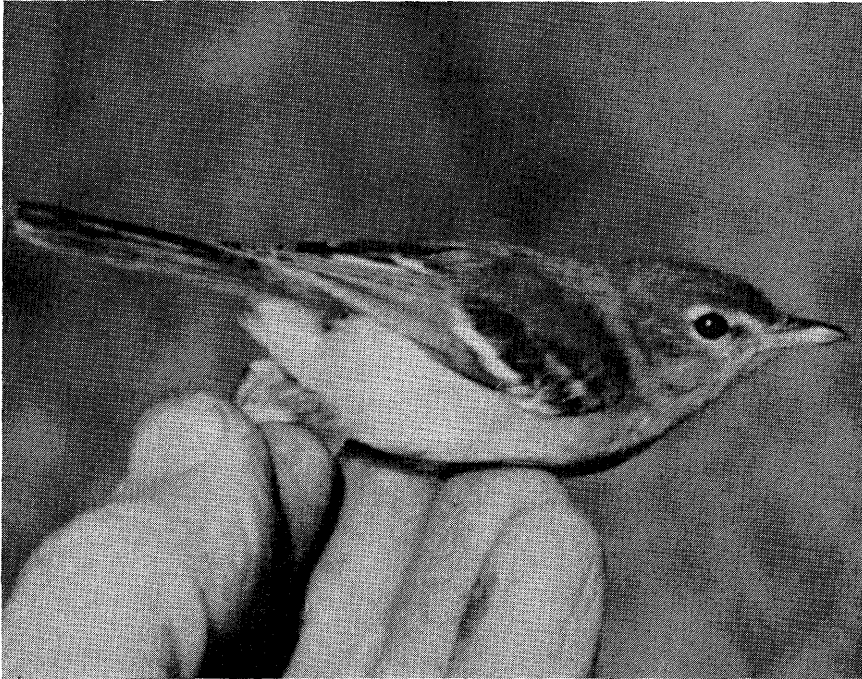


PHOTOGRAPHS OF NEW YORK STATE RARITIES.

20. *Bell's Vireo*.



Photograph by LeRoy Wilcox
Tiana Beach (Shinnecock Bay), Suffolk Co., N.Y. Sept. 25, 1959

According to the 5th edition of the A.O.U. Check-list (1957), this widespread North American species breeds as close to New York State as northeastern Illinois, yet to the best of our knowledge its recorded status east of Illinois/Indiana, except in the New York City region, is only as follows:

New Hampshire: specimen collected 19 November 1897 (see Cruickshank, *Birds around New York City*, 1942: 364); present whereabouts unknown;

- Massachusetts: typically dismissed by Griscom & Snyder (*Birds of Massachusetts*, 1955: 260): "Sight records of so critical a species, difficult to identify in life, require a specimen for confirmation;"
- Connecticut: A.O.U. Check-list records a specimen from Redding; no details are available;
- New Jersey: one banded at Swell, Gloucester Co., on 10 August 1940, has been questioned by Fables (*Annotated List of New Jersey Birds*, 1955: 75): female collected at Island Beach State Park, Ocean Co., 15 September 1959 (J. R. Jehl, pers. comm.);
- Pennsylvania: sight record in Poole (*Pennsylvania Birds*, 1964: 69) on 14 July 1957 from Erie, Erie Co.

In the New York City region, the situation is quite different, due in no small measure to both the quantity and (especially) the quality of observers in such proven migration meccas as Central and Prospect Parks. Yet even here the species' "recognized" status has fluctuated. Cruickshank (op. cit.) listed two records, without really any details. Bull (*Birds of the New York Area*, 1964: 355-56) despite an increase in detailed sight records since 1942, chose to dismiss all except the one banded and photographed by Wilcox (see Figure 1 and details below). We feel the actual situation has been distorted by ignoring the pattern that the New York City region reports present. In an effort to rectify the situation, we have gathered as much of the original descriptions and interviewed as many of the observers as we could. We feel that these sight records of Bell's Vireo, by experienced observers aware of what they were seeing, must be accepted, at face value, until contrary evidence dictates otherwise. Documented New York City area records we feel acceptable are the following:

