

## Warbling Vireo *Vireo gilvus*



**Folk Name:** (none)

**Status:** Migrant and casual Breeder

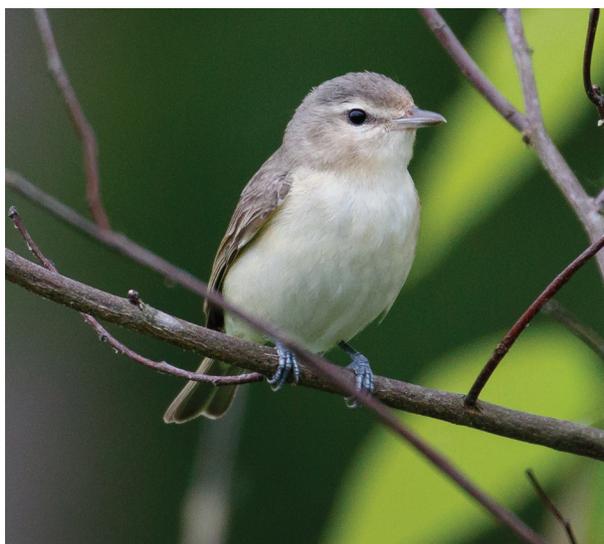
**Abundance:** Rare

**Habitat:** Hardwood trees lining creeks and rivers in open country

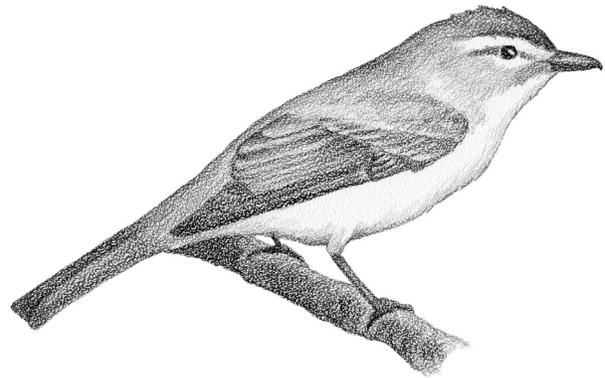
This 5-½-inch songster is nondescript, and it is certainly our least colorful vireo. It looks a bit like a dull Philadelphia Vireo without dark lores and with a wide white eye-line without a black border. It is mostly white below and has no wing bars. It has been called a true “warbling” vireo as this bird “sings more than four thousand songs a day during breeding season.” Its song has been interpreted as: “If I could see it, I would seize it and would squeeze it till it squirts.”

The Warbling Vireo is commonly found throughout almost all of the United States during breeding season or migration, with the unfortunate exception of parts of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. In North Carolina in the 1980s, zoologist Harry LeGrand declared that for most birders, this vireo “is a ‘once-a-decade’ find east of the mountains.” In South Carolina, it wasn’t even verified as officially present in the state until June 29, 1989, and it remains a rare find there today.

This bird is primarily known as a rare spring migrant in the Carolina Piedmont and there are only a handful of fall reports. Spring migrants have been reported in this region as early as 22 April, and they have generally moved through by the second or third week of May. Fall migrants have been recorded as early as 2 August and as late as 11 October. Three birds is our highest one-day count.



Warbling Vireo. (Barry Rowan)



Surprisingly, almost all of our twentieth century reports are from Mecklenburg County. Our earliest reference of a possible sighting was on April 21, 1930, William McIlwaine wrote: “And down in the bottom at Elliott’s, in a high tree on the edge of a wood I saw what must have been a warbling vireo. A little gray bird, with short, slightly indented tail, slow-moving. He was silent. But I believe it to have been a warbling vireo.”

Elizabeth Clarkson reported one was seen in Charlotte in May 1940 and designated the bird a “rare transient” in Mecklenburg County. Two Warbling Vireos were reported by birders conducting the Charlotte Spring Bird Count on May 6, 1961. It was one of only three species highlighted with a “bold” designation on that count. Another Warbling Vireo was reported in Charlotte on May 9, 1981. (None of the first three editions of the Clarkson checklists include the 1940 Warbling Vireo record that is included in the 1986 edition. The observation was not published in any other source, so it is unclear where this sighting date was obtained.) Harriett Whitsett and her Charlotte Spring Bird Count party found one on May 7, 1988, and reported it after “careful study.” David Wright reported a Warbling Vireo in Mecklenburg County in the spring of 1989, but no details were provided.

Lisa Beckstrom sighted one while conducting a research project on neotropical migrants at Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge on September 27, 1996, providing a rare fall report for the region. Lyle Campbell reported one along the Broad River in Cherokee County on May 10–13, 1997. Marek Smith had one in Mecklenburg County on May 4, 1997. The author reported one at the McAlpine Greenway in Charlotte on May 14, 1998. Tim Kalbach reported one at South Carolina’s Broad River Wildlife Management Area in Fairfield County on September 12, 1998. Dwayne Martin found one in Catawba County at Glenn Hilton Park in Hickory on September 19, 2000.

The fact that this bird does not regularly breed in the

Piedmont of North Carolina is a bit of a mystery and it has generated much discussion over the years. This vireo's preferred habitat, described as "open hardwoods along rivers and large streams," appears to be abundant in the region. The bird is known to breed in this habitat in the mountains of North Carolina and Virginia.

The Warbling Vireo is known to occasionally linger and breed when it is found east of its usual range. Along with a smattering of migrant reports, we have had several reports of possible breeding in the Central Carolina region since the turn of the twenty-first century.

Simon Thompson and Jo Ann Martin confirmed a breeding pair on territory in Cleveland County in June 2000. In May 2006, "up to three Warbling Vireos" were seen several times in an ash grove directly behind a jewelry store across from Concord Mills Mall in Cabarrus County. Warbling Vireos were found at this wetland each breeding season through 2010—but direct evidence of nesting remained elusive.

In May 2010, Monroe Pannell found three spots with singing males on territory on Lookout Shoals Lake in Catawba County. These birds were found in a floodplain with a small grove of cottonwood trees along the lake edge.

They returned each year through at least 2013. Pannell noted he never "confirmed breeding at this location. But have to believe it is occurring."

Nesting has also been suspected in Mecklenburg County on several occasions. Alan Kneidel encountered a singing Warbling Vireo while walking along the McMullen Creek Greenway in south Charlotte on May 22, 2006. Excellent habitat was present. Tom Ledford found one at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge on June 21, 2013. Several birders reported at least one Warbling Vireo regularly singing in a grove of willows along the Lower McAlpine Greenway in May 2009 and again in May 2015. Rob Van Epps and Jeff Lemons photographed a pair of Warbling Vireos at the Wallace Farm in eastern Mecklenburg County on May 14, 2016. One bird was singing in some willows around two farm ponds. Van Epps noted: "The singing bird aggressively and immediately responded to a tape (so I stopped playing)." The pair was relocated there a week later.

The breeding population of the Warbling Vireo in North Carolina is currently listed as "Significantly Rare," meaning the population exists in small numbers and needs monitoring.