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The colorful male black-capped vireo is only four and a half inches long. He actively defends his nest and young. Photos by John Shackford

*From one who loves the vireo's song.*

## Unique Is Hardly The Word

By Euelda N. Sharp

Come with me to the red rock canyon country of Western Oklahoma—I want you to meet a unique resident of this special area. Bring along your binoculars, and we'll go on some early morning in May.

When we arrive in the canyon country just south and east of Hinton, a soft haze is rising from the hills and ravines and the air is full of bird sounds. A mourning dove coos like a gentle sigh, a titmouse scolds, and a tattletale bluejay sounds his raucous note of alarm. From somewhere down the road a wren trills its exuberant song.

Suddenly, a clump of bushes almost explodes with a cascade of emphatic protest. We peer into the tangled clump and finally locate the tiny singer as he flits madly from limb to limb, uttering his hurried call from each perch.

Ah-h-h! This is the little fellow we've come to see. He is a black-capped vireo (*Vireo atricapillo*), a species whose rigid habit requirements seem to be satisfied only by certain parts of the Oklahoma canyon country in spring and summer.

Often listed as a rare species, this vireo qualifies as a pioneer resident of our state. In fact, it was first reported in what is now Blaine County in 1901, well before statehood.

The birds arrive in Oklahoma in late April each year to breed and nest, then retreat to their wintering grounds in Western Mexico in late August.

They prefer grassy hillsides riddled by ravines and spotted with bushy clumps of young blackjack oaks and cedars with foliage clear to the ground. When trees grow tall or cattle strip the underbrush, the species disappears. In the early days, Indians periodically burned large areas of the rolling prairies and this probably helped perpetuate the kind of habitat needed by the birds.

The little bird we're watching continues trying to sing us away from his hiding place. He sounds angry—his nest is probably inside this clump of blackjack shrubs. Watch him through your binoculars while I go on with his story.

The black-capped vireo is unique, not only because of the restricted area in Oklahoma it calls home in spring and summer, but also because of several traits which set it apart even from other species of vireos.

First of all, it is the brightest colored of all eight species which occur in the

state. Look at the glossy black cap on this male we're watching (now you know where it got its name!). Females and immatures wear gray ones. Nearly complete white rings around the red eyes look almost like spectacles. His back is greenish; his throat, breast, and underparts are white, brushed with greenish yellow on the sides; his wings show two yellow wing bars.

Next, its song varies from most other vireos. It contains many different phrases and is delivered in a hurried rush, while most other vireos slowly repeat the same monotonous phrases over and over.

A third difference is habitat preference. Other vireos feed slowly and deliberately through forest treetops. Only the black-capped and one other--the Bell's vireo--select low, brushy sites for their nests.

Its behavior makes the black-capped vireo distinctive too. Restless and quite active, it behaves more like a warbler.

Oh, look! There's the nest, a short little cup suspended from the fork of a limb in the center of the blackjack clump, about four feet from the ground. It's woven with fine grasses, roots, and strips of cedar bark or grapevine; and bits of spider web decorate the rim (this is a typical vireo habit).

Three or four eggs make up the usual clutch. This one has three. Here we see the final way this species differs from its kind: the eggs are pure white. Other vireo eggs are speckled with brown. Would you believe that one little 4½-inch bird could be so unique?

Let's walk down the road now and leave the birds to their nesting duties. Too much disturbance might cause them to abandon the area.

Thanks to a detailed study made by Mrs. Jean W. Graber during 1954 to 1956, we know more about the habits and behavior of the black-capped vireo than about many other birds. Her study was conducted as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. degree at OU, and the base site was near Cogar, Oklahoma.

According to Mrs. Graber, the males return in the spring a little ahead of the females. They establish their territories by song, warning other male intruders away. The birds appear to gather in loose colonies of three to five pairs, each with a territory of two or more acres.

Although the males may build a nest or two in different places in their territories, the serious nest building is

done by the female, who begins soon after she arrives in territory and has found a mate. First nests of the season may take four or five days to complete; later nests are built in less time.

Egg laying begins the day after the nest is completed, and one egg is laid each day for three or four days. Incubation begins when the second or third egg is laid, and both male and female share this chore during the day; the female spends the night on the nest.

When the eggs hatch--in about 14 to 17 days--both parents share the job of feeding larvae, spiders, and small flies to the hungry young. Mrs. Graber observed that the male provided about three-fourths of the food for the brood. As the babies grow, the *number* of feedings stays the same, but the *size* of the food items increases. Grasshoppers and katydids make up the meals now.

The young birds grow rapidly and leave the nest in about 10-12 days. The male parent continues to care for them for five or six more weeks, while the female begins a second nest. She may care for this brood by herself, but sometimes will take another mate to help her.

And so the life cycle of the beautiful black-capped vireo has repeated itself since it was first discovered in Oklahoma 85 years ago. But today, this feathered pioneer is in big trouble, not only in our state, but throughout its range.

