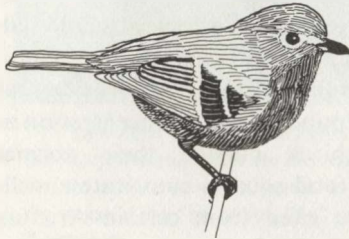


Field Identification of Hutton's Vireo

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This plain but personable little bird of the western oak woodlands is easily identified by reference to a few key characters

Observers who are enjoying their first encounters with western birds often run into some difficulties in identifying Hutton's Vireo *Vireo huttoni*. This is particularly true during the winter and migration seasons, when the vireo's entire range in the western U.S. and Canada is inundated by large numbers of Ruby-crowned Kinglets *Regulus calendula*: these two species, though unrelated, are remarkably similar in superficial appearance. Both of the standard bird identification guides covering western species (Peterson 1961, Robbins *et al.* 1966) acknowledge the similarity of these two birds; unfortunately, neither book manages to state accurately the differences between the two species, so the observer is left to puzzle these out unaided.

Actually the two species are not at all difficult to distinguish, and experienced western birders will not consider this a problem identification. This article is intended to point out the main identification criteria (and the errors in the field guides), so as to simplify the sorting-out process for newcomers to western birdwatching.

DISTRIBUTION

The breeding range of Hutton's Vireo is adequately indicated in the standard bird guides. Since this species is closely associated with the oak woodland zone, gaps in its range are created by extensive desert or grassland areas. North of Mexico there are three major populations: one ranging from southwestern British Columbia south through California (nominate *V. h. huttoni*, with separate race *V. h. insularis* on Vancouver Island), one from central Arizona and southwestern New Mexico south into northwestern Mexico (*V. h. stephensi*), and one from the Chisos Mts. of western Texas south into northeastern Mexico (*V. h. carolinae*). Other races occur in oaks in the mountains farther south, extending the total range of the species south to Guatemala.

Hutton's Vireo is a permanent resident to the extent that some individuals occur in all parts of the breeding range throughout the year. However, there is a substantial amount of wandering during the nonbreeding seasons. In Arizona, for example, a few may be regularly found wintering along rivers in the Lower Sonoran zone up to 150km from any breeding locality. The species occurs rarely in migration in such nonbreeding areas as El Paso, Texas (Oberholser and Kincaid 1974), and southern Nevada, and one

has been reported from Pershing County in northwest-central Nevada (Ryser 1976).

Because of this tendency to short-distance wandering, it would be worthwhile for observers to watch for Hutton's in areas peripheral to the normal range; stragglers might be expected in such areas as southwestern Utah and southern Texas. However, this species seems to be a poor candidate for any long-distance vagrancy.

DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN HUTTON'S VIREO AND RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET

Behavior: The bird guides describe the Hutton's Vireo as "sluggish" and, by contrast, refer to the hyperactive nature of the Ruby-crowned Kinglet, including the latter's characteristic mannerism of incessantly "twitching" or "flicking" its wings. Robbins implies, and Peterson actually states, that the vireo does not twitch its wings.

It is true that the vireo is the more slow-moving of the two species. However, the difference is not striking except when the two are together, since *huttoni* is a fairly active bird as compared to most other vireo species. And it should be emphasized that HUTTON'S VIREO DOES TWITCH ITS WINGS. I get the impression that the action is not so rapid as in the kinglet, and that the vireo may not raise its wings quite as high; certainly the vireo performs the wing-flick less often under normal circumstances. Yet when it is agitated — as when responding to "spishing" or pygmy-owl calls — a Hutton's may twitch its wings rapidly and repeatedly, in fair duplication of the Ruby-crowned Kinglet's manner. Thus, despite the average differences, it is not advisable to try to distinguish the two species on the basis of behavior alone.

Size and shape: The impression created by a bird's size and shape is difficult to convey in words, and difficult to use in field identification unless one is already familiar with the species involved. However, this aspect of the "gestalt" is useful enough in this case that I will attempt to describe it.

The most direct approach is to describe the shape of Hutton's by comparison to other vireos. Let me begin by asserting that the Solitary *V. solitarius* and Yellow-throated *V. flavifrons* represent my idea of the "average" or "archetypical" vireo shape; they are medium in size and moderately heavy in build, being obviously chunkier and larger-headed than warblers. The Red-eyed Vireo *V. olivaceus* represents a departure from this "average" in that it is more elongated, appearing more slender and not so heavy-headed. Against this background, we could picture Hutton's as representing the opposite extreme from the Red-eyed: it is foreshortened, chunky to the point of being rotund. Its head appears large for the very small size of the bird, and the neck seems to be very short. If one ignores plumage pattern, the shape of the bird recalls White-eyed Vireo *V. griseus* or Black-capped Vireo *V. atricapilla*, but Hutton's appears slightly shorter-tailed and even more "neckless" than either of those two species.

