

The Black-whiskered Vireo: a summary of its status on the northern Gulf Coast

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The Black-whiskered Vireo (*Vireo altiloquus*) is known to breed in southern Florida and the West Indies, wintering chiefly in the Greater and Lesser Antilles and northern and central South America (Bond 1956). In Florida it is a summer resident, breeding from the Keys northward along the east coast to Volusia County and along the west coast to Levy County (Sprunt 1954). The Florida subspecies *V. a. barbatulus*, breeding also in Cuba and the Bahamas, winters in Amazonian South America (A.O.U. 1957:473). Formerly the species was considered accidental along the northern Gulf Coast (Weston 1956, Imhof 1962), but a review of published records in *Audubon Field Notes* and *American Birds* for the 10-year period 1965 - 1974 and unpublished records for the same period and 1975 reveals at least 36 occurrences and evidence of possible breeding there. A summary of these data follows:

Northern Florida (Tallahassee area): Three records; four reports prior to 1965.

Northwest Florida: Ten records; two reports prior to 1965.

Alabama: Nine records; one report prior to 1965.

Mississippi: No records.

Louisiana: Lowery (1974) notes that it has been observed "on at least a dozen dates in Cameron Parish as well as on Grand Isle and Grand Terre."

Texas: Two records; no records prior to 1965.

Evidence of possible breeding exists. On July 9, 1952 Henry M. Stevenson discovered a singing male 8 miles north of Tallahassee (Sprunt 1954). On May 16, 1965 one was heard singing on Dauphin I. (Imhof 1965). James R. Stewart (1971) comments that "the repeated occurrence in the last decade in Louisiana during the period of spring migration has strongly hinted these birds might represent a small Louisiana population rather than annual strays from the Florida - West Indies population." Lowery (1974) comments that the bird was considered accidental in Louisiana until recently. He now considers it of regular annual occurrence and speculates that it may actually nest along the coast. The strongest evidence of breeding

in Louisiana was the discovery on June 19 and July 4, 1971 of two pairs on the Delta National Wildlife Refuge near the mouth of the Mississippi River. The males were singing and appeared to be on territory, for one of the birds repeatedly returned to the same tree. No nest was found.

For four consecutive years, the species has been observed at Gulf Breeze in extreme northwest Florida. This location lies at the end of a wooded peninsula which extends into Pensacola Bay. It is suburban-coastal woods habitat with live oaks (*Quercus virginianus*) and sand pines (*Pinus clausa*) predominating. Gulf Breeze is approximately 270 miles west of Cedar Keys, the northernmost known breeding site of the south Florida population. On May 6, 1973, an apparent first-year bird was seen by the author at Gulf Breeze. On June 21 - 22, 1973, an adult bird was seen and heard by the author and Lucy Duncan. On May 8, 1974, one was again observed and on June 10, 1974, one was observed in song, and photographed. A tape recording of the species' song was played to this bird, and it exhibited a positive response. On June 14, 1974, an apparent first-year bird, with an indistinct malar mark and uniformly brownish upperparts was observed singing, "fluffing up", and was joined by another with a distinct malar mark and adult coloration. The former bird was observed feeding the latter. What appeared to be courtship chasing followed. On June 15, 1974, the author, Lucy Duncan and Steve Stedman observed an individual singing at Gulf Breeze and the author later watched two individuals exchange what appeared to be cottony nesting material. The birds reappeared on June 6, 19, 20 and 25, 1974 at the same location. No nests or young were found. Another or the same bird was observed singing during the period June 5 to July 21, 1974 by Dr. Charles Kahn about 0.5 mile from the author's observation.

The presence of seemingly first-year birds with indistinct malar streaks and brownish upperparts in April, May and June along the Gulf Coast is an

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Black-whiskered Vireo. Photo/S.A. Grimes, from N.A.S

enigma. There are three observations of such birds: one at Gulf Breeze May 6, 1973, and June 14, 1974, as described above, and one banded at Ft. Morgan, Ala., April 25, 1975 (Thomas A. Imhof, pers. comm.). Bent (1965) states that the molting and plumage sequence of *V. altiloquus* follows that of the Red-eyed (*Vireo olivaceus*), in which case adults and immatures should be identical in plumage by winter of the first year. However, a thorough study of the plumage sequence of *V. altiloquus* is lacking. Observers should pay special attention to these "brownish" birds so that their origin can be determined.

