

Bell's Vireo (*Vireo bellii*) Documented in Carteret County, North Carolina

John Fussell¹ and John Voigt²

¹ 1412 Shepard Street, Morehead City, NC 28557; jfuss@clis.com

² 1105 Timber Trail, Emerald Isle, NC 28594

On the morning of 4 November 2007, the authors conducted a survey of birds at North River Farms in central Carteret County, NC. This wetland restoration area is located near the North River estuary, north of the communities of Bettie and Otway. In the late morning, while we were working along the prominent shrub line that forms the north boundary of the property, we discovered a bird we soon identified as a Bell's Vireo (*Vireo bellii*).

We first noticed the bird because of its whiny, scolding calls, which we assumed to be the calls of a White-eyed Vireo (*V. griseus*). Because the bird was deep in the shrub vegetation, we played the White-eyed Vireo song and calls on an iPod, and the bird came into view almost immediately. We then saw that although the bird was generally colored like a White-eyed Vireo, it was nevertheless different. It was obviously much slighter in build and had dark eyes and a very subtle face pattern. We quickly concluded that the bird was likely a Bell's Vireo, and we began to study the bird's various field marks to confirm our identification.

After our initial encounter, we played the song of Bell's Vireo on the iPod. The bird became very inquisitive and came as close as 3m in the edge of the roadside vegetation. During the next few minutes, the bird sang several times. Its song matched the Bell's Vireo recording perfectly. We also played the songs of Philadelphia (*V. philadelphicus*) and Warbling (*V. gilvus*) vireos to refresh our memories and to compare them to the song of this vireo.

Over the next half-hour we studied the bird in excellent light at extremely close range, often as close as the minimum focus on our 10x binoculars. As noted, the bird had the same basic color pattern as a White-eyed Vireo: greenish back, wings, and tail and yellow-tinged belly, flanks, and undertail coverts. The throat was white. The bird could be described as having "one-and-a-half" wing-bars in that the upper one was very faint. The bill had a typical vireo shape, moderately thick with a curved culmen, but it was relatively small. The irides were clearly seen to be brown. The grayish face at first appeared to be plain and unmarked, but closer inspection showed faint whitish spectacles and a faint eye-line. Because the eye-ring was broken by the eye-line, it might be best to describe it as two eye-crescents, one above and one beneath the eye. The legs were bluish or blue-gray, bluer legs than we had ever seen on a vireo before. Periodically the bird pumped its tail somewhat in the manner of a Palm Warbler (*Dendroica palmarum*), and it flicked its wings several times.

This bird seemed typical of the eastern population (mostly *V. bellii bellii*), as portrayed in Sibley (2000), in that it was relatively colorful. (Subspecies are based on Brown 1993.) Southwestern populations, consisting of *V. bellii arizonae* and *V. bellii pusillus*, are typically more grayish and plain. However, birds breeding in western Texas southward into adjacent Mexico (*V. bellii medius*) are reported to be intermediate in appearance (Sibley 2000; Joseph Morlan, pers. comm.), and an origin from this area could not be ruled out. In addition to appearance, the Palm Warbler-like tail-pumping is also consistent with the bird's being from the eastern portion of the species' range (Sibley 2000). Birds from the southwestern populations are reported to flick their tails like gnatcatchers.

The habitat at the site is a narrow strip of shrubs and young trees along a canal, bordered on both sides by vast fields and old fields. It resembles what Brinkley (2007) describes as typical habitat for the eastern population of the species.

Later in the afternoon, Fussell returned to the site with Derb Carter, Ricky Davis, John Dole, Harry LeGrand, and Jeff Pippen. Once again, we were able to observe the bird very closely. Davis, Dole, and Pippen obtained several excellent photographs (Fig. 1) of the bird. The photographs support the observations described above, especially in showing that the upper wing-bar was present but was quite faint. Photos taken in relatively poor light suggest that the bird had a plain gray face, but those taken with better light clearly show the faint spectacles.

Fussell returned to the area with several birders the next morning (5 November) and quickly relocated the bird. The vireo was last seen in the late afternoon of 5 November, by Fussell and Jeff Lewis. Efforts to relocate the bird on the morning of 8 November and following days were unsuccessful.

The NC Bird Records Committee has accepted this record of Bell's Vireo based on photos taken by Davis, Dole, and Pippen, and a written description provided by LeGrand (LeGrand et al. 2008). This is the second definitive record of the species in the state. The first was a bird seen and photographed at Carolina Beach State Park on 21 September 2006 by James Parnell (LeGrand et al. 2007).

There are also three previous sight reports not supported by photographs. The written details of a report from 2002 and another from 2006 were considered unacceptable by the NC Bird Records Committee (LeGrand et al. 2004, 2007). Another report of a Bell's Vireo from near Zebulon, Wake County on 10 Aug 1974 (Potter 1975) was accepted by the Committee (North Carolina Bird Records Committee 1990) but is in our opinion unconvincing, because the details do not rule out the possibility that the bird was a juvenile White-eyed Vireo. Specifically, Potter's (1975) belief that the presence of white spectacles eliminated the possibility of White-eyed Vireo is incorrect (Sibley 2000, 347).



Figure 1. Bell's Vireo found at North River Farms 4 November 2007. Note vireo bill, faint whitish spectacles, and presence of "one-and-a-half" wing-bars. Photo by Ricky Davis.

Literature cited

- Brown, B. T. 1993. Bell's Vireo. *In* The Birds of North America, No. 35 (A. Poole, P. Stettenheim, and F. Gill, Eds.). Philadelphia: The Academy of Natural Sciences; Washington, DC: The American Ornithologists' Union.
- Brinkley, E. S. 2007. National Wildlife Federation Field Guide to Birds of North America. Sterling Publishing Company, New York.
- LeGrand, H. E., Jr., K. E. Camburn, S. Cooper, R. J. Davis, E. V. Dean, W. K. Forsythe, and R. L. Tyndall. 2004. 2003 annual report of the North Carolina Bird Records Committee. *Chat* 68:1–5.
- LeGrand, H. E., Jr., K. E. Camburn, S. Cooper, R. J. Davis, E. V. Dean, W. K. Forsythe, and R. L. Tyndall. 2007. 2006 annual report of the North Carolina Bird Records Committee. *Chat* 71:1–5.
- LeGrand, H. E., Jr., K. E. Camburn, S. Cooper, R. J. Davis, E. V. Dean, W. K. Forsythe, and R. L. Tyndall. 2008. 2007 annual report of the North Carolina Bird Records Committee. *Chat* 72:7–10.
- North Carolina Bird Records Committee. 1990. Report of the North Carolina Bird Records Committee, 1990. *Chat* 54:53–58.
- Potter, E. F. 1975. Bell's Vireo seen in Wake County, N.C. *Chat* 39:92–93.
- Sibley, D. A. 2000. National Audubon Society The Sibley Guide to Birds. Alfred A. Knopf, New York.