

## BIRD NOTES by Rick Pyeritz

### The Blue-headed Vireo



*Order: Passeriformes (Perching Birds)*

*Family: Vireonidae*

*Genus: Vireo*

*Species: solitarius*

*Subspecies: alticola*

*...If a Solitary Vireo is among them, you may be treated  
to its sweet, beguiling periods, poignant in the singer's  
seeming innocent unawareness  
of the valedictory mood  
that imbues all....*

Charlton Ogburn  
**The Adventure of Birds**

We cannot pursue any natural study with love and enthusiasm without  
the object becoming a part of our lives. The birds, the flowers,  
the trees, the rocks all become linked with our lives and hold the key  
to our thoughts and emotions.

Not till the bird becomes a part of your life can its coming  
and its going mean much to you. And it becomes part of your life  
when you have taken heed of it with interest and affection, when you have established  
associations with it, when it voices the spring and summer to you calls up the spirit of the  
woods or the fields or the shore.

John Burroughs  
**The Gospel of Nature**

When I first visited Southeast Arizona in the late 80's, I heard what sounded like a raspy,  
Solitary Vireo song. After much searching, I found the songster, a very grayish Solitary Vireo.  
Many years later, I discovered that in 1997, the Solitary Vireo, based on DNA hybridization  
analysis, had been split into three species:

1. *Vireo Cassini*, Cassin's Vireo, which breeds primarily along the western slope of the  
Sierras
2. *Vireo plumbeus*, Plumbeous Vireo, which breeds primarily along the eastern slope of  
the Sierras
3. *Vireo solitarius*, Blue-headed Vireo, which breeds primarily from SW Canada,  
Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, New England, New Jersey and down the Southern  
Appalachians

Alexander Wilson first described this species in 1810 from one collected in Bartram's Woods in  
Philadelphia. He was familiar with it mainly during migration when the vireo is generally found  
flocking with groups of different sparrow species, but rarely with members of its own species.  
Hence its Latin name, *solitarius*, meaning solitary.

In 1885 William Brewster collected a Blue-headed Vireo around Highlands, North Carolina which differed from some Blue-headed Vireos found in New England. The New England subspecies was referred to as the Northern Race or *Vireo solitarius solitarius*. The North Carolina race had a stouter bill with darker, duller and more uniform coloration above. This subspecies was referred to as the Appalachian race, or *Vireo solitarius altilcola*. *Altilcola* in Latin means dweller of high places, most likely in reference to this subspecies' preference for breeding at higher elevations than the *solitarius* subspecies. James Tanner, former professor of Ornithology at University of Tennessee, noted that the Appalachian race arrived in the Smokies earlier in the spring and left later in the fall than the Northern race. Arthur Stupka, former chief naturalist for 30 years in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and author of *Notes on the Birds of Great Smoky Mountains National Park*, stated the earliest singing record for the Blue-headed Vireo was March 14 (1946).



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*Blue-headed Vireo by A. Lenk*

During fall migration, the Northern race migrates into Mexico and Central America. The Appalachian race is much less migratory, rarely leaving the United States and instead favoring the lowland forests of the Gulf coast

Besides being one of the earliest spring migrants to the Southern Appalachians, I also was attracted, as others have been, to the Blue-headed's song. Neltje Blanchan, author of [Bird Neighbors](#), stated in 1897, "The distinguishing quality of this Vireo's celebrated song is its tenderness; a pure, serene uplifting of its loving, trustful nature that seems inspired by a fine spirituality." Thomas Nuttall, writing to his friend, J.J. Audubon said, "Its song seems to be intermediate between that of the Red-eyed and Yellow-throated species....and the fine variety of the former in its tones."

This time of year (mid-May) the Blue-headed Vireo can easily be found at high elevation in mixed pine, spruce, hemlock and deciduous forests with beech alder, poplar, and birch trees.

The oldest recorded Blue-headed Vireo was at least 6 years, 5 months old. It was banded in Ontario and found in Guatemala.

Suggestions and/or questions email me at [eapyeritz@gmail.com](mailto:eapyeritz@gmail.com).