spring migration – not so much at other times?), at least one of whom noted the birds' gray plumage. To my knowledge, however, no other observers took notes on the bird, and I do not have the names of any of the few people who saw it. I also remember explaining to one woman that I had seen a Solitary Vireo but that this one was unusual, it looked all gray, maybe it was one of the western subspecies, etc. She opened her field guide to a plate of vireos, looked them all over, and then said that "well, they never really look like the picture in the book anyway".

Of course at the time there were no cell or smart phones, email, texts, or digital cameras. When I got to my desk on campus, I alerted a few other birders, fellow graduate students who, like me, had experience with Plumbeous Vireo. Sherman Suter searched for it later on the day it was found, without success. I also called Doug Stotz, who was at the Field Museum and without a car. Realizing that it might take up to two hours to reach Wooded Island by public transportation, Doug went birding instead in Grant Park (on the theory that a vagrant at one site on the lakefront might mean that there were other rarities to be found). Sherm, Doug, and I looked for it the next morning, with no luck. In those days there was a recorded rare bird alert. I reported the vireo to the alert, but the compiler (Richard Biss?) did not put it on the recording. So, outside of the few people I contacted directly, no one else in the Chicago birding community knew of the bird, or had the opportunity to look for it.

Observers NOT agreeing with identification: _____

6. **Description of bird, including size; shape; proportions; details of both color and patterns on head, back, chin, throat, breast, flanks, undertail, wings, and tail, etc.; coloration of soft parts (bill, eye, legs and feet). Include only details actually seen in the field:**

I noticed the bird when it was at about 30 m away, and immediately recognized it as a "Solitary Vireo", my first of the spring, by its chunky, bull-headed shape, and prominent white spectacles and wingbars. I also recognized, almost as immediately, that

ILLINOIS DOCUMENTATION FOR UNUSUAL BIRD SIGHTINGS

the bird was quite gray, and the thought that it might be a Plumbeous Vireo instantly came to mind. I quickly crossed over to the bird, and began studying it more closely.

An obvious vireo, i.e. larger than a warbler with a heavier, dark, hooked beak. The crown, nape, sides of the face and throat were clean, pure gray. A bold white ring circled the eye and extended over the lores to the base of the bill. The back and scapulars were also gray, but, when studied closely in good light, had a slight brownish tinge. Rump (visible on occasion when the bird fluttered while in short flight or making a foraging maneuver) with a light greenish tinge. Wings "dark," with two prominent white wing-bars; presence or absence of white edgings of tertials or remiges not noted. Throat white, contrasting sharply with the gray sides of the throat. Rest of underparts also "white," but slightly duller; there was a noticeable difference in brightness between the center of the throat and the breast. A gray wash on the sides of the breast, at the bend of the wing. A dull wash, color not satisfactorily determined, on the flanks. A faint, dull yellow wash across the vent. Tail "dark," the rectrices noticeably edged with white on both inner and outer webs (seen both from below and, in flight, from above, against the dark background of foliage).

7. Description of behavior:

Foraging in typical vireo fashion, moving sedately through the foliage and gleaning insects from the leaves, often while clinging to leaf clusters. Foraged from ca 3 m to ca 10 m above the ground. Gradually moving south down the island as it fed.

8. Description of vocalizations:

Silent; not heard to call or sing

9. Description of immediate and surrounding habitat(s):

10. Viewing conditions:

Optical equipment used for observation (type, power): Zeiss 10 x 40 binoculars _____

Distance/how measured? to within ca 10 m _____

Time(s) of observation: ca 0730-0830 _____ **Total time of observation:** at least 20 minutes _____

Weather (including regional or national weather patterns if relevant)/ sky conditions/ relative position of the sun: overcast; the light was not strong, which did not help in trying to determine muted colors, but the light was even _____

11. Previous experience with this species and similar species:

It is important to note that at the time of the observation, Plumbeous Vireo was classified as only a subspecies of "Solitary Vireo"; it was not split until many years later (1997: [Auk 114: 542-552](#)). I started birding in east Texas, where my "Solitary Vireo" is what we now know as Blue-headed Vireo. I later lived for eight years (1968-1976) in coastal northern California. During that period my "Solitary Vireo" primarily was Cassin's Vireo, but I traveled throughout the state, and became familiar with Plumbeous Vireo. I probably also saw Plumbeous during those years on trips to other western states, such as Arizona and Colorado, but it would be difficult for me to confirm that in the short term. More to the point, I definitely paid attention during those years to geographic variation in "Solitary Vireo"; for example, in 1974 Dick Erickson and I found one of the first records for California of Blue-headed Vireo ([American Birds 1975, volume 29: 166](#)). Later (1976-1988) I was an active birder in Louisiana, where again Blue-headed Vireo was my "Solitary Vireo". But it was during those years that Louisiana recorded its first Plumbeous Vireo (see [Schulenberg 1988](#) and [Remsen et al. 1996](#)). So, as noted above in the Description, I was well primed to know a Plumbeous Vireo when I saw one, and recognized this individual as a likely Plumbeous as soon as I spotted it.

