

ABOUT THE COVER

Blue-headed Vireo

The Blue-headed Vireo (*Vireo solitarius*) is a harbinger of spring, the first vireo to arrive on the northward migration. It is easily separated from the other eastern vireos by its blue-gray head with prominent white eye ring and lores — “spectacles” — white throat and underparts, and greenish upperparts and white wing bars. Its flanks are washed with yellow. The Blue-headed Vireo is the eastern species of the recently split Solitary Vireo complex that includes the western Plumbeous Vireo (*V. plumbeus*) and Cassin’s Vireo (*V. cassinii*). The three had previously been considered subspecies of the Solitary Vireo, but recent molecular genetic studies indicated that they were better considered separate species, an opinion followed by the official AOU Checklist in 1997. The Cassin’s Vireo lacks the contrast between the blue head and white throat and the Plumbeous Vireo is a drab bird lacking the greenish yellow color. All three species are closely related to the Yellow-throated Vireo. The Blue-headed Vireo has two recognized subspecies, *V. s. solitarius* over most of its range, and *V. s. alticola* from Maryland to Georgia.


The Blue-headed Vireo’s breeding range extends across Canada from eastern British Columbia to southern Newfoundland and in the U.S. from the Great Lakes region east through New England. In the Appalachians its range extends south to Georgia. In Massachusetts it is considered a fairly common breeding species from Worcester County west, but rare to the east. Blue-headed Vireos winter from southeastern Virginia through Florida, west to Texas and south to Central America. In spring they reach Massachusetts in mid-April, and they are the last vireo to leave in the fall, with some remaining until mid-October.

Blue-headed Vireos are monogamous and produce a single brood per season. They prefer extensive tracts of coniferous or mixed coniferous/deciduous forest. They generally nest in remote areas and pairs are widely spaced, producing low densities of birds. Their song, which is similar to that of the Red-eyed Vireo, with whistled phrases and pauses between them, has been variously described as *teeyay*, *tayah*, *taweeto*, or *toowip*. The males song serves as territorial advertisement and mate attraction, and may play a role in maintaining pair bonds. The Blue-headed Vireo’s song is mostly pure tone, while the Cassin’s and Plumbeous have a buzzy quality. Blue-headed Vireos have been known to mimic other birds’ songs, including White-eyed and Yellow-throated vireos and Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. They defend their nesting territory, chasing intruders, feathers ruffled, uttering scolding notes. They may be somewhat territorial in winter, although they sometimes join mixed species foraging flocks. The courtship is rapid. The male fluffs the yellow feathers of his flanks and bows, bobs, and sings to his prospective mate.

Before pairing, the male chooses a nest site and begins depositing nest material. The nest is usually 6-15 feet high in the top center of a sapling or shrub of either conifer or deciduous tree. Both birds contribute to the nest building. The nest is a


hanging cup suspended by its rim from a branch fork, and is composed of spider webs, lichens, bark and other plant fiber, and lined with dry grass. The clutch is usually four brown-blotched cream-colored eggs. The female has an incubation patch and the male a partial one. Both birds incubate for about two weeks until hatching, and both brood and feed the young for approximately two weeks until fledging. Blue-headed Vireos vigorously defend their nest and will attack jays or crows.

Blue-headed Vireos are versatile foragers, taking mostly medium- to large-sized insects. They forage primarily in the interior parts of trees, gleaning insects mostly from branches, less from leaves, and sometimes taking up to half their prey by "snatching" (sallying) insects from branches in flight. In winter fruit may constitute up to half their diet.

Blue-headed Vireos have been increasing in numbers during the past few decades as reforestation has occurred. They are, however, sensitive to forest fragmentation and human intrusion at the nest-building stage. Cowbirds frequently parasitize them, although if cowbirds lay eggs in their nest before they do, the vireos will build a new nest floor over the cowbird eggs. Their preference for large tracts of undisturbed forest may pose problems in the future as new rounds of deforestation occur, but for the moment they seem secure. 

William E. Davis, Jr.

About the Cover Artist

Andrew Magee has been a field observer, drawing and sketching the natural world, since childhood. He also illustrated *A Guide to Amphibians and Reptiles* by Thomas F. Tying. He lives in Conway, Massachusetts. His illustrations are part of an upcoming bird-finding guide to western Massachusetts. This comprehensive guide will cover birding sites from western Worcester County to the New York state line. Thirty-five illustrations and more than sixty-five maps will accompany the text. To be notified when the guide becomes available, please send an e-mail to books@umext.umass.edu. 



GEORGE C. WEST