

## BELL'S VIREO IN NEW YORK

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**ABSTRACT** — The observation of a probable Bell's Vireo and an examination of specimens and the literature concerning this bird in New York suggest that the variability of this species and the publication of a misleading early photograph have led to this species being underreported or ignored in New York.

### INTRODUCTION

No sight record of Bell's Vireo has ever been accepted in New York and its place in the state avifauna is based on a somewhat dubious photograph by Wilcox in 1959 (Figure 1) and a single undoubted specimen. This species is one of the most controversial and argued over birds in New York (see, for example, Carleton 1958, 1970; Buckley and Post 1970; also Buckley 1974). The key to this problem is the undoubted variability of this species which has not yet been sufficiently analyzed or understood; it appears to be both subspecific and individual.

### FIELD OBSERVATION

A probable Bell's Vireo (*Vireo bellii*) was observed with sparrows and kinglets in a black pine near Ponquogue Bridge, Shinnecock (Suffolk), at about 9 am on the morning of 26 October 1996 (Schiff & Wollin 1997). The bird was refound a few minutes later in a scrubby red cedar next to the road where it was observed from a distance of 20 feet at, or slightly above, eye level. Light conditions were excellent and the many dead branches of the tree afforded clear views into its interior where the bird could be seen feeding actively for about 20 minutes until it dove into nearby grassy scrub where it vanished from sight and could not be further relocated. It was about the same size as the numerous Chipping Sparrows in the immediate area and displayed the following field marks:

- Uniform, olive-colored upper parts, more brownish than greenish compared with the Ruby-crowned Kinglets in the area.
- Dark eye with a distinct, narrow, circular, complete eye-ring.
- Small, darkish loreal area.
- Smallish, rather straight bill thickened at the base (color not noted); also dark legs.
- Two white wingbars, the lower one more prominent than the upper.
- Thin light edging on the flight feathers barely noticeable on folded wing.

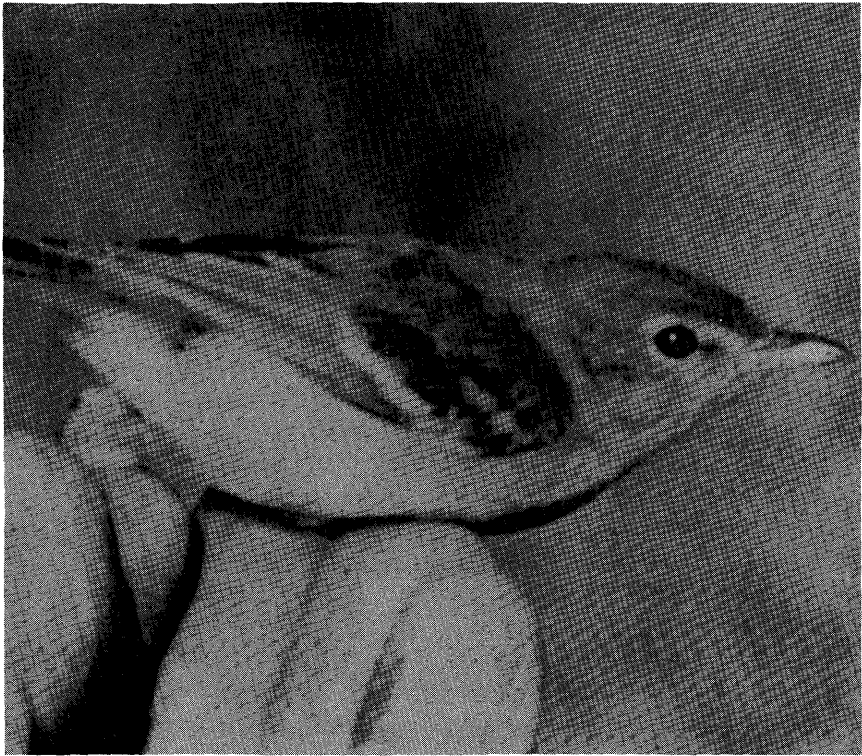


Figure 1: Photo by LeRoy Wilcox taken at Tiana Beach, Shinnecock Bay, Suffolk County on 25 Sep 1959. Published in Buckley and Post 1970 *Kingbird* 20(2):57-60.

