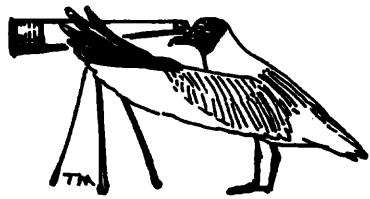


IDENTIFICATION NOTES



The Identification Paper Committee continues to encourage the submission of brief notes on yet-to-be-resolved identification problems. The following note on the calls of two very similar *Empidonax* flycatchers is an example of such a note. It is not intended to be the final word, but will encourage, we hope, further investigation.

CALLS OF ALDER AND WILLOW FLYCATCHERS

Until fairly recently, most observers did not attempt to separate Alder (*Empidonax alnorum*) and Willow (*E. traillii*) flycatchers in the field except by song and, indirectly, by breeding range and habitat (not safe in many areas). The idea that these two species, and most Empids in general, are readily identifiable only on the basis of song and breeding habitat has been instilled by many of the early breed of field guides. The result has been that many observers do not attempt identification of migrating *Empidonax* flycatchers. But many individuals in this group *call* during migration, as well as on the breeding and wintering grounds, and these calls are very useful in identifying many of them to species. Many silent Empids, if followed long enough, will give a call note (or rarely, in a few species such as Willow, a song) at some point!

The typical call notes of Alder and Willow flycatchers are distinctly different, and probably provide, in addition to song, the best means of identifying the two in the field. Willow's typical call is a liquid "whit," softer in tone than the more emphatic, sharp "whit" of the typical Least Flycatcher (*E. minimus*). Willow Flycatchers are frequently heard calling in migration. The typical call of the Alder Flycatcher is a sharp note, variously transcribed "pip," "peek," or "bic." The quality of this call is quite different from that of a Willow, and has been likened to the call of Hammond's Flycatcher (*E. hammondii*), Pygmy Nuthatch (*Sitta pygmaea*), or, vaguely, Long-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*). Certain other, less commonly heard calls of Alder and Willow flycatchers may also be useful for identification; here is a fruitful area for further study.

Although most observers will be understandably reluctant to report extralimital sightings of either species solely on the basis of calls, awareness of these differences can allow observers to focus their attention on the odd-sounding individuals. Increased attention to identification of these two species on migration would certainly go a long way towards a better understanding of their relative status in different parts of the continent.

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PLUMAGE WEAR IN VIREO BELLII

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In this note I respond to and expand on some of the ideas presented by Stallcup (1984) in his "identification quiz" on Bell's Vireo. The bird depicted in the quiz was photographed at San Blas, Nayarit, in December 1975. The published black-and-white print is a reproduction of an original color slide, which Bruce Webb and Tim Manolis kindly loaned me. The written description in the quiz, however, is of a bird captured in San Diego County, California, as Stallcup (pers. comm.) has pointed out. Stallcup's description, "in life, this bird was white below and gray above with scarcely a

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trace of green or yellow," implied that a bird answering the description of *V. b. pusillus* had been photographed at San Blas, since the discussion did not mention the provenance of the bird on which the written description was based. This erroneous impression merits correcting because the published winter range of *pusillus* is confined to southern Baja California (Friedmann et al. 1957, AOU 1957). The bird photographed in San Blas, to judge from the original color slide, was most likely *not pusillus*, since it shows some contrast between a plain gray head and a slightly olive-tinged back. Any further speculation on its subspecific identity is unwarranted; identification of Bell's *Vireo* races cannot be made conclusively on the basis of photographs, since light and film conditions are unknown variables. As with most subspecies, such identifications must be made through comparison with preserved specimens.

Vireo bellii consists of four subspecies: *pusillus*, breeding in California and northwestern Baja California (see Goldwasser et al. 1980 and Wilbur 1980 for details of current range), *arizonae*, breeding from the Colorado River east through Arizona and south through Sonora, *medius*, breeding from western Texas south to northern Durango and eastern Coahuila, and nominate *bellii*, breeding from eastern Colorado, eastern Texas, and Tamaulipas east to the Mississippi River region (Ridgway 1904, AOU 1957). As Stallcup mentions, the eastern races are brighter green and yellow than the western. More specifically, the four races represent a gradation: each subspecies is more brightly colored than its neighbor to the west. Plumage wear and fading, however, markedly change the birds' appearance; they convert yellow-green birds into grayer ones. To identify properly specimens of Bell's *Vireo*, one must compare birds collected at the same season. Faded summer specimens of *arizonae* become as gray as fresh fall *pusillus*. (Bell's *Vireo* has the molt schedule common among North American passerines: a single complete annual molt, which takes place after nesting but within the breeding range.) A *medius* collected on 8 May looks much like an *arizonae* collected on 25 January; both specimens are in the San Diego Natural History Museum and were identified by Allan R. Phillips. This January *arizonae* has a conspicuously greenish back and yellowish flanks that distinguish it easily from even the freshest (late August) specimens of *pusillus*. The difference in fresh plumage between *pusillus* and this specimen of *arizonae* is enough to surprise a Californian like myself who is familiar only with pale gray, faded, summer *pusillus*. I suspect that many of the fall sight records of "eastern" Bell's *Vireos* in California are based on fresh *arizonae*.

I thank Rich Stallcup and Tim Manolis for their review of an earlier version of this note and for correcting the confusion in the identification quiz. I thank Allan R. Phillips for identifying the January specimen of *arizonae* that turned my attention to the problem of plumage wear in *Vireo bellii*.

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