

ABOUT THE COVER: BLACK-CAPPED VIREO

The perky, diminutive Black-capped Vireo (*Vireo atricapillus*) is one of North America's most sought after and attractive vireos and one of its most endangered species. The male is striking, with a jet black cap and contrasting white spectacles. The female is similar but duller, with a gray cap. Both sexes are whitish below, largely green above, with yellow feather edgings, distinct wing bars, and yellowish flanks.

Black-capped Vireos formerly bred from southern Kansas in a wide band through Oklahoma and Texas to southern Coahuila, Mexico. Their range has contracted markedly in recent years. The species is extinct in Kansas, breeds in only two areas of Oklahoma, and has become local and patchy in Texas and Mexico. The Edwards Plateau of Texas is one of its remaining strongholds, but even there it is diminishing and threatened. The factors that led to its addition to the federal Endangered Species List in 1987 involve both habitat deterioration and brood parasitism by Brown-headed Cowbirds.

Black-capped Vireos prefer a scrubby successional habitat, often on rocky hillsides, of predominantly oaks and junipers. Overgrazing by sheep and goats, control of wildfires (which ultimately produce good vireo habitat), and agricultural and urban development have reduced the vireo's habitat. However, there now seems to be more good habitat than birds to use it, and the major culprit appears to be the Brown-headed Cowbird. Recent studies conducted in prime vireo habitat report that nearly all Black-capped Vireo nests at Oklahoma study sites, and more than seventy-five percent at Texas sites, were parasitized by cowbirds. The recent expansion of the Bronzed Cowbird to favored habitat in the Edwards Plateau makes the picture even bleaker.

The vireos arrive in April from their wintering grounds along a narrow strip of western Mexico, and by mid-April, most nesting is underway. The males are highly territorial and persistent singers. Even through the heat of the day their distinctive song is described as harsh and hurried, restless, and with an angry quality, somewhat reminiscent of the songs of Bell's or White-eyed vireos.

Males often follow females while courtship singing, and have a wing-fluttering courtship flight. In this monogamous species the female typically incubates at night while sharing these duties with her mate in the daytime. After the young hatch the female does most of the brooding and the male most of the food gathering. The nest, usually three or four feet above ground in the center of an oak thicket, is a typical cup-shaped pendant vireo nest, about three inches wide and suspended from a forked twig. Coarse grass and bark strips are tightly bound with spiderweb silk, and the cup is lined with fine grass. The usual clutch is four pure white eggs.

Unfortunately for Black-capped Vireos, they have a protracted incubation period of up to seventeen days. Thus, the presence of cowbird eggs, which take only ten to twelve days to hatch, virtually ensures that no vireo young will

fledge from a parasitized nest. Vireo young fledge in ten to twelve days, but sometimes receive extended parental care for over a month. The male will often continue to care for the fledged young after the female has started raising a second brood. Black-capped Vireos are insectivorous, preferring caterpillars gleaned from leaves. They are active foragers, sometimes hanging upside down, like chickadees, from leaf clusters.

Local cowbird control programs have been fairly successful in reducing brood parasitism in several study areas in Texas and Oklahoma, but these measures are expensive and only locally effective. One can only hope that habitat preservation and brood parasitism controls will be widely applied, allowing birders to continue to enjoy these magnificent little vireos into the indefinite future.

W. E. Davis, Jr.

MEET OUR COVER ARTIST

Bird Observer welcomes Rick Frey of Norman, Oklahoma, as the artist of this issue's cover, the Black-capped Vireo. A native Oklahoman, Rick's works are on permanent display at the Artisan 9 gallery in Norman. He is a self-taught artist who began drawing wildlife at an early age. His first love is birds, and he spends as much time observing birds as he does drawing birds. He says, "I believe it is very important to become as familiar as possible with your subject, especially if the artist chooses a realistic type of expression." George Miksch Sutton was a major influence on Rick's work with birds and paintings.

Rick also works with western themes, alone and in combination with wildlife. He enjoys commercial success mostly through his paintings and prints, but also does graphic design work, such as logos, silk screen printing, and special design projects for nature and wildlife organizations. Rick can be reached at P.O. Box 720576, Norman, OK 73070.

M. Steele