- White underparts from the chin to the undertail coverts with yellowish wash on the flanks.
- Distinctive jizz: rounded head, longish-appearing tail with wings extending approximately to the base of the tail only.
- Extremely active with a lot of characteristic tail flicking.

In spite of the lack of an effect of spectacles (invariably shown in field guide illustrations) and the missing observation of bill color (most museum specimens show one or both mandibles as light-colored). I believe this was a Bell's Vireo (*Vireo bellii*) of the nominate eastern or 'inland' subspecies.

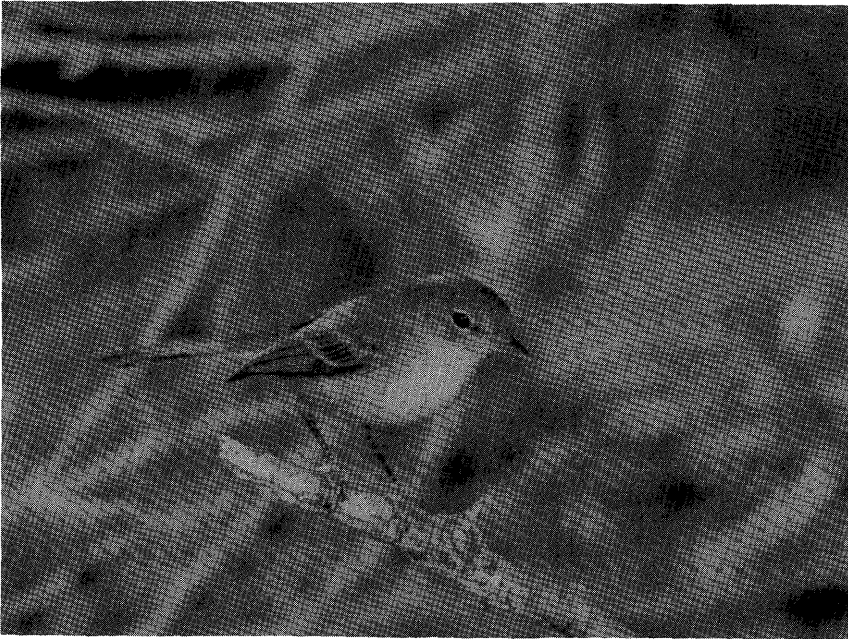


Figure 2: Photo of Bell's Vireo taken by Herbert Clarke, reproduced with his permission. It appears in *Terres Encyclopedia*, 1980, page 913.

## SPECIMEN REVIEW

There is an undated photograph of Bell's Vireo, subspecies not indicated (Figure 2), in the John Terres *Encyclopedia*, which closely resembles the bird I described above except in color (in any case, color registration varies greatly in different reproductions). At least one well-known biologist/birder, familiar with western forms in particular, says that "if the bird looks like the pictures in any of the standard field guides then it is most certainly NOT a Bell's Vireo"! (Kimball Garrett, personal communication). Several experienced field observers and the series of specimens at the American Museum of Natural History testify to the fact that Bell's Vireo often lacks a clearly demarcated supraloral, supercilium or both, and virtually never shows the definite spectacles commonly found on some other vireos.

There are four subspecies generally recognized, the nominate *bellii* which breeds in central and southern USA, herein referred to the "eastern" subspecies; *arizonae* breeding in the southwest and referred to below as the "western" form. The two additional are *medius*, which is essentially Mexican, and *pusillus*, known as Least Bell's Vireo, which according to the literature is confined to southern California and Baja California.