Size and shape are very helpful in distinguishing *V. huttoni* from the Ruby-crowned Kinglet; in fact, observers familiar with both species can generally separate the two on this basis alone, without bothering to look at plumage characters. While Hutton's is small, the kinglet is *tiny*. The Ruby-crown conveys an impression of insignificance (which some Arizonans have summed up by calling it the "non-bird") never received from the vireo. The kinglet's head seems proportionately small, and its body seems to taper rapidly toward the rear. Its inconsequential tail hardly extends beyond the tips of the folded wings (which appear somewhat long for the diminutive size of the body). The kinglet has incredibly thin legs and delicate feet even for the small size of the bird, while those of *V. huttoni* appear more sturdy. I have attempted

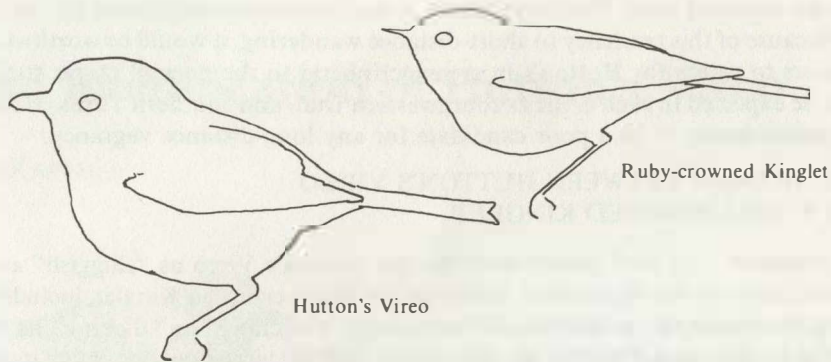


FIGURE 1. Comparative size and shape of Hutton's Vireo and Ruby-crowned Kinglet (approximately $2/3$ x life size)

to sketch out the differences in shape between the vireo and kinglet in Figure 1.

Bill: Although *huttoni*'s bill is small, it is of the typical thick vireo shape, and thus is quite different from the short flat bill of the Ruby-crowned Kinglet (see Figure 1). The kinglet's bill may appear to be angled slightly above the horizontal (or above the horizontal axis of the head), an impression never received from the vireo. Additionally, the vireo's bill is pale at the base (not always easy to see at a distance), while that of the kinglet is all black.

Eye-ring: Robbins (1966) suggests that *huttoni* differs from the Ruby-crown "by having spectacles rather than an eye ring." However, I have not found this to be a usable field mark. Both the vireo and the kinglet often have a pale area on the lores which connects with the broken eye-ring to create the impression of "spectacles;" this tends to be more conspicuously developed on the vireo, but it is not diagnostic. The shape of the eye-ring itself is worth remembering, however, as it quickly distinguishes Hutton's from other vireos: no other vireo species north of Mexico displays a conspicuous eye-ring which is so conspicuously broken just above the eye.

Wing-pattern: For observers unfamiliar with Hutton's Vireo, the wing-pattern is the most reliable point to check in separating this species from the Ruby-crowned Kinglet.

Both species possess two white wing-bars, and pale (yellowish-white) edgings to the blackish flight feathers. In Hutton's Vireo, the pale feather-edgings extend as far forward as the posterior wing-bar, so that the blackish ground color of the flight feathers is largely obscured and the entire area behind the wing-bars appears only moderately dark. The area *between* the two wing-bars, by contrast, shows less pale edging, and as a result this area catches the eye as the darkest part of the wing — darker than the color of the back. The two wing-bars on *huttoni*'s wing are both well developed, and are about equally conspicuous.

On the Ruby-crowned Kinglet's wing, the pale edgings to the flight feathers end abruptly a short distance behind the posterior wing-bar — leaving a broad black bar immediately behind, and parallel to, the white wing-bar; this catches the eye as the darkest area of the wing. The area between the wing-bars is not as dark, and does not contrast with the color of the back. The posterior wing-bar is always conspicuous, but the anterior one usually is not: thus at first glance the kinglet often appears to have only one wing-bar, an impression never gained from Hutton's Vireo. All of these points are indicated in Figure 2.