Once reported regularly in a broad band from South-central Texas, through the cross-timbers area of Oklahoma, and into Kansas, black-capped vireos were found in 1985 in only three locations within the state, and none north of Blaine County. Known population in Texas has also diminished greatly. Researchers who literally beat the bushes last year for the elusive little birds estimate that there were fewer than 120 adults in the Oklahoma summer population; only 45-50 birds were actually seen. The vireo has now been recommended for federal Endangered Status and probably will be designated as such this year.

What caused this decline in population? Scientists and government officials who have been closely observing the birds for the last three years have identified several factors which affect their survival. Among them are habitat destruction due to overgrazing, drought, and urbanization; and nest

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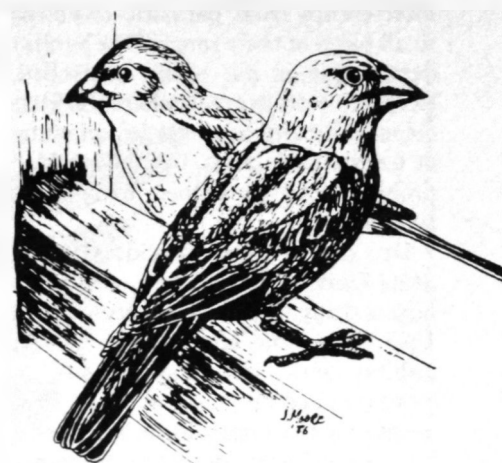


ILLUSTRATION BY JACK MOORE

## The Brown-Headed Cowbird

*Molothrus ater*

**Length:** 6-8 in.

**What to look for:** conical bill; male glossy black, with dark brown head; female gray, with paler throat. **Habitat:** farmlands, groves, forest edges, river woodlands.

## A Social Pariah

Few birds are as generally disapproved of as the Brown-headed Cowbird, which lays its eggs in the nests of other birds, particularly flycatchers, sparrows, vireos, and warblers. A newly hatched cowbird quickly grows larger than the rightful nestlings and devours most of the food; it may even push the hosts' eggs or young out of the nest. The foster parents feed the huge intruder until it can fly.

They range over most of the U.S., but are migrants in the North. In Oklahoma during the winter, the males and females gather in separate flocks and sometimes roam with other blackbirds. When feeding on the ground among other birds, cowbirds can be recognized by the way they hold their tails high in the air.

Male song is a gurgled, creaky "glug-glug-glee." He sometimes gives a high whistle, with two lower notes. The female makes a chattering sound.

Look closely at the drawings; the birds' silhouettes are distinctive--slightly sloping heads, short tails, and stubby beaks. This bird in your yard means trouble for nesting songbirds in spring and summer.

interference from parasitic cowbirds in all parts of their range. The habitat destruction is not easily controlled, except in certain areas where the little colonies luckily have settled on state- or federal-park lands, but the cowbird problem can be helped by human intervention.

Dr. Joseph Grzybowski, Central State University professor of biology, began studying the vireo situation in 1983. When the birds in the Hinton habitat area, and another site in Texas, raised no young at all in 1984 because of the cowbirds, he launched a pilot experiment in decoy trapping. Aimed at reducing the cowbird population in nesting areas, this method employs a large wire trap in which several live cowbirds are placed. These decoys attract other cowbirds that enter the trap, are unable to leave, and can be removed from the premises. Decoy trapping has been successfully used to aid the rare little Kirtland warbler in Michigan, and it was successful in Oklahoma too. In 1985, 10-11 young were fledged from the Hinton colony, and the Texas site reported the same encouraging results.

The parasitic cowbird phenomenon is itself unique, and the damage it does is not limited to the black-capped vireo. Many of our loveliest songbirds--the cardinal and oriole among them--are suffering as cowbird numbers increase all over the U.S.

The brown-headed cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) is a small blackbird which feeds around corrals and cattle feed lots. The female cowbird builds no nest. Instead, she simply watches until she finds one unattended, deposits her egg, and goes blithely on her way. The host bird feeds and raises the young cowbird, at the expense of its own young, since the cowbird egg hatches earlier and the baby is bigger than the host's own.

Has help come too late to save this long-time resident of Western Oklahoma? We hope not.

Dr. Grzybowski and his associates expanded their trapping efforts this spring to help the vireo hold its own against the cowbird threat. They also continue to search likely habitat areas all over the state to see if other vireo populations exist. Much has been learned about this little songster, but much more must be learned if it is to survive this modern world. The very uniqueness of the species is working against it now.

If the black-capped vireo, its beauty



The gray-capped female vireo cocks her head to peer closely at her nest. Note how it is draped with spider web strands.



Typical black-capped vireo habitat near Hinton, Oklahoma: cedar/brush-rimmed ravines and grassy, rolling hills. Photo by Euelda Sharp

and distinctive song disappear from the Western Oklahoma landscape, certainly no great economic loss would result. But just as certainly, its loss would mean one more species gone from the natural world which loses ground every day. And even if we don't realize it, the wild community adds much to the quality of life for everyone.

The Indians understood.

Crowfoot, Orator for the Blackfoot Confederacy, put it this way:

"What is life? It is the flash of a firefly in the night. It is the breath of a buffalo in the winter time. It is the little shadow which runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset."

Many people are working hard to keep the black-capped vireo from becoming a little shadow which loses itself in some August sunset and does not return with the spring.

Let them succeed! 