The appearance of the specimens also suggests that much of this variability is individual rather than geographic. *Bellii* differs from the western subspecies mainly in color; the upper plumage is olive rather than gray and there is much more yellow underneath. The facial markings and wing bars are rather more difficult to correlate with geographical origin and may be due to age, condition or individual variation. Feather wear and molt may be factors; the molts of the eastern subspecies appear to be little studied; most of the published information about this bird seems to pertain to the western forms. The bill is also variable. The light color on either mandible, although obvious on the specimens, is rarely mentioned in field descriptions, has been overlooked in almost all the painted portraits of the bird, and is often not visible on photographs. This lack may be due to variability, some quirk of field conditions or a difference between the bill color of living birds and specimens. Many birds also lack the characteristic hook at the end of the bill, possibly due to wear or individual differences.

When dealing with such a range of variability, it is necessary to consider alternatives. The thickish bill was wrong for a wood warbler or any "Old World" warbler (including kinglets) and no North American species of either group has the right combination of field marks in any known plumage. Ruby-crowned Kinglets (*Regulus calendula*), active in the immediate area at the time, are somewhat similar but much smaller with a tiny bill, a tear-drop eye-ring, a different wing pattern, and a very different jizz; other muscapid or sylvid warblers from Eurasia are even less similar. Chestnut-sided Warbler (*Dendroica pensylvanica*) immature has a much smaller, thinner bill and a

very different tone to the upperparts. Tennessee Warbler (*Vermivora peregrina*), like Warbling Vireo, is an "eye-striper" not an "eye-ringer" and, like all warbler candidates, has a very different bill. The most likely confusion species are other vireos: Warbling (*Vireo gilvus*), Philadelphia (*V. philadelphicus*), immature White-eyed (*V. griseus*) and Solitary (*V. solitarius*). The eyestripe or supercilium of the first two, and the wide, well-marked spectacles on the other two would rule them out. A white or whitish superloral is common on Bell's Vireo and a faint eye stripe is visible on some individuals but the bird in question showed very little of the one and nothing of the other. This degree of variability is characteristic of Bell's Vireo but not of the other species.

October 26 is a late date but not exceptionally so. An unusually late bird was present at Cape May from early December, 1996, well into the new year and birds have been reliably reported from Cape May and other eastern locations in late October and early November.

A good deal of mystery surrounds this species in New York State. This bird's place in the New York State avifauna is securely based on the specimen taken by D. Ford and Paul A. Buckley at the Fire Island lighthouse, 26 Sep, 1970 (USNM #566493). Another specimen (AMNH #708118) was taken at Island Beach, New Jersey, just south of the New York metropolitan area by Joseph R. Jehl, Jr., on 15 Sep 1959.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

No sight record of this species has ever been accepted in New York State. The only record accepted in Bull's 1964 *Birds of New York City* was the bird that Leroy Wilcox mistnetted and color photographed on September 25, 1959, at Tiana Beach, less than a mile down the beach from the bird I observed and only ten days after Jehl's specimen was taken in New Jersey. The photograph, said to have been deposited at the American Museum of Natural History, cannot be found at present and only the black and white reproduction in the 1970 *Kingbird* article (Figure 1) seems to survive. In addition to this record Bull (1974) also lists the specimen taken at Fire Island 26 Sep 1970. No other records are given credence by that author.

It is my opinion that this picture, together with Bull's remarks in both 1964 and 1974, caused a great deal of confusion about the field identification of this species in New York State. Judging by the printed photograph, the field marks appear to be at the edge of or even beyond the limits of what a Bell's Vireo ought to look like and only the wing and tail dimensions given in the accompanying article fall comfortably with its range. Bull reports that this photograph was identified by himself and Eugene Eisenmann by comparison with specimens at the AMNH, but the bird in the photograph does not closely resemble any specimen of this species currently in the museum trays. The

comparatively heavy bill, prominent white spectacles, substantial white wingbars, broad light-colored edging on the flight feathers, and grayish throat and upper breast, all appear to exceed the range of even a very variable species. If the measurements are correct, immature White-eyed Vireo is a possible alternative. "Cassin's" Solitary Vireo (*V. s. cassinii*) is strongly suggested by the appearance of the photograph but the given measurements are too small. The disappearance of the original color photograph only deepens the mystery. If this is a Bell's Vireo, it is at the far extreme of variability for this species and one must additionally consider the possibility that it is a hybrid.

