

IDENTIFICATION OF THE PHILADELPHIA VIREO  
IN THE AUTUMN

by Richard A. Forster, Massachusetts Audubon Society

Of all the warblers and vireos that combine to give the beginning birder problems in identification in the fall, the Philadelphia Vireo ranks high as a troublemaker. This is so not only because it is somberly colored and virtually without field marks, but it also has two look-alikes: the Warbling Vireo and the Tennessee Warbler.

At first glance there shouldn't be any difficulty in separating vireos from warblers, and there really isn't, once you know vireos. On average, vireos tend to be chunky, large-headed, and thick-billed (with a hook on the tip of the upper mandible that is only discernible at close range), and they move in a slow, deliberate manner. By contrast, warblers are slim and small-headed with a thin bill and nervous behavior. Despite these obvious differences, it will take practice to differentiate between them.

Field Identification. Generally speaking, the Philadelphia Vireo has a gray head, an olive gray back (which gives the bird a capped appearance), olive gray wings and tail, and yellowish underparts. However, individuals vary in the degree of yellowish suffusion to the plumage, with some birds appearing quite gray with a pale yellow suffusion to the underparts, whereas others are olive gray with more obviously yellow underparts.

Philadelphia Vireos that are strongly yellow are readily identified, but those that are grayish could be confused with the Warbling Vireo. Briefly, the head and upperparts of the Warbling Vireo are a uniform light gray with a faint olive green tinge, which doesn't produce the prominent capped appearance of the Philadelphia Vireo. The underparts are usually clear white below but can be slightly yellow, especially in the fall. However, the yellow is restricted to the sides and does not cover the entire underparts as in the Philly. The lores (area between the bill and eye) are the most diagnostic field mark: Philadelphia Vireos have black lores, whereas the Warbling Vireo's are gray.

Tennessee Warblers can be troublesome if you are still having difficulty separating warblers from vireos, but fall-plumaged Tennessees should cause no problem since they are fairly uniformly yellow green, i.e., no cap. They also have, in addition to the eye stripe, at least one, and sometimes two, whitish wing-bars (lacking in the Philly). Breeding-plumaged Tennessees, which are sometimes seen in the fall, have a gray cap, bright yellow green back, wings, and tail, and clear whitish underparts. However, Tennessee Warblers are quite small, a fact that should be readily noticeable.

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Occurrence of Fall Migrants. The Philadelphia Vireo is more frequently seen in the fall at coastal landbird traps, where it can be expected with reasonable frequency from August 20 through the end of September. The scarcity of inland records is more probably related to the difficulty of seeing Phillys in woodlands than it is a reflection of abundance. The Tennessee Warbler migrates throughout the same period and can be seen with equal frequency, both inland and coastally. Warbling Vireos also occur during this period but are rarely seen on the coast and are very unusual after mid-September.

Summary. Philadelphia Vireos are sluggish, chunky, heavy-billed birds with yellow underparts, no evident wingbars, a capped appearance, and black lores. Tennessee Warblers are similar in appearance but exhibit a restless behavior and have a thin bill, an obvious wingbar, and uniform yellow green upperparts. The Warbling Vireo is distinguished by whiter underparts and the lack of dark lores.

References.

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