

**"CASSIN'S VIREO" AT JACKSON PARK,  
CHICAGO (COOK COUNTY), ILLINOIS,  
3-5 MAY 1994**

A Vireo appearing to belong to the Pacific race of Solitary Vireo, *Vireo solitarius cassinii* "Cassin's Vireo", was seen and heard singing over a three-day period 3-5 May 1994 on and near the north end of Wooded Island in Jackson Park, Chicago. As far as I am aware, this represents the first report of this form for Illinois, and one of the few for eastern North America.

The bird was first seen on the morning of 3 May at the north end of Wooded Island in Jackson Park, Chicago, by the undersigned and John Harshman, and independently by Thomas Schulenberg and by Harriet Rylaarsdam. At that time the bird was taken simply as an exceptionally drab Solitary Vireo by most of the observers, though Schulenberg entertained "Cassin's Vireo" in the back of his mind.

The following day the bird spent the entire morning singing in and about the Japanese Garden on Wooded Island. Based on the song only, the bird was independently identified as a Yellow-throated Vireo by at least four parties of experienced birders, including Sue Friscia, Robert Hughes, Sherman Suter, and Peg Walsh. All four parties also reported seeing a Solitary Vireo at the same site. That morning I saw the Vireo as it broke into song, and Friscia and Walsh confirmed, albeit with dismay, that this was indeed the "Yellow-throated Vireo" song heard earlier. I later learned that neither Hughes nor Suter ever saw a Yellow-throated Vireo that morning, and under the circumstances both retracted that species.

On the morning of 5 May, the same bird was seen and heard - still sounding like a Yellow-throated Vireo - by myself, Robert Hughes, and Tom Schulenberg. Schulenberg then suggested the bird's identity as a "Cassin's Vireo". It was not until then that I became aware of a West Coast form of Solitary Vireo distinct from the Rocky Mountain "Plumbeous Vireo". Later that morning I returned to the field with a tape recorder but failed to locate the bird either by sight or by playbacks of songs of both "Blue-headed" (*V. s. solitarius*) and "Cassin's" Vireos. Another vain attempt to elicit song via tape recordings was made the following morning. The bird was neither seen nor heard subsequently.

Physical description: Upperparts, olive green overall, slightly washed with gray on the forehead, sides of the head, and crown; this wash was strongest on the forehead, while the nape had no apparent gray. "Spectacles", broad, dull white (i.e., complete white eye-ring and loreal stripes, joined across the forehead). Throat through undertail, flat white, broadly washed with dull yellow at the sides of the upper breast. Wings, blackish, with two broad white wing-bars. Tail coloration not noted. Iris, dark (apparently black). Bill, dark overall; in good light appeared dark horn brown along the cutting edges, grading to black on the culmen. Leg color, not noted. Bill, short, blunt, "Vireo-like".

Size and proportions: No immediate yardsticks for comparison were available; however, on the afternoon of 5 May I studied a typical "Blue-headed Vireo". My gross impression was that this was a somewhat less compact bird than the "Cassin's", appearing a little larger, with a slightly longer, more slender bill. By contrast, the "Cassin's" struck me as more akin to White-eyed Vireo *V. griseus* in size and "jizz".

Song: Typical "Vireo-like" alternation of short rising and falling two-note phrases, with a strong burry quality to the song and with notably long pauses between phrases. Compared to typical songs of eastern Solitary Vireos, the song was lower in pitch, burry rather than sweet, with much longer pauses between

phrases. As noted above, the song was qualitatively like that of Yellow-throated Vireo. No variations were noted in the song pattern.

Discussion. Visually and vocally, this bird was aberrant as a "Blue-headed Vireo" on those points which apparently make it typical of the Pacific coast form. It is worth emphasizing that the head was essentially olive green, and that the gray on the head was nothing more than a dull wash. This olive ground color was strong enough that, on 4 May, a pair of novice birders matched this bird to Bell's Vireo in the 1980 Peterson field guide, specifically ruling out Solitary Vireo because "that species has a gray head." My gut reactions on size and proportions relative to "Blue-headed Vireo" are apparently consonant with "Cassin's". The song - as noted above - bore a strong resemblance to that of Yellow-throated Vireo, which is in keeping with the vocal descriptions and song recordings of the National Geographic field guide. But, since "wrong-species" song acquisition has been attested in Vireos, the possibility must be raised that the bird in question was an under-colored and apparently undersized "Blue-headed Vireo" which had learned the song of Yellow-throated Vireo. The simpler explanation, however, is that the bird was indeed a "Cassin's Vireo".

