

Black-capped Vireo: New to Canada

by
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On 27 April 1991, a female Black-capped Vireo (*Vireo atricapillus*) was observed and mistnetted at Long Point peninsula, Lake Erie, Ontario. The bird was found at the Breakwater field station which is situated at the base of Courtright Ridge, 8 km along the peninsula.

Circumstances

The vireo was seen briefly, high up in a small group of pines (*Pinus* sp.) during a busy morning of banding. Although not specifically identified during these views, my suspicions were aroused, and I later returned to find the bird caught in a nearby mistnet. Upon taking the bird out of the holding bag I immediately identified the bird as a Black-capped Vireo, a species which I had seen previously in southern Texas in 1988. Knowing that the species was endangered in North America, I suspected it to be the first record for Canada. The news was subsequently radioed in to the Old Cut field station by a very excited and shaking birder!

Once all the biometrics were taken and recorded, the bird was rested and released into the pines where it was initially discovered. It was observed briefly in the field as it made its way north-east along Courtright Ridge. The vireo was very active upon release and was subsequently lost from sight, not to be seen again. Due to the remoteness of the field station, the only other observers to see the vireo were Hillary Smith and Hilary Pittel, both

voluntary migration assistants working for the Long Point Bird Observatory.

Description

The following notes are a combined description of the bird in the hand (Figure 1) and in the field. It was a small and compact vireo, slightly smaller than a White-eyed Vireo (*Vireo griseus*), with a round head and thick-necked appearance. The forehead, crown, nape and ear coverts were a dark ash-grey colour contrasting with bold white lores and spectacles, which were broken just before the eye. The mantle, scapulars and rump were uniform olive-green. There were two distinct wing bars visible on the closed wing, formed by broad, yellowish-white fringes to the blackish-centred median and greater coverts. The tertials had dark, blackish centres with well-defined yellowish-white fringes. Both the remiges and rectrices were blackish-brown with distinct yellowish fringes, except for the primary tips which were noticeably browner.

The throat, upper breast and belly were dull white, whilst the flanks and undertail coverts were moderately washed with yellow. The bill was broad-based and blackish-grey in colour (slightly browner along the cutting edges). The eye was reddish-brown with a black orbital ring, and was one of the most striking features in the hand. However, this was less obvious in the field. The legs were short and stout, and dark grey

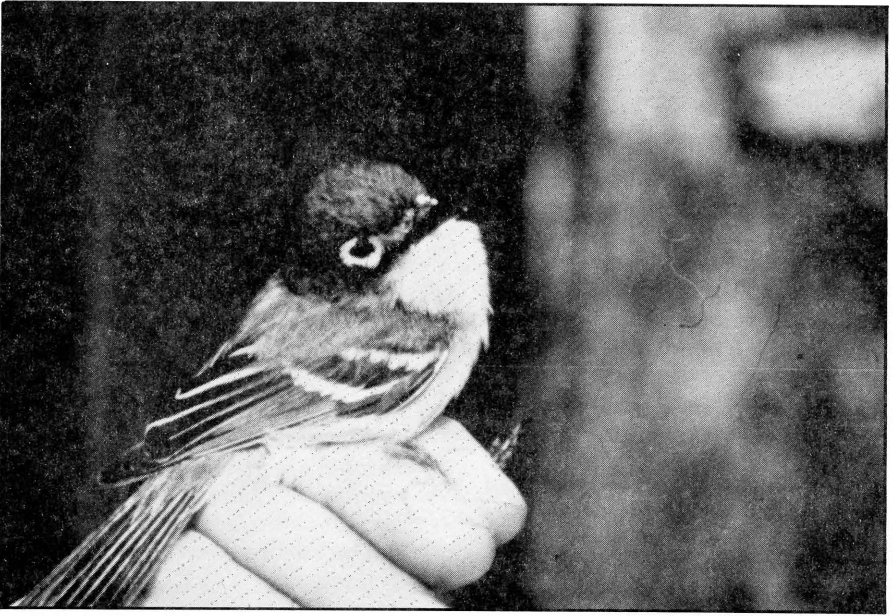


Figure 1: Black-capped Vireo in the hand, Long Point, Ontario, 27 April 1991.
Photo by *Julian R. Hough*.

in coloration.

Jon Barlow (pers. comm.) states that some males can be similar in plumage to females, and that some caution should be used when sexing as plumages intermediate between the sexes may occur. However, the Long Point individual was sexed as a AHY female due to the ash-grey head, which (in the hand) showed no presence of any black or brown feathering (which would probably be shown by AHY males), and instead had distinct olive tips to all of the crown feathers.

Discussion

The weather patterns prior to 27 April were possibly correlated with the vireo's occurrence, with an extensive cold front running north to

south dominated by high winds and tornados. This weather system would seem a likely explanation for the bird's arrival in Canada, being caught up in the fast-moving northerly airstream.

This sighting constitutes the first record of the Black-capped Vireo for Canada, and it is the only documented extralimital occurrence of this distance for this species in North America. The only other records of Black-capped Vireos outside their breeding range are from Nebraska (J. Barlow, pers. comm.), and a sight record from Louisiana (A.O.U. 1983). The Black-capped Vireo is a restricted and local breeding species in south-west Texas, extending from Edwards Plateau eastwards across to Dallas (A.O.U.

1983) This species also breeds in two localities in Oklahoma, one of which (Blaine County) is the northernmost limit for the species in North America (Grzybowski *et al.* 1986). Previously, this species bred in Kansas, but due to their decline they have now gone from that state. Recent studies reveal that the entire population of Black-capped Vireos may hover between 250 and 500 birds, and that Oklahoma's entire adult population is fewer than 110 birds (Graham 1990).

The Black-capped Vireo was listed as endangered in 1987, this status being attributable to several factors. Perhaps the most important of these factors is habitat loss. Black-capped Vireos have a strict preference for areas where oak (*Quercus* spp.) constitutes 50 per cent of the breeding habitat. This is the case particularly in Texas where Juniper (*Juniperus* sp.) is replacing oak, and the Black-capped Vireos are declining. Nest parasitization by Brown-headed Cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*) is also a significant factor in the decline of this species (Grzybowski *et al.* 1986), as well as a variety of predators such as fire ants (*Solenopsis* sp.) and Scrub Jays (*Aphelocoma coerulescens*) which attack nests (Graham 1990). Thus, unless

successful habitat management and protection from cowbirds can be effected, the future of Black-capped Vireos in North America will hang in the balance for years to come.

To summarize, the Black-capped Vireo is characterized by a small, restricted breeding population. The fact that it is a short distance migrant and therefore a species which is not overly prone to vagrancy makes this record all the more amazing and unbelievable!

Acknowledgements

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Literature cited

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- Grzybowski, J.A., R.B. Clapp, and J.T. Marshall* 1986. History and current population status of the Black-capped Vireo in Oklahoma. *American Birds* 40: 1151-1161.

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Erratum

In the article entitled "Checklist of Recognizable Ontario Bird Forms" (*Ontario Birds* 9:49-55), the section beginning with the last sentence on page 49 should read: The third part

of the scientific name identifies the subspecies. In the checklist, each race is given an English name followed by its scientific name in italics.