Nikon Photo Quiz

Sponsored by Nikon Canada *Glenn Coady*

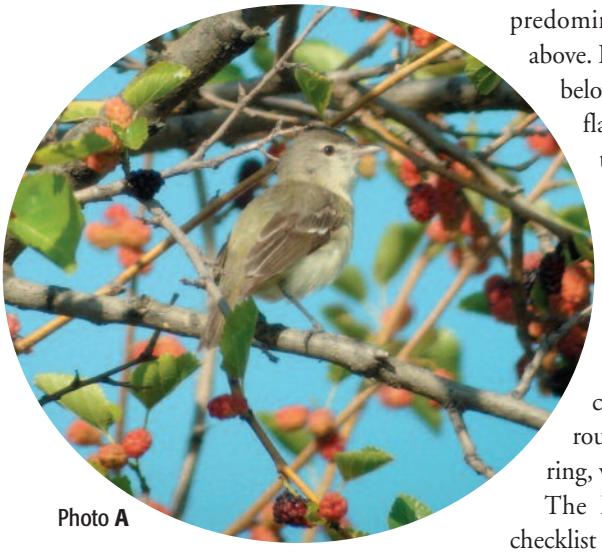

Photo **A**

Some readers are undoubtedly relieved to see that the subject of this quiz is an adult songbird, rather than a nest and eggs, a nestling, a juvenile bird, or some combination thereof. Other readers, having had a chance to puzzle over the photo a little, are probably beginning to appreciate how little advantage this may confer upon them. Many readers, as usual, will find the identification of this bird quite straightforward.

Let us begin by listing some of the general characteristics of this bird that are immediately apparent and useful in narrowing the list of possibilities to a reasonable number of species. Our quiz bird is a rather small and drab songbird that is predominantly olive-gray and greenish above. It is uniformly plain and whitish below from the chin to the belly and flanks. Its back is not streaked and the rump is plain and close to concolour with the back. The wings are a slightly darker brown, with two narrow, white wing bars, formed by the fine white tips on both the median and greater secondary coverts. It has a dark iris surrounded by a prominent white eye ring, with white in the lores as well.

The list of birds on the Ontario checklist that might reasonably meet this fairly general description includes several of the flycatchers of the genus *Empidonax* (including Acadian, Willow, Alder, Least, Dusky and Gray), several of the vireos (including Bell's, White-eyed and Blue-headed), Ruby-crowned Kinglet, several of the female wood-warblers of the genus *Dendroica* (including Chestnut-sided, Pine and Bay-breasted) and Western Tanager.

When trying to determine the identity of a bird species from such a disparate group of possibilities, it is always useful to begin by recalling the old maxim "you are what you eat" (or perhaps more accurately, in the case of birds: "you are *how* you eat").

Close examination of the bill structure of many birds will help in the separation of species that otherwise exhibit many similarities.

Our quiz bird's bill is much too long and thick for it to possibly be a Ruby-crowned Kinglet. It also lacks the dark bar that is easily noted at the base of the secondaries in the kinglets.

The bird has a grayer upper back that forms a "saddle" effect in its contrast with the lighter nape and the greener lower back. It also has a very pale wash of yellowish on the breast and its tertials are broadly margined in white. Although these are all field marks that are similar to a pale female Western Tanager, our quiz bird's bill is not stout enough at the base for that species. Female Western Tanagers tend to have more yellow-orange bills than the uniform horn-coloured bill on this bird. In addition, our quiz bird has much shorter primary projection than one would expect for any Ontario tanager species.

Another important aspect of this bird's bill is that it appears to be laterally (or sagittally) flattened. This is very useful in helping to distinguish it from the superficially similar *Empidonax* flycatchers, whose bills tend to be broad-based and more transversely flattened (top to bottom). Our bird is clearly not one of these flycatchers.

Closer inspection of the bill shape reveals that the upper mandible has a very pronounced downward curvature near the tip, which forms a distinct hook. Of the remaining species in our original list, this is most characteristic of the vireos, and rules out any of the superficially similar female *Dendroica* warblers, which have rather pointed bills lacking a hooked tip.

So we know that our quiz bird is, therefore, one of the Ontario vireo species with wing bars. Many will have also noticed the blue-gray legs on our quiz bird – this is another very good, but easily overlooked, vireo field mark.

