Lumps & Splits

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The Solitary Vireo has never attracted much attention. Quietly sneaking its way through deciduous canopy leaves — and the leaves of field guides, two-thirds of the way back — it has pretty much kept to itself. Moderately common through most of the contiguous U.S. and Canada during spring and summer, it has not been lusted after by birders, as are some of its rarer congeners. It’s a low-profile, low-maintenance native bird; things have always been relatively uneventful for its populations as a whole.

Then in July of this year the Solitary Vireo’s taxonomy and phylogenetic placement were reorganized. Not only was this species split into three, but vireos as a group move way up the checklist, just behind shrubs, to begin the oscine passerines (“songbirds”). Their traditional list placement and erroneously perceived close relationship to wood warblers were due perhaps to the simple fact that all these birds are small, green-and-yellow insectivores. Now the two groups are separated by such diverse tribes as corvids, flycatchers, swallows, parids, wrens, thrushes, and thrashers.

Vireos are not like warblers. There are lots of different kinds of warblers, and most of them are pretty. That’s it. Pretty and helpless. Vireos have personality... and grit. Anyone who has banded birds or had other reasons to hold them knows: warblers submit, vireos fight; warblers lay still, vireos struggle to escape; warblers stare in frightened silence, vireos chew on knuckles and rave in protest. These really are different kinds of birds, and ornithological chemistry has finally established that they are not closely related.

During the 1970s and early ‘80s, we ran 12 PRBO natural excursion trips to southeast Arizona, and everyone who was there saw Plumbeous Vireos. I told you to put them in the bank and wait until they matured; it is now time to take them out.

The revisions by the American Ornithologists’ Union (AOU) Committee on Taxonomy and Nomenclature, summarized here, appeared in the 41st supplement to the AOU Checklist of North American Birds in their own journal The Auk.

The new species: Three of the former races (subspecies) of Solitary Vireo are now considered separate species. Of course, the birds themselves do not care.

Blue-headed Vireo (Vireo solitarius) is the eastern one. It nests in the northeastern U.S. and all Canadian provinces. Many winter in the Gulf states and eastern Mexico. Plumbeous Vireo (Vireo plumbeus) is the desert one. It nests on mountains in the Chihuahuan and Sonoran deserts and in the southern Great Basin. Most winter in western Mexico. Cassin’s Vireo (Vireo cassini) is the western one. It nests at mid-elevations in mountains in the far west and north throughout most of western British Columbia. Most winter in western Mexico.

Geographical default & identification: Unless something just won’t fit, it is always best to name a bird as the normal kind for the geographic region where you see it. If you are on the West Coast during fall and see a vireo that is brighter than field guide pictures of Cassin’s (or than the Cassin’s you sang six weeks ago), consider that it might be a fancy juvenile Cassin’s — their first plumage is the most colorful they will ever wear — before blustering out Blue-headed. If you see a dull vireo lacking any color, consider that it might be a very worn adult Cassin’s — in need of a good molt — before picking Plumbeous.

It is unlikely that the flashy and citrus-colored solitarius (lime green back, lemon-yellow sides and flanks) would ever be taken for the dull plumbeus, but bright and dull cassini can be (and are) mistaken for both the others, respectively. The field guides are almost adequate to cause correct ID for individuals in decent plumage.

Bright, crisp Hutton’s Vireos resemble worn or wilted Cassin’s, and we have seen faded, featureless adult Plumbeous placed on life lists and taken home as Gray Vireos.

Voice: The Solitary Vireo has been labeled somewhere as the “question-and-answer bird,” and each of the three born-again species would qualify for that anthropomorphism. The song, given in two phrases, has been written “chu wee...cheerio,” with a rising, questioning inflection to the first element and an even, assertive one to the second. Songs of Blue-headed and Cassin’s are essentially the same, while Plumbeous has a burly quilty more like the song of Yellow-throated Vireo. A series of loud, grating scold notes are unique to the group.

Distribution: Cassin’s is an uncommon breeder in northern California’s Coast Ranges (except in the fog belt), Sierra Nevada, and Cascades in places shaded by deciduous forest. During mild winters a few individuals (never more than ten) are found on northern California Christmas Bird Counts. Blue-headed is a very rare vagrant on the California coast from late September into November. Plumbeous is an uncommon breeder on the east side of the Sierra Nevada, from Mono County south, and is a rare vagrant along the coast during migration, especially fall. A wee few individuals winter in California, in numbers equal to Cassin’s in the state but rarer in the north, with the northernmost record at Bodega Bay.

Ask birders what their favorite bird is, and most will say Gyrfalcon or Golden Eagle or something similarly glamorous. Not me. While Skua, the big pirate, is at the top of my list, the scrappy, chatty Solitary Vireo(s) are a strong second.

May the beauty of nature bring you peace and hope, and may the importance of protecting it help you guide your plans for the new year.

As the season change and the holidays come upon us, we at PRBO also begin to look forward to a new year of providing scientific support for the conservation of birds and their habitats. At Palomarin Field Station, the Farallon Islands, the California coast, throughout the western United States, and in Latin America, PRBO biologists and volunteers collect data in the field, analyze long-term trends, and develop solutions to problems threatening wildlife populations and ecosystems.

As you prepare for your holidays, please consider a gift to PRBO.