

Blue-headed Vireo *Vireo solitaries*



Folk Name: Solitary Vireo, Mountain Solitary Vireo

Status: Migrant, local Breeder, Winter Visitor

Abundance: Uncommon

Habitat: Mature pine/conifer forests (for breeding), mixed forests

The Blue-headed Vireo was once called the “Solitary” or “Mountain” Vireo. It is a medium-sized vireo with a slightly bulbous blue-gray head, white spectacles, white throat, and two obvious wing bars. It is white underneath with yellow on the sides. This vireo likes to nest and forage for food at mid-level in the canopy. It is well known for repeatedly singing its song throughout the day, although after breeding, it sings more slowly and the frequency of singing decreases noticeably. This bird generally winters in the Coastal Plain of the southeastern United States and south to Central America. Unlike many species of songbirds, the continental population of the Blue-headed Vireo has been slowly increasing for several decades.

During the nineteenth century in North Carolina, the Blue-headed Vireo was believed to have bred from the mountains “across the Piedmont to the edge of the coastal plain.” In South Carolina during that period, it was known only to nest in the mountains along the Blue Ridge escarpment. Leverett Loomis collected his first specimen of a Blue-headed Vireo in Chester County on October 27, 1877. He designated this species a migrant there and provided no records of it breeding in the Piedmont of South Carolina at that time.

In 1888 in Statesville, R.B. McLaughlin recorded their spring arrival as early as 21 March, and he was surprised to confirm breeding there that year. He found two nests, one on 2 June and one on 11 June. He collected the birds and nests and they were confirmed as belonging to the Appalachian subspecies *V.s. alticola*, a race that today generally breeds at higher elevations in the Appalachian Mountains from Georgia northward. Later that year, McLaughlin and ornithologist William Brewster published detailed accounts of three Blue-headed Vireo nests collected in North Carolina in the *Ornithologist and Oologist*. These were believed to be the first ever taken and formally described. Brewster’s nest was collected by W.S. Cairns in deciduous woods in Buncombe County.

McLaughlin noted these details of his Iredell nests:

The body of woods in which I found the nests consists wholly of pines, is high and dry...Turning my attention to the female I saw her step upon the side of her nest, which was suspended from a pine limb, and after drawing some webs across the bottom part and along the sides she got down in it.



She then flew to another tree and the male got in the nest. ...I found the pair had hatched a brood earlier in the year which was still following them. ...I took the nest of this pair with four fresh eggs on June 15th. The male was incubating and refused to be frightened from the nest. After throwing at him a few times, I buckled on my climbers and went up the tree—a small slim pine. The bird never left the nest until I placed my finger on his head.

Elmer Brown recorded one arriving in Salisbury on April 8, 1924. Allen Mills Jr. collected a nest of a “Mountain Solitary Vireo” in Mecklenburg County on the campus of Davidson College in the spring of 1932. In 1939, Charlie Sellers reported “Mountain” Vireos breeding in Charlotte. He examined a nest with three young birds on 4 June. His last sighting that year was on 21 October and he reported not finding them present in Charlotte during the winter.

Since the 1960s, Blue-headed Vireos have been reported nesting at sites in multiple counties in the Central Carolinas. Many of these were higher elevation sites. These birds were found regularly nesting above 1,200 feet in the Brushy Mountains of Alexander County. They were reported to be “fairly common” in the South Mountains above 1,400 feet. They were found at Crowders Mountain State Park in Gaston County and at Kings Mountain State Park and National Military Park in York County. They were found in the Uwharries in both Stanly County and Montgomery County.

Sightings during breeding season at lower elevation sites were mostly reported from the South Carolina portion of our region. Robin Carter found them at three sites in Chester County, all near Leeds in the Sumter National Forest, while he was conducting his 1989 BBS route. At one spot he watched adults feeding newly fledged young. The following year he reported seeing one

while conducting the “Salem Crossroads” Breeding Bird Survey on June 24, 1990, in Chester County. Lex Glover had a bird singing on territory in Lancaster County on May 30, 1991. Robin Carter found two males and a female at the Carolinas Sandhills NWR in Chesterfield County on June 16, 2002.

In *The South Carolina Breeding Bird Atlas*, published in 2003, ornithologist John Cely reports:

Atlas data shows it to be fairly widespread in the heavily forested middle piedmont, west of the Broad River...The bird is apparently missing as a breeder in much of the upper piedmont, which is heavily urbanized or consists of orchards, pasture, and other open, non-forest land...[and] Blue-headed Vireos are associated with pine forests more than any other vireo.

During the early 1980s, observers began to report Blue-headed Vireos lingering in winter in the Piedmont. Winter reports increased in the 1990s. One source noted that mild winters were responsible for this increase as they benefitted Blue-headed Vireo and other short-distance migrants that prefer forested habitats. Most were reported in November, December, and early January. Paul Hart reported one on the Gaston Christmas Bird Count on December 17, 1983. This bird was a highlight of that count. Bill Brokaw reported one visiting his suet feeder near Charlotte on January 30, 1986. Park Ranger Paul Hart had a few visiting throughout the season at Crowders Mountain State Park during the winters of 1986–1987 and 1987–1988. Blue-headed Vireos have been found somewhere in the region in winter almost

annually since 1995. Several have been documented in the month of February. However, this bird still remains a rare find on local Christmas Bird Counts with about 0.1 seen per party-hour on average over the last 20 counts.

Despite the rapid loss of appropriate nesting habitat in the latter part of the twentieth century, the Blue-headed Vireo remained designated a possible rare summer resident in Mecklenburg County through the early 1980s. No recent nest records are known and Breeding Bird Atlas volunteers found no evidence of breeding during the recent BBA survey. Therefore, in Mecklenburg County, the Blue-headed Vireo has been placed on the “Lost” list of breeding birds.



Blue-headed Vireo. (Jeff Lemons)

The instinct for a mother bird to feed its young is very powerful. Atkins Carson, a 10-year-old bird watcher from Charlotte, published this account of a Blue-headed Vireo he found on June 8, 1952, on a trip to the town of Blowing Rock:

I will never forget! I was playing in the woods close to a golf course with my brother, Charlie Carson, when suddenly I saw a little bird on the ground. It was crying for its mother, so I picked it up and put it on a bench about a foot away from where I was sitting. The mother bird came and fed the little bird! I was surprised that the mother wasn't afraid of me. I took the baby bird back to our cottage, which was about a block away from the woods. My father said it was a Blue-headed Vireo. About a half an hour later, I saw the mother bird out in front of the cottage calling to her baby, which I had put in a box. I took the little bird out and held it in one hand, and the mother bird came and stood on my other hand and fed it! She did this about a dozen times that day. Before we left for home the next morning, we put the baby bird in a tree, where its mother could feed it until it could fly.