

FEATURED PHOTO

APPARENT EASTERN BELL'S VIREO IN SAN FRANCISCO

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Bell's Vireo (*Vireo bellii*) has four recognized subspecies: *V. fa. beltii*, which breeds from eastern Colorado east to the Mississippi River and south to central Texas and Tamaulipas; *V. b. medius*, which breeds from southwestern Texas south to Durango and Coahuila; *V. b. arizonae*, which breeds from the Colorado River east through Arizona and south to Sonora; and *V. b. pusillus*, the Least Bell's Vireo, which breeds in California and northwestern Baja California (AOU 1957, Brown 1993, Unitt 1985, Pyle 1997).

Most California records of Bell's Vireo refer to either *pusillus* or *arizonae*. We report here a bird showing characteristics of one of the other eastern subspecies, probably nominate *bellii*, in San Francisco.

On October 30, 2005 Emilie Strauss along with Mike McClaskey, Steve Hayashi, and Lillian Fujii found a vireo they were unable to identify in the McClaren Rhododendron Dell in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco. They alerted Alan Hopkins, who tentatively identified it as an eastern Bell's Vireo (probably *V. b. bellii*), an opinion shared by many subsequent observers. The bird remained until 28 November 2005 when last reported by Pat Greene (Armstrong 2005, Glover et al. 2006).

Morlan visited the site 31 October 2005 and obtained digiscoped images, one of which has been posted at <http://fog.ccsf.edu/~jmorlan/bevi311005.htm>. The bird was reportedly heard singing on 5 November by Dennis and Patricia Braddy, suggesting it was a male (also, see discussion below). On 12 November, Leslie Lieurance was able to obtain video of the bird documenting its hyperactive wing-flicking and tail-pumping. His video has been posted at <http://www.petrels.com/bevi.htm>.

On 21 November 2005, Greaves and Chadwick were able to photograph this bird (see back cover). At first, they were unable to locate it even while intermittently playing the song of a Least Bell's Vireo through a small digital voice recorder (Panasonic RR-QR100). A few minutes after they quit looking for it and were wandering back toward the street, however, they heard the bird scolding about 100 feet to the south, only a few minutes after having passed that spot. The scolds came from the evening primrose (*Oenothera* sp.) and patch of other low shrubs and weeds in the dell's center, where others had seen the vireo. They watched it forage in blackberry and other native and non-native plants. Eventually the bird posed peacefully in the evening primrose in full sun, where its behavior was readily apparent: wing flipping, tail wagging, and fluttery flights that seemed to flow from the wing-flips as it hunted between perches. This behavior, and the bird's colors, far brighter than any Bell's Vireo Greaves had seen in 25 years of close contact with *pusillus*, convinced him that the identification of the bird to an eastern race was correct.

During his observation, Greaves noted that the bird foraged mostly within 4 feet of the ground and often landed on the ground among the *Oenothera* stalks. His notes taken at the time indicated that in comparison to a Least Bell's Vireo the bird had

- A shorter tail (probably at least 10 mm shorter than in *V. b. pusillus*, whose tail measures 47-54 mm; Pyle 1997)
- A larger bill (longer and deeper than in *V. b. pusillus*) pale flesh in color (compared to dark blue-gray in *V. b. pusillus*)

- Much brighter and more extensive yellow on the flanks
- Extensive greenish on back.

Its behavior, with wing-flipping, was much like a kinglet's. The tail wagging was not so much side to side as in *pusillus* but more up and down and not as rapid. Thus, although *pusillus* wags its tail a lot, like a gnatcatcher, this bird flipped its wings like a kinglet.

This was only the second Bell's Vireo not *pusillus* that Greaves had seen in California, the other being a wintering bird in Goleta (see below) that was thought to be of the Arizona or one of the eastern races. His recollection of that bird was that it did not flip its wings like a kinglet; on this basis it was probably *arizonae*.

Greaves's experience with Bell's Vireo began in Santa Barbara County, where he was part of a team that discovered and subsequently studied a population breeding inland at 1400 feet elevation in the Los Padres National Forest in 1978. None of the birds he has seen in that region, extending into Ventura County, were as bright as the one at Golden Gate Park, including fresh immatures after their molt out of juvenile plumage. Even in fresh plumage *pusillus* is gray and white, showing only a vague tinge of olive on the back and rump and only a hint of yellow on the sides of the breast and along the outer edges of the primaries and secondaries when the light hits them right. These relatively bland characteristics distinguish *pusillus* clearly from the other subspecies during the fall and winter.