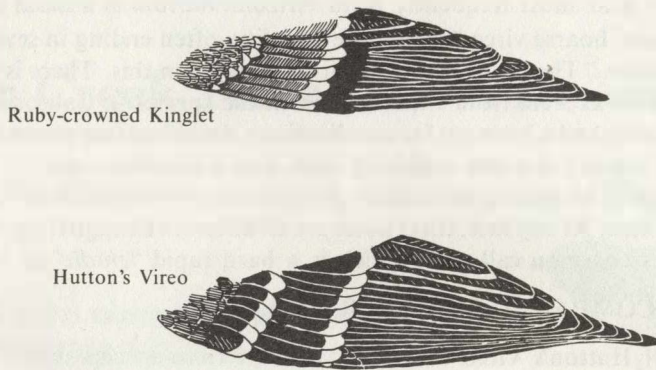


FIGURE 2. Wing-patterns of Hutton's Vireo and Ruby-crowned Kinglet (approximately life size)

Peterson (1961; plate 49) has succeeded in illustrating the wing-patterns of both species rather accurately, although in the field the Ruby-crowned Kinglet will usually display a less conspicuous anterior wing-bar and a less blackish area between the wing-bars than shown. Singer (in Robbins *et al.* 1966) has also depicted the wing of Hutton's Vireo with fair accuracy (p. 247). His illustrations of the wing of the Ruby-crown on the gnatcatcher/kinglet plate (p. 237) are not too bad, although the black bar is not emphasized enough (particularly on the female bird), and the areas between and before the white wing-bars as shown are much too dark. However, on p. 247, adjacent to the Hutton's Vireo drawing, there is an illustration of a "Ruby-crowned Kinglet for comparison," and the wing on this bird is totally wrong: it is shown with very black areas between and before the wing-bars, and no black bar behind them (except for grossly large black primary coverts on the lower edge of the wing). The birder who uses the Robbins guide would do well to take some indelible ink and blot out the kinglet drawing on p. 247 entirely, so as to avoid confusion in the field.

Voice: The song of Hutton's Vireo could be described as the most characterless of all North American vireos'. It is almost always a monotonous series of identical, nasal, hoarse, slurred notes, with all of those in any one series either ascending or descending: "zuwee . . . zuwee . . . zuwee . . ." or "zeeoo . . . zeeoo . . . zeeoo . . ." with the accent on the higher-pitched note in either case. The song usually sounds half-hearted and does not carry very far, and the hoarse or burry quality of the notes is thus noticeable only at close range (at greater distance the notes sound only nasal or whining). On a very few occasions I have tracked down Hutton's which were using both ascending and descending notes in the same series, thus approximating the song-pattern of some other vireos such as Red-eyed or Solitary. However, in at least one of these cases the bird soon reverted to the typical series of identical notes; and in all cases the song retained the insipid and whining quality characteristic of Hutton's. The song of the Ruby-crowned Kinglet (which need not be described in detail here) is an explosive medley which is much more colorful and three times as loud. Both the vireo and the kinglet sing mainly during the breeding season, but the vireo may be heard singing occasionally at any time of year and the kinglet often delivers mild renditions during late winter and early spring.

Outside of the breeding season it is much more helpful to be aware of the call-notes. The note I hear most frequently from Arizona *huttoni* is a nasal ascending "cheee," with typical hoarse vireo "scold-note" quality, often ending in several rapid notes: "cheee-dididee." There are many minor variations on this. There is probably geographic variation as well: from experience with the species in California, Ralph Hoffman (1927), who had a keen ear for vocalizations, described two common calls as "a *tschuk tschuk* uttered in a low inquiring tone, and a low *whit whit*" — elements which do not seem to be among the standard repertoire of the species in Arizona or northwestern Mexico. At any rate, these notes are all different enough from the Ruby-crowned Kinglet's common call-note, which is a hard rapid "*chidit*" or "*chididit*."

HUTTON'S AS COMPARED TO OTHER VIREOS

Confusion of Hutton's Vireo with other western vireo species should not be a major problem. It seems that while other vireos are sometimes misidentified as Hutton's, the reverse rarely occurs.

The very gray Rocky Mountain race of the Solitary Vireo, *V.s. plumbeus*, occasionally misleads visiting eastern birders because it looks so different from the eastern races, but its larger size, obvious "spectacles," and strongly contrasting white throat should quickly separate it from Hutton's. The Gray Vireo *V. vicinior* is most unlikely to be confused with Hutton's; although the *plumbeus* Solitary is sometimes misidentified as the Gray, the genuine Gray Vireo is so utterly distinctive (with its absent-minded facial expression, almost unmarked wings, and expressively flopped tail) that when seen it is almost impossible to mistake for anything else.

Bell's Vireo *V. bellii* can cause identification problems here, partly because it has been misrepresented in some field guides. It can be easily distinguished from Hutton's by its fainter wing-bars (particularly the anterior one), by its paler throat and chest, and especially by its peculiar face-pattern which combines a faint eye-ring with a short superciliary line (the latter is well illustrated in Peterson's (1961) western guide, but rather poorly elsewhere). The illustration of Bell's in *Birds of North America* (Robbins *et al.* 1966) is particularly likely to mislead in the West: not only because the bird is shown with unrealistically bold "spectacles," but also because the bird illustrated appears to be of the (relatively) brightly-colored eastern race; western Bell's are much grayer.

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