- Spring 1939 (probably May, date apparently lost): singing adult present for a week, with a White-eyed, in Easthampton, Suffolk County, L.I., (Helmuth) — see *Proc. Linn. Soc. N.Y.*, 49-62: 68 for original reference;
- 27 August 1939: Woodmere, Nassau County, L.I., reported in Cruickshank (p. 364) as seen and heard, but Berliner (pers. comm.) states it was not heard; since Helmuth's 1939 bird was heard but Cruickshank does not so state, we must assume he juxtaposed this aspect of these two sightings;
- 3 May 1947: Prospect Park, Brooklyn, N.Y. (Jacobson and

- Sedwitz) — see Carleton, *Birds of Central and Prospect Parks*, 1958, for other details;
- 9 May 1950: Watsessing Park, Bloomfield, Essex Co., N.J. (Soll and Whelen); vocalizing, with “scolding notes” and what may have been the typical *bellii* song: “the sound was more jumbled and quicker than is the quite deliberate [song] of the White-eye” (Soll, pers. comm.); published here for the first time;
- 11 May 1950: Central Park, Manhattan, N.Y. (Sedwitz); (Carleton, op. cit.)
- 11–14 May 1950: Prospect Park, Brooklyn, N.Y. (Jacobson, Alperin, Sedwitz, *et al.*) *ibid.*;
- 9 May 1952: Central Park (Sedwitz), *ibid.*;
- 14 April 1954: Van Cortlandt Park, Bronx Co. (Buckley and Scully); with 5 Ruby-crowned Kinglets for 1/2 hour; published here for the first time;
- 25 September 1959: Tiana Beach (Shinnecock Bay), Suffolk Co., L.I., N.Y. — mist-netted by Wilcox, the photograph here reproduced for the first time; measurements (wing; 56 mm. tail; 44 mm.) indicate probably a male; race unknown; Note that it was captured 10 days after the N.J. specimen was collected.

Despite intensive searching since then by many observers, there are no additional reports for this species from the New York City area for which any documentation exists. The three May 1950 records suggest a slight invasion that year, which might recur.

Anyone who has had extensive field experience and who has seen Bell's Vireo in life will acknowledge that it is a difficult but hardly impossible species to identify. Seen well, it is probably no more difficult to identify than a Clay-colored Sparrow — a species which was accorded the same skepticism when its first Atlantic Coast sight records began to come in the late 1930s. However, it is well to call attention here to some of the field marks of Bell's Vireo, and to some of the comments — the little comments that often tell so much about the validity of an observation — that most New York City finders of Bell's Vireo were almost unanimous in noting in their descriptions.

Size: a very small vireo, hardly bigger than a kinglet, with much the same effect in the field; it is more like a warbler or kinglet in its actions than any other North American vireo, and the kinglet-like coloration enhances the similarity;

Color: pale olive-grey above, usually with a greyish wash on the head; whitish below, with strong yellow sides; usually two pale but distinct wing-bars, and a definite but usually broken eye-ring, totally unlike the strong, complete eye-rings of both White-eyed and Solitary Vireos; eye small and dark; definite white lores, but not prominent: more like a Warbling Vireo in this respect; bill light orange-yellow, although this may not always be visible or extensive enough to be the qualitative character some think it is (but see Figure 1, above):

Actions: very kinglet or warbler like, most local observers commenting on this impression, enhanced by the kinglet-like wing-flipping and harsh chattering (call) notes;

Song: absolutely diagnostic if heard, and practically impossible to phoneticize (listen to it on the Peterson records); it is a short explosive jumble of harsh notes only hinted at by Peterson's "cheedle-cheedle-cheedle-chee;" it is certainly instantly recognizable by anyone with a good ear, if heard at all well.

Many guides compare Bell's to White-eyed; the resemblance is really misleading. Many local observers, while noting its very small size and kinglet-like actions, were impressed by how much the color patterning resembled a Solitary Vireo, despite the bird's utterly different size and actions. Everyone we have spoken to or corresponded with was at pains to point out how very different was Bell's eye-ring from either White-eyed or Solitary, but to be objective, we must state that to the best of our knowledge, no local observation mentioned the bill color. However, it remains to be seen if this is a universal, qualitative character separating Bell's from all other North American vireos. We call it to observers' attention here, but stress that even without bill color and song, the species is readily identifiable. Nonetheless, a detailed description should be submitted for every observation.

On geographical proximity grounds, Bell's Vireo undoubtedly occurs more often than even the above records suggest. We must consider its present New York State status as that of a very rare or occasional spring (and possibly also fall) migrant.

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