



WILDLIFE NOTES



BELL'S VIREO



Bell's vireo (*Vireo bellii*) resembles other vireos, wood warblers and other insect-eating birds that have small, short, sturdy bills. This small songbird measures almost five inches long. It is pale colored, with faint eye rings ("spectacles"), and double wing bars. Its song is unique, sounding harsh and squeaky. "Zheedle zheedle zheedle zhoo? (pause), zheedle zheedle zheedle zheel!"; it sounds as if someone is asking a question and moments later answering the question himself.

The upper parts of this bird are brownish gray, and the underparts whitish—with sides washed with olive in fresh plumage. The iris is dark brown, and the bill and legs are bluish gray.

The Bell's vireo breeds from southern California to the Great Plains and adjoining parts of the Midwest to northern Mexico. The subspecies *V. b. arizonae* summers locally in the lower Gila Valley and in Guadalupe Canyon and San Simon Cienaga in Hidalgo County, with occasional birds in the lower San Francisco Valley. *V. b. medius* summers very locally in the lower Rio Grande and the lower Pecos Valleys. Most common habitat areas are Rocky Arroyo and Rattlesnake Springs in Eddy County.

In New Mexico, this bird is most often found in dense shrubs or woods along lowland streams where willows, mesquite and seep willows grow. These vireos feed on insects, moving deliberately, gleaning food from branches and leaves. These birds are difficult to spot, but their song draws attention to their presence. This is generally the only vireo breeding along lowland streamsides, although other species occur there in migration; gray vireos (*V. vicinior*) may breed on nearby slopes.

The nest is a cup of grasses and other plant parts slung between twigs or small stems not far above the ground. They lay three to five white eggs, speckled with brown.

Bell's vireos have declined in southern California but elsewhere their numbers have remained

stable. In New Mexico, given the amount of habitat destruction that has occurred, Bell's vireo has almost certainly declined for this reason alone. In addition, there is evidence that this bird may have become endangered as the result of unintentionally raising brown-headed cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) chicks.

Cowbirds lay their eggs in the nests of vireos, then the vireos hatch and rear the cowbirds' young. The cowbirds typically destroy eggs or kill the young of the vireos, with the result that only young cowbirds will be raised by adult vireos. Cowbirds are often common in the areas frequented by Bell's vireos. Cowbird numbers have apparently greatly expanded in recent times, which is an unfortunate fact with which some vireo populations have to cope.

Preservation and restoration of streamside and adjacent habitats are essential to conserving this species in the state. There is little chance that the numbers of cowbirds can be controlled to the point of benefitting this vireo.

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