Sprunt (1954) indicates that in Florida, the Black-whiskered Vireo has a definite preference for and will breed only in mangroves. Since 1961, there have been numerous inland records in southern Florida of apparently breeding birds away from mangroves, including a nest containing young found in a live oak at Lake Maggorie on June 22, 1963 (Stevenson 1963). Robertson (1962) noted that birds were apparently on territory in citrus groves 15 to 20 miles inland in Dade County. Singing birds have been noted from such inland localities as Homestead, west of Ft. Lauderdale (Robertson 1968) and Royal Palm Hammock in Everglades National Park (Cunningham 1965).

South of the United States, the species is not confined to mangroves in its choice of breeding habitat. Bond (1971) describes its habitat as woodland and mangrove swamps in both humid and arid regions. C.J. Maynard (Bent 1965) described the bird as common in gardens and along the streets of Nassau; Dr. Glover Allen (op. cit.) described it as a bird of open tree growth in cultivated lands, and W.E.C. Todd (op. cit.) as numerous on the slopes and at the foot of the Casas and Caballos Mountains on the Isle of Pines. The black mangrove (*Avicennia nitida*) country of the Louisiana coast could provide suitable habitat, but the possibility of its use of other habitats along the northern Gulf Coast should not be discounted, in view of its frequent occurrences in recent years. In 1965, Imhof (Stewart 1965) speculated that if the bird would accept hardwoods other than mangroves it might eventually establish itself as a breeding species along the northern Gulf Coast. Vagrants found there could be individuals which have overshot western Cuba and may not be representative of the south Florida population, since Cuban populations winter inland in South America and return from there each spring (Bond 1971). As such, they might accept non-mangrove breeding habitat.

The lack of records from Georgia and the Carolinas, where coastal habitat is similar to that of the northern Gulf Coast suggests that the extralimital records are of vagrant birds displaced by migratory abnormalities, rather than being indicative of a genuine range expansion. Imhof (1966) comments that easterly winds are responsible for a westward displacement of migrants including *V. altiloquus*. Occurrences have generally coincided with the prevalence of strong easterly or southeasterly winds, typical in April and May along the Gulf Coast. A review of weather conditions prevailing from one to two days preceding observations at Dauphin I. and Gulf Breeze reveals that of 14 occurrences, 9 were accompanied by SE or E winds.

The increasing frequency of occurrences of the Black-whiskered Vireo along the northern Gulf Coast in recent years suggests that it is no longer accidental in this region. It should be considered a rare but regular spring transient and summer visitor which may possibly breed occasionally. The general absence of arboreal vireos in the coastal woods during summer leaves open an environmental niche where interspecific competition generally is absent. Observers should be alert for positive evidence of breeding where singing males are present.

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Winter Bird-Population Studies Publication Deferred

The reader will discover that something is missing from this issue of *American Birds* that has been published in every June issue for twenty-eight years. A decision has been made to defer publication of the Winter Bird-Population Studies, and to include them with the Breeding Bird Census reports in one combined habitat analysis issue to be published in December.

With the recent growth in popularity of these studies, now so useful in environmental impact statements, *American Birds* is having an increasingly difficult time in editing, publishing, and financing their publication. In the two most recent seasons, no less than 243 such studies were submitted, and the annual totals show no signs of decrease. The work-load and the cost of these projects are sizable.

At a recent meeting of the Scientific Activities Committee of the Board of Directors of the

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National Audubon Society, a discussion was held on the future of this project. There was agreement on the great scientific value (more potential, perhaps, than realized) in both types of studies. It was agreed too that the Society wants to ensure their continuance, but the way is still under consideration. Options for the future might include continuance as a regular feature of *American Birds*, with page charges to authors, continuation as a specially funded annual supplement to *American Birds*, or even finding another institution to sponsor and publish the studies.

Meanwhile, until these questions are resolved, we will continue to encourage participation Breeding Bird Censuses for 1976 are now due and should be mailed to the Editor, Willet T Van Velzen, 21510 4th SE, Bothell, Washington 98011