ILLINOIS DOCUMENTATION FOR UNUSUAL BIRD SIGHTINGS

At the time of the observation I also was already familiar with Gray Vireo and Bell's Vireo, although I probably had seen many fewer Gray Vireos than Plumbeous.

12. Please eliminate other similar species and/or hybrids (use additional paper, if necessary):

Easily identifiable as a member of the "Solitary Vireo" group by the combination of bold white spectacles (lores and eyering) and bold white wingbars, and generally rather chunky appearance. Blue-headed and Cassin's vireos easily eliminated by the uniformly gray upperparts and dull flanks.

Gray Vireo: Lacks bold spectacles (in particular having little or no white on the lores) and the wingbars also are much weaker. Gray Vireo is a lankier vireo, not presenting the stolid appearance of Plumbeous Vireo.

Bell's Vireo (southwestern races rather gray): Much smaller than Plumbeous Vireo, slimmer, with little in the way of wingbars and much less prominent eyering.

"Central American Vireo" (*Vireo plumbeus notius/montanus*): Plumbeous Vireo currently includes not only nominate *plumbeus* (western US to central Mexico), but also two subspecies, *notius* and *montanus*, that occur from southernmost Mexico south to northern Nicaragua. These two southern subspecies are genetically distinct (basal to all other "Solitary Vireos") and clearly are a different species, although this seems not to be widely recognized yet. The plumage of "Central American Vireo" is much brighter than that of true Plumbeous Vireo, with a greenish back that contrasts with the color of the crown, and greenish yellow flanks; it is at least as similar to a Cassin's Vireo as it is true Plumbeous. At the time of this observation, I doubt that I even was aware of "Central American Vireo", much less cognizant of how to identify one (I've seen it but once, and that was many, many years later). This species presumably is resident and is highly unlikely as a vagrant to Chicago. Otherwise I think it safely can be eliminated by the much grayer color of the Jackson Park bird, in the same way that Cassin's Vireo also is not under consideration.

Blue-headed Vireo: A real wild card is the identification by Alan Phillips (1991, *The known birds of North and Middle America. Part II*. Privately published, Denver, Colorado) of a gray specimen from New York as an axanthic Blue-headed Vireo, that is, a Blue-headed Vireo lacking in yellow pigments. Aside from the sheer unlikelihood of encountering such an odd plumage – never otherwise reported? – I think this possibility can be eliminated by the hints of green on the rump and of yellow on the vent on the Jackson Park bird.

13. Where photos obtained? no _____ **If so, by whom?** _____ **Attached?** _____

14. Books & illustrations consulted, and advice received. How did these influence this description?

15. How long after the observation were field notes recorded? At time of observation _____

16. How long after observation was this form completed? Funny you should ask. Sometime after the observation – months later, I'm sure, but I don't remember the details – I wrote up an account of the sighting, in standard records committee documentation style, and submitted it to an Illinois bird records committee. The IORC website claims that IORC was founded in 1985, but that's not the way I remember it. I submitted my original report to a records committee chaired by Vernon Kleen, which as I recall was under the auspices of the Illinois Audubon Society. That iteration of the records committee folded soon thereafter, with no action being taken on this sighting. My understanding was that my report eventually was transferred to IORC, however, when that version of a state records committee was inaugurated. It still languished under IORC, however. For a (long) while I was alternately amused and perplexed that this record was kept in limbo, despite it being known to the IORC secretary. I toyed with the idea of bypassing IORC and writing this up for *Meadowlark*, as Paul Clyne did for his Cassin's Vireo record (Illinois's first "Cassin's Vireo"?, *Meadowlark* 3: 141-142; note that in this article Paul mentions my Plumbeous Vireo sighting, but gives the wrong date). Anyway, publishing in *Meadowlark* didn't seem like a fast track approach either. Sooner or later of course I would end up submitting that day's checklist to eBird, a step I finally took on 31 May 2018 (<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S46199910>). And now

ILLINOIS DOCUMENTATION FOR UNUSUAL BIRD SIGHTINGS

I'm finally (re)submitting this directly to IORC, drawing extensively on my (much) earlier report, in the modest hope that, whether the record is accepted or not, it at least will be reviewed in my lifetime.

17. Additional remarks:



Signed:

Date: 25 June 2018_____

FORM REVISED April 2015