

LETTER — MORE ON BELL'S VIREOS IN THE EAST

Paul Lehman

PO Box 379, Cape May NJ 08204

In the September 1997 issue of *The Kingbird*, Eric Salzman tackles the difficult and potentially sensitive subject of Bell's Vireo (*Vireo bellii*) occurrence in New York State and elsewhere along the East Coast. I would like to add some additional information and perhaps clarify a couple of the points Salzman made in the article.

First off, Salzman is certainly correct when he says that there is a fair amount of mystery and confusion surrounding this species in the East. His quote from one western authority familiar with the species rings true: that if a reported Bell's Vireo "looks like the pictures in any of the standard field guides, then it is most certainly NOT a Bell's Vireo!" This statement is correct for some of the older guides still in use, such as the "Golden guide" (particularly misleading) and the "eastern Peterson" guide, whereas a few of the more recent guides, such as the National Geographic Society field guide, do a better job at depicting this species. These misleading pictures in the popular literature, coupled with the species' rather skulking behavior and preference for dense, brushy habitat, have been major contributing factors to the mystery and confusion that exists.

Reports in the East

Over the years there have been a number of reports of Bell's Vireos in the Northeast and mid-Atlantic states, most from fall, but also with some for spring and summer. If one looks more closely at the literature, however, many of these reports have not been accepted or are deemed hypothetical by the respective state authorities. For example, the sole pre-1990 report from Connecticut was not accepted by that state's bird records committee (Zeranski and Baptist 1990); a late-summer sight record from Cape May, New Jersey, in the late 1980s has since been retracted by one of the two observers (who now believes the bird was a young White-eyed Vireo); and published reports from Virginia and Georgia are judged "hypothetical" (Virginia Society of Ornithology 1987; E.S. Brinkley, pers. comm.; Georgia Ornithological Society 1977; G. Beaton, pers. comm.). Most of these reports are not necessarily erroneous, they apparently just lack sufficient documentation.

Documented records in New England include one collected in New Hampshire on 19 November 1897 (Dearborn 1903; specimen verified by A.R. Phillips, who thought it possibly not of the "eastern," nominate subspecies: *V. b. bellii*) and one photographed in Westport, Connecticut, on 14 October 1991 (Clark and Bevier 1993). In New Jersey, there have been some nine reports of Bell's Vireos since 1940, but most of these lack documentation. A specimen (now at the American Museum of Natural History) was collected at Island Beach State Park on 15 September 1959. There have been two recent documented

records of Bell's Vireos at Cape May: 30 October - 3 November 1994 and 4 December 1996 - 3 January 1997. Both birds were photographed and seen by many observers. The winter record is particularly unusual. Both birds appeared to be nominate *bellii*. That subspecies is brighter plumaged than the western forms, as noted by Salzman. It is also shorter tailed (Oberholser 1974), giving it a slightly different shape. Such were the impressions of several of the observers who studied the two recent Cape May birds. Some of these birders also commented that perhaps as a result of this difference in tail length, the birds did not flick or otherwise move their tails about in the fashion of a gnatcatcher, which is how many people describe the behavior of western Bell's, but more in the fashion of a weak Palm Warbler tail-wag.

The photo of a Bell's Vireo, taken by Herb Clarke and used by Eric Salzman to depict what a true [western] Bell's Vireo looks like, was probably from California. No matter which western race it is, it may appear slightly longer tailed than does *bellii*, the race most likely to occur along the East Coast.

True Status

So what is the true status of Bell's Vireo in the East? The nominate subspecies breeds in the Great Plains and Midwest. In the eastern part of its range (east to southwestern Michigan and Indiana) it is uncommon to rare, and local. Despite a general declining trend in the species' population as a whole, it appears to have recently spread eastward slightly to Ohio, where it is now a rare to casual transient and summer visitor (Peterjohn 1989). I would disagree somewhat with Salzman's assessment of this species' true status farther east, and think that it is of only casual occurrence in the Northeast and mid-Atlantic states. Bell's Vireos appear to be casual visitors in the Carolinas; in South Carolina, there is one specimen record for 14 October 1985 (Post and Gauthreaux 1989). The species borders on rare but regular in Florida (where it is a transient and winter visitor (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992, Stevenson and Anderson 1994).

Salzman summarizes some of the reports of Bell's Vireo in New York. I, too, believe the single photograph reproduced in his article of the bird in the hand at Tiana Beach, Suffolk County, on 25 September 1959 is a misleading depiction of a Bell's at best, and not a Bell's Vireo at worst. Single photographs are often misleading, and it can be "dangerous" to make definitive statements about subtly-plumaged birds based on just one photo and no available written details. But the bird in the photo does appear to show an eyering and wingbars that are bolder (thicker) than those of a typical Bell's. The bird also does not look quite right for a young (dark-eyed) White-eyed Vireo, arguably the most likely species with which a Bell's Vireo could be confused. It also doesn't look right for a Cassin's Vireo. I really am not sure what the bird in the photograph is.

No matter how all the past East Coast records of Bell's Vireos "shake out" in the end, several things are certain: this species does occur in this region, at least casually; it is not easy to identify (particularly if the observer has limited or no field experience with the species, especially the race *bellii*); and observers

should strive to carefully document all such reports, obtaining photographs and/or tape-recordings if possible.

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