

## Red-eyed Vireo *Vireo olivaceus*



**Folk Name:** Preacher, Hanger, Red-eyed Swinging Bird

**Status:** Breeder

**Abundance:** Common to Very Common

**Habitat:** Hardwood forests and mixed pine hardwood forests

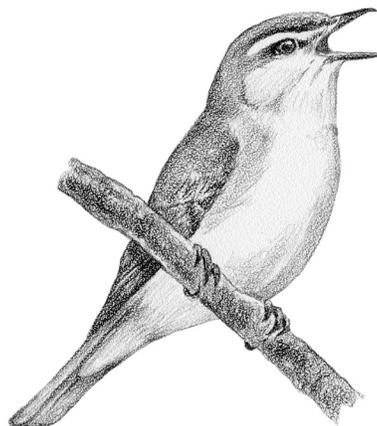
The Red-eyed Vireo is our most common and best known member of the vireo family. It is also the largest of our vireos, averaging 6 inches in length. Adults have a blue-gray head with a distinctive bright red eye and a white eyebrow outlined in black. Its body is olive green above and white below and it has no wing bars. Like our other vireos, this bird is more often heard than seen. It repeats its song over and over all day long, often while perched high up in a tree. This is why many local folk have called it “Preacher” or the “Preacher Bird.” One early interpretation of this bird’s call was: “You see it, you know it, do you hear me? Do you believe it?”

In June 1919, Charlotte businessman and birder C.M. Carson published this poem with a different interpretation of the song of the Red-eyed Vireo:

What little bird is it that’s up so soon, from early morn to sleepy moon? He is calling his dearie all day long, as he hops from limb with his pretty song. What is he saying with voice so clear? He is calling his dearie, Marie—come here. About little birds very few know, from whence they come or whither they go; I know all of them when they come in the spring, their notes are familiar with the sweet songs they sing. And without any rhyme or reason—this I know, that none of them have anything on the Vireo. He is a darling with voice sweet and clear, when he calls his dearie—Marie—come here.

Each spring, Red-eyed Vireos return to their breeding grounds in this region from their wintering grounds in Central and South America. Our earliest arrival date on record is 23 March, and our latest departure date is 23 October. We have no records of this bird in the Central Carolinas from the last week of October through the middle of March.

In the late 1800s, Leverett Loomis designated this vireo as abundant during migration and very common as a summer breeding bird in Chester County. R.B. McLaughlin reported them first arriving in Iredell County on April 8, 1885; April 15, 1887; and April 5, 1888. Elmer Brown reported them in Salisbury on April 21, 1923. William McIlwaine reported a Red-eyed Vireo in Charlotte on April 16, 1929. He later reported this species as a common local breeding bird and noted his



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last bird leaving during fall migration on 18 September of that year. McIlwaine had two arrive in Charlotte on April 14, 1930, and his last was seen on 24 September. Charlie Sellers reported a departure date of 13 October in 1939 and an early return date of 11 April in 1941.

Grace Anderson of Statesville published this anthropomorphic but eloquent account of the nesting activities of a pair of Red-eyed Vireos in *The Chat* in the summer of 1937:

There hangs a nest between a Willow Oak’s forked twig, made beautiful with ribaned paper, lichen and spider’s web. On June 17, we turned our field glasses on quivering leaves high above and saw the Red-eyed Vireo sewing her nest, using the overhand stitch, until it swung exquisite, a tiny basket of weed stalks, grasses and inner barks of trees. She draped the whole in soft trim of white paper-lichens-web, smoothed and plucked them, approved the effect with head turnings to right and left, as any woman plucks and approves a frilly dress. Intermittently for three days we watched the builder quietly working, but when the finishing layer of hair was brought her joy burst into sweet twitterings. She is the architect while her mate is proficient as a long-winded pleasant-voiced orator, or as a new-fangled musician. Is he talking or singing?