Of the Ontario vireo species that have barred wings, we can easily eliminate the accidental Plumbeous Vireo from consideration, since our bird is not uniformly lead-coloured like that species. Similarly, we need not consider the Yellow-throated Vireo, since our bird lacks the bright yellow throat and breast of that species.

The only remaining candidates are, therefore, Bell's Vireo, White-eyed Vireo and Blue-headed Vireo. We can eliminate the Blue-headed Vireo because our quiz bird lacks the dark, blue-gray head with the boldly contrasting white "spectacles" of that species.

Our quiz bird lacks both the white iris and yellow "spectacles" of an adult White-eyed Vireo, but one must beware that hatch year White-eyed Vireos have dark eyes, and juveniles lack the bright yellow "spectacles". However, White-eyed Vireos

of all ages tend to have considerably darker (almost blackish) greater secondary coverts than the brownish coverts of Bell's Vireos. This tends to present a much higher contrast appearance to the barred wing of the White-eyed Vireo than the Bell's Vireo. Our quiz bird has light brownish greater secondary coverts and wing bars with a very weak contrast. It also has a much more prominent lower wing bar and a fainter upper wing bar. These are both characteristics that favour Bell's Vireo. White-eyed Vireo tends to have a much darker moss-green back than the Bell's Vireo, which can be quite variable from a plain grayish to a paler, olive-green back. Our quiz bird also conforms better with Bell's Vireo in this regard. Another field mark we can see is a very faint, dark post-ocular line on our quiz bird. This is another very good Bell's Vireo field mark, and one which gives them a more Warbling Vireo-like appearance to the head. Indeed, they are often visually mistaken for Warbling Vireos by those who don't notice the barred wings. The White-eyed Vireo, on the other hand, does not have any hint of a post-ocular line, but rather a strikingly solid head colour behind its bold "spectacles", imparting a more "Solitary" Vireo-complex type of head pattern. Our quiz bird also exhibits a broken eye-ring that is more in keeping with a Bell's Vireo than a White-eyed Vireo.

The bird in photo A is an adult male **Bell's Vireo.** The photo was taken near a nest on the campus of Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, on 22 June 2008 by Mikey Lutmerding.

I chose this photo particularly because of its deceptive nature. The nominate

"eastern" Bell's Vireo (*Vireo bellii bellii*) tends to be brighter (greener dorsally and more yellowish ventrally — see photos B and C for examples of more typical eastern individuals) and shorter-tailed than the three more western subspecies in North America. However, very drab, worn and faded adults like this one also occur in the east. This bird is also in a fairly vertical posture that gives it more of a flycatcher "gestalt" than the typically more horizontal postures one normally associates with the vireos.

This quiz serves as a good example of how bird identification from a single photo, from a lone angle, is often fraught with much more difficulty than bird identification in the field, where several angles, repeated viewings, ranges of lighting conditions, habits, vocalizations and comparison with other available species, help to form the basis for a more solid identification.

Accuracy of colour saturation in photographs can strongly bias first impressions, often producing identification dilemmas that may be much more easily sorted out "in the field". This quiz clearly presented that challenge as well.

Fortunately, the drab, secretive, and often chameleon-like Bell's Vireo has a very distinctive and unmistakable song, which makes its detection and identification pretty simple.

For the past 50 years, the "eastern" Bell's Vireo has been undergoing a slow, but steady, eastward and northward range expansion. It was first detected nesting in Ohio in the Cincinnati area in 1968. Since the mid-1980s it has bred annually in very small numbers in Columbus and other counties across Ohio. In the recently completed Ohio Breeding Bird Atlas, there was a confirmed breeding record not very far inland from the south shore of Lake Erie, directly across from Point Pelee National Park. An interesting paradox is that, although the Bell's Vireo is an exceedingly rare vagrant species in Ontario (with very few recent accepted records), it is probably also a good candidate to be one of the next newly-confirmed breeding species in Ontario. Birders in Ontario, particularly those living in the southwest counties, should make a point to become familiar with its distinctive song, and be sure to give ample coverage to its dense, early successional, scrubland habitat in spring and summer.


Photo **C**

Photo B was taken at the Catalina Woods Forest Preserve in Orland Park, Illinois, on 2 July 2008, by Paul Dacko. Photo C was taken at the Cook County Forest Preserve in suburban Chicago, Illinois, on 30 June 2008, by Craig Thayer.

Glenn Coady, 604 – 60 Mountview Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M6P 2L4