In the article accompanying the reproduction of the photograph, Buckley and Post argue that many of sightings of this species in the state are undoubtedly correct and list a number of these. Since the appearance of this article, however, the species has only been recorded in the *Kingbird* on only one occasion: a singing bird on 12 Sep 1977 at the Wellwyn Estate in Glen Cove, Long Island, Nassau (Lauro 1978). There have, in fact, been other sight records by reliable observers in the interim but, in spite of the plea by Buckley and Post, they have apparently not been submitted or been rejected by editors. No sight records have ever been accepted by Bull or by NYSARC. The account of this species for the forthcoming revision of the *Birds of New York State* essentially continues to repeat the previously accepted New York information and a *de facto* moratorium on published field reports of this bird seems to prevail.

### RANGE OF VARIABILITY

Published descriptions and portraits of Bell's Vireo have contributed to the confusion surrounding this species. For example, Bull (1964) states categorically that Bell's Vireo does not have a conspicuous eye-ring but "merely a trace." The eye-ring is described in some sources as broken and in others as complete. In fact, the presence of some kind of eye-ring may be the single most dependable field mark! Already mentioned is the tendency of most field guide paintings to show the bird with marked spectacles. A more or less whitish supraloral, rarely prominent and sometimes quite obscure, is all that most birds show, and some do not even show much of that.

An examination of the series of specimens at the AMNH of both eastern and western subspecies reveals the extremes of variability. Most specimens show a dark loreal spot which often extends to the eye, interrupting the white eye ring; the whitish supraloral is often defined most clearly by contrast with the dark loreal. On many birds the dark loreal does not reach the eye, leaving the eye-ring complete. There is often little or no white on the supralorals. Some birds also show a supercilium, generally fairly faint. Any combination of one or more of these features seems to be possible with the eye-ring, broken or complete, as the most consistent feature, the other elements appearing in varying degrees of distinctness. It should be mentioned that many specimens have suffered from

poor handling in the area around the eye during preparation. However, much the same kind of variability shows in photographs of living birds.

Other features vary as well. Some birds show a relatively strong pair of wing bars, others show almost nothing. Generally, the lower bar is wider and strongly than the upper. The color of these bars is always white. The flight feathers show, at best, a thin, whitish (rarely yellowish) edging. One or both mandibles of the bill are light-colored on the specimens and the bill is often, but not invariably, strongly hooked; these bill features appear to be often overlooked in field descriptions for reasons already discussed.

### CONCLUSIONS

Evidently the confusion surrounding this species and Bull's strong doubts on the subject have inhibited observers and editors in New York from publishing observations of this bird. However, Bell's Vireo continues to be reported in New York by experienced observers. In 1996, likely individuals of this species were seen in New York City in Prospect Park (Gochfeld 1996) and Central Park (Starr Saphir, personal communication). These inhibitions, moreover, do not apply to New Jersey where the 1994 Cape May bird was accepted by the New Jersey state records committee (Larson 1996) and the 1996/97 bird has also been accepted (P. Lehman, personal communication).

As already suggested by Buckley and Post, *V. bellii* should not be a difficult species to recognize under the right circumstances, especially if its variability and the limits of this variability are better understood. Bull's descriptions of the status of the bird as "accidental" or "casual" may turn out to be overly cautious. In any case, it is time that the *de facto* moratorium on reporting this bird should be reconsidered.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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[Editorial note: A Bell's Vireo was reported by Robert Spahn on 14 May 1997. See Region 2 report in this issue.]

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