The day her work was done, her mate, of the doubtful profession, rose to near the top of their tree and in his pleasantly-serious, monotonous voice proclaimed it good. He perched in one spot, publishing his happiness for eight minutes. There were moments when his voice fell to a half-still, whispering sweetness that we have heard when

birds sing near their nests. The nest hangs thirty feet up, and three to five eggs will soon fill the cup-shaped home. Usually the nest is within ten feet of the ground in smaller trees but it is not unusual to find them as high as this.

Sarah Nooe reported 23 Red-eyed Vireos were amongst more than one hundred birds found dead at the base of the ceilometer tower at the Charlotte Municipal Airport on September 25, 1955. She found one with an injured wing, captured it, and tried to nurse it back to health, but it died by the first week of October. Joe and Becky Norwood collected 37 Red-eyed Vireos out of 400 dead songbirds killed during migration at the WSOC television tower in October 1959.

On July 11, 1958, Joe Norwood watched a Red-eyed Vireo in a branch of a dogwood tree at Camp Stewart near Charlotte. A juvenile Brown-headed Cowbird sitting on the ground nearby flew up to the Vireo and immediately began begging for food. Norwood reported:

The Vireo placed an insect in the Cowbird's mouth which the clumsy youngster promptly dropped; the foster parent immediately dropped to the ground, retrieved the insect and ate it itself. When the Vireo flew to another tree, it's oversized "child" followed in hot pursuit. After a few seconds search the

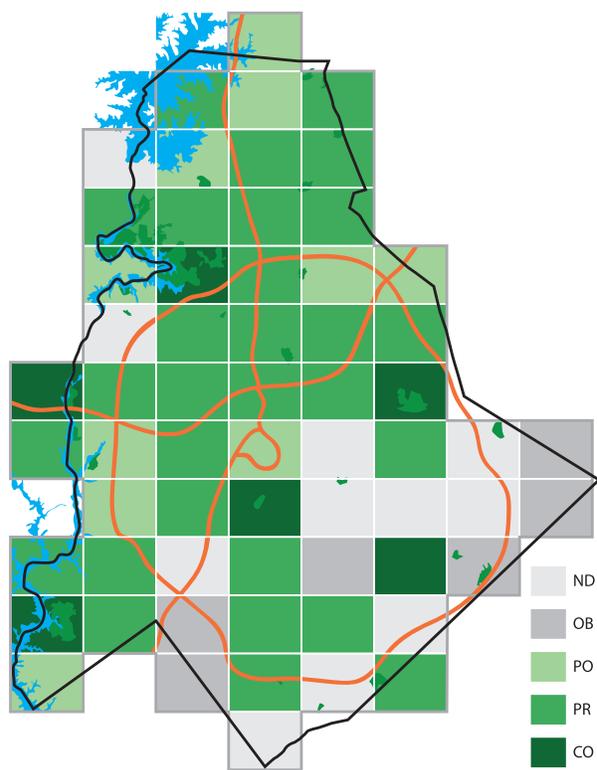


*Red-eyed Vireo at Latta Park in Charlotte. (Will Stuart)*

Vireo nabbed another insect which it was this time successful in poking down the Cowbird's throat.

The Red-eyed Vireo ranks in the list of the top 25 most common species of birds tallied (per party-hour) on the Charlotte Spring Bird Count. A single day tally of 106 birds on the Charlotte count in the spring of 2014, is the highest one-day count in the region.

Data collected for the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas indicate that despite development, the Red-eyed Vireo remains a widespread breeding bird in the county. One Red-eyed Vireo nest was found hanging in the fork of an oak branch growing directly over a dirt trail at Latta Plantation Nature Preserve in Huntersville. The nest was about 20 feet off the ground, just above the heads of the many equestrian riders that regularly ride this well-used trail. At another nest, young of a second brood fledged on the late date of 27 June.



### **Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:**

*Widespread (PR/29, CO/6)*