From the bird's first response and subsequent behavior, Greaves was fairly confident that it was a male, but he never heard it sing. It is possible that, if it were a bird of the year, it might have responded to tape playback regardless of sex. In addition, there are rare instances when a female may sing, if however weakly or odd sounding, so what may resemble singing might not confirm the bird's sex in fall or winter. For example, on 31 May 1981 Greaves made a recording of a female *pusillus* issuing forth with five "songs" near a nest with chicks (she sang three times again on 11 June 1981). Her utterance flowed from rapid scolding and resembled the juveniles' practice songs, given usually after the fifth week from fledging. Greaves has heard such juvenile vocalizations a few times over the years, and from two adult females near nests.

Photos were made with a Nikon D70 digital SLR through a Sigma 400-mm macro auto-focus (non-digital) lens set to manual focus. Sunlit exposures were f-8 at 0.002 second at ISO 200; Greaves used a Vivitar 285H zoom flash wherever possible for highlights or when the bird was in shade. More photos may be seen at http://mysite.verizon.net/res_luzgs/Bells_Vireo.html.

As pointed out by Unitt (1985), the identification of eastern Bell's Vireo in California is confounded by bright examples of *arizonae* in fresh plumage. Furthermore there is a cline from the drabest and grayest birds in the west (*pusillus*) to the brightest and greenest in the east (nominate *bellii*). Western birds average longer-tailed with little overlap between *pusillus* and *arizonae* in the west and *bellii* in the east (Ridgway 1904; Pyle 1997).

Although we feel it very likely that the San Francisco bird represents *bellii*, it may not be possible to rule out completely a bright example of *medius*. David Sibley provided us with photographs of three specimens of *medius* in fresh plumage in direct comparison with three of nominate *bellii* taken at the same season (September), preserved in Harvard University's Museum of Comparative Zoology. He also sent photographs comparing three spring specimens of *medius* with three spring specimens of *arizonae*. It appears from these photographs that *medius* is not exactly intermediate but closer to *arizonae* in coloration. These specimens of *medius* lack the more intense green on the back and yellow on the sides of the breast evident in the San Francisco bird.

Sibley also pointed out a possible difference in behavior that agrees with our observations. California *pusillus* wags its tail sideways like a gnatcatcher, while nominate *bellii* usually pumps its tail vertically like a Palm Warbler (*Dendroica palmarum*).

Further study is needed to confirm these behavioral differences, however, as they are based on relatively few observations. The apparent difference in wing-flicking also deserves further study.

We agree with Unitt (1985) that many California sight records thought to be eastern Bell's Vireos are probably based on fresh-plumaged examples of *arizonae*. Without high-quality photos and detailed study, however, it is difficult to evaluate these sightings. We therefore make no judgment as to the validity of previously published reports. However, we are aware of at least seven other reports of apparent eastern Bell's Vireos from California, as follows.

Richardson et al. (2003) noted two individuals on Southeast Farallon Island 15-18 September 1993. The published photo by J. Kaplan includes a caption which states, "This one appears too green to have been the California subspecies." The caption reference to 1992 was a typographical error, as the birds were in 1993 (R. Burnett, P. Pyle pers. comm.).

Lehman (1994) noted sightings of a bright individual suggesting a "different race" at Gaviota State Beach 16-17 October 1984 and another "probably not *V. b. pusillus*" wintering in Goleta 22 January-8 March 1981 and returning 16 October 1981-15 February 1982 (see Greaves's comments on this bird above).

Hamilton and Willick (1996) noted two fall records from Orange County with plumage suggesting "one of the more colorful eastern races, *V. b. bellii* or *V. fa. medius*." One was at Huntington Beach 21 September 1992, the other at Huntington Central Park 28 October 1995. Jim Pike (pers. comm.), who saw both birds, stated that his notes on the 1995 bird strongly suggest an identification of *V. b. bellii*, as the bird had a "yellow-green" back, extensively yellow underparts, and a notably short tail. He also felt that the bill looked thicker than on the Least Bell's Vireos that he studied at the Prado Basin.

Unitt (2004) referenced a sighting at Point Loma 10 October 1988 of a Bell's Vireo thought to be of the nominate race, adding that this green extreme of the species is "likely in California as a rare vagrant but has not been confirmed with a specimen or photograph." With publication of the photo featured on this issue's back cover, we take a step toward remedying this uncertainty.

We thank David Sibley for providing previously unpublished information and analysis and Ryan Burnett of Point Reyes Bird Observatory for additional information. This note benefited from the input of many other colleagues and observers who provided opinions on the subspecies of this bird during the course of its stay.

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