The physical description and attendant details were recorded on the afternoon of 5 May. What little I know of field identification of "Cassin's Vireo" comes from the National Geographic *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, 2nd ed. (1987) and its accompanying recordings; and from Farrand's 1988 *Western Birds: An Audubon Handbook*. Photograph #3 in the latter provides a very good match to the Jackson Park bird, though our bird may have been even less gray on the head than the individual shown there. Note especially the distribution of gray there - strongest on the forehead and wanting on the nape, as in the Jackson Park individual.

Paul Clyne

17 Nov 94

Mr. Ron Goetz

Dear Ron,

This is a brief note regarding the "Cassin's Vireo" sighting from Jackson Park, 3-5 May 1994, with some information which may be helpful in allowing the I.O.R.C. to assess the documentation. I finally made it to the Field Museum a couple of weeks ago to sort through vireo specimens. Of 141 skins labelled "*Vireo solitarius solitarius*", virtually all specimens which approach the dullness of *V. s. cassinii* are females, especially birds labelled as juvenal females. A smaller number of fall males (especially juvenals) also show little color. Spring males, by contrast, consistently showed contrastive gray heads, with two exceptions. The dullest was a bird collected on 7 March 1934 (FMNH#94009) by Emmet Blake at San Marcos, Tajumulco Volcano, Guatemala. Blake's handwritten label simply identifies the bird as "*V. solitarius*", with the designation "subsp." added in someone else's handwriting. A second label on this bird designates it as "*Vireo solitarius solitarius*". I asked Dave Willard if he could deduce anything further from the handwriting. He was unable to determine who made the subsequent designation, and he flagged the specimen for re-evaluation of the subspecies. Interestingly, Tajumulco Volcano is in the Sierra Madre mountains of far western Guatemala, just south of Mexico, and lies within the normal wintering range of *cassinii* and apparently west of the expected winter range of *solitarius*, based on information in Peters's Checklist. Both plumage and range suggest that this specimen, if identifiable, belongs to *cassinii*, not *solitarius*.

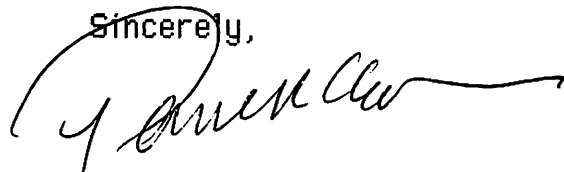
The other dull spring male is slightly brighter than the Tajumulco specimen, but still duller than other *solitarius* in the Field Museum collection. This specimen bears the FMNH#327636, and was collected by W. E. Southern sometime in May 1961 at DeKalb Co., DeKalb IL (Campus Woods), with the Northern Illinois University specimen number #596. This bird shows a somewhat asymmetrical distribution of gray on the head, looking quite olive-headed on one side and more gray-toned on the other. From this standpoint it is not

a typical specimen of either race. It seems worthy of re-examination by a vireo specialist.

In sum, I found that female and immature plumages of *solitarius* and *cassinii* approached one another so closely as to not be safely separable as out-of-range vagrants in the field, but that spring male *solitarius* proved separable with some confidence in almost all instances. I unfortunately neglected to take a sub tally of spring males vs. other plumages in the collection. My guess is that spring males constituted roughly 25% of the specimens.

On the assumption that singing birds in this complex are males, I find the Jackson Park bird to be outside the normal range of plumage variation within *solitarius*, and - pending evaluation of the two specimens noted above - possibly outside the absolute range of variation within spring male *solitarius* found in the collection at the Field Museum.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Paul R. Clyne". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the word "Sincerely,".

Paul R. Clyne