

# Kenn Kaufman THE PRACTICED EYE

Text and Illustrations by Kenn Kaufman

## Identifying Hutton's Vireo

**Along the Pacific Coast and in parts of the Southwest, one of the most characteristic birds of the oak zone is a little creature called Hutton's Vireo (*Vireo huttoni*).**

THE "MIGHTY OAK" OF LEGEND and verse is found in North America mainly east of the Great Plains. Oaks in the eastern hardwood forest can tower a hundred feet or more without rising above their fellows. In the west, by contrast, oaks are usually modest trees, thirty or forty feet tall at the most, some averaging much

shorter than that. But oaks in the west are mighty in another way. From southwestern Canada south through much of Mexico, oak woodland is a major habitat type, home to a great many species of birds and other animals.

Along the Pacific Coast and in parts of the Southwest, one of the most characteristic birds of the oak zone is a little creature called Hutton's Vireo (*Vireo huttoni*). It is unobtrusive—small, drab, and relatively quiet—and visiting birders may spend quite some time in its habitat without noticing it. But what it lacks in color and size, it makes up for in personality. Observers who have gotten to know Hutton's Vireo often regard it as a favorite. This *Practiced Eye* looks at this engaging little vireo of the western oaks.

Several of the North American vireos

offer challenges in identification, but these almost always involve confusion with other vireos. Hutton's is different. It often causes problems for birders, but it is much more likely to be confused with birds from other families, rather than with other vireos.

The most frequent source of confusion with Hutton's Vireo is the Ruby-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus calendula*). The two species do not overlap in summer, at which season the kinglet is in coniferous forests of the far north and the high mountains, while the vireo sticks resolutely to the oaks. But in fall, the kinglets flood southward and downhill. In some lowland areas of the Southwest, Ruby-crowned Kinglet is among the most numerous birds in winter, fidgeting and fussing in every thicket. After you have seen forty of them in a morning, you might fail to notice if number forty-one is actually a Hutton's Vireo instead.

One of the most famous field marks for the kinglet is a behavioral one, concerning its "wing-flicking," its habit of very rapidly part-opening the wings and closing them again. The Ruby-crowned seems to do this constantly, and it often identifies an individual merely glimpsed in the field. Unfortunately (and contrary to statements in some bird guides), Hutton's Vireo will do exactly the same thing. Not as frequently, I'll admit; sometime we can watch a Hutton's for ten minutes without seeing a single wing-flick. But when the bird is excited—responding to owl calls, for example—it may flick its wings practically as much as the most demented kinglet. So as a field mark, this one is virtually useless.

Wing pattern is often the easiest thing to see at a distance for separating these species. Ruby-crowned Kinglet is always illustrated as having two white wing-bars. It has them, ac-

tually, but in the field we usually notice only one (or one and one-fourth), because the forward wing-bar (on the median coverts) is so short and insignificant. Behind the main wing-bar, however, is a broad black band, the darkest part of the wing. (This distinctive mark is actually a *lack* of marking. The inner flight feathers on the wings are black with narrow yellowish-white edges, but these pale edges do not extend all the way to the base of the feathers, so this basal area appears black by contrast).

On Hutton's Vireo, the flight feathers are pale-edged all the way to the base, so there is no contrasting black bar there. Hutton's shows two distinct wing-bars, and the area *between* them (on the greater coverts) stands out as the darkest part of the wing.

Most of the rest of the plumage looks about the same between the two species (although, of course, Hutton's has no red crest to raise). But there are structural differences. With a good view, the tiny black bill of the kinglet is clearly different from that of the vireo. The *legs* provide another mark: those of the vireo are relatively thick, and colored blue-gray, while the kinglet has spindly black legs. With a close look, you might notice that Ruby-crowned Kinglet has dull yellowish-brown toes (as pointed out by Ian Paulsen in a recent issue of *Birding*), an effect that Hutton's would never show.

Another source of confusion, and a rather surprising one, is that Hutton's Vireo is sometimes taken for an Empidonax flycatcher. I have seen birders make this mistake a number of times. Sometimes the vireo is even identified to a particular species of Empid, which ought to earn some points for optimism, considering how hard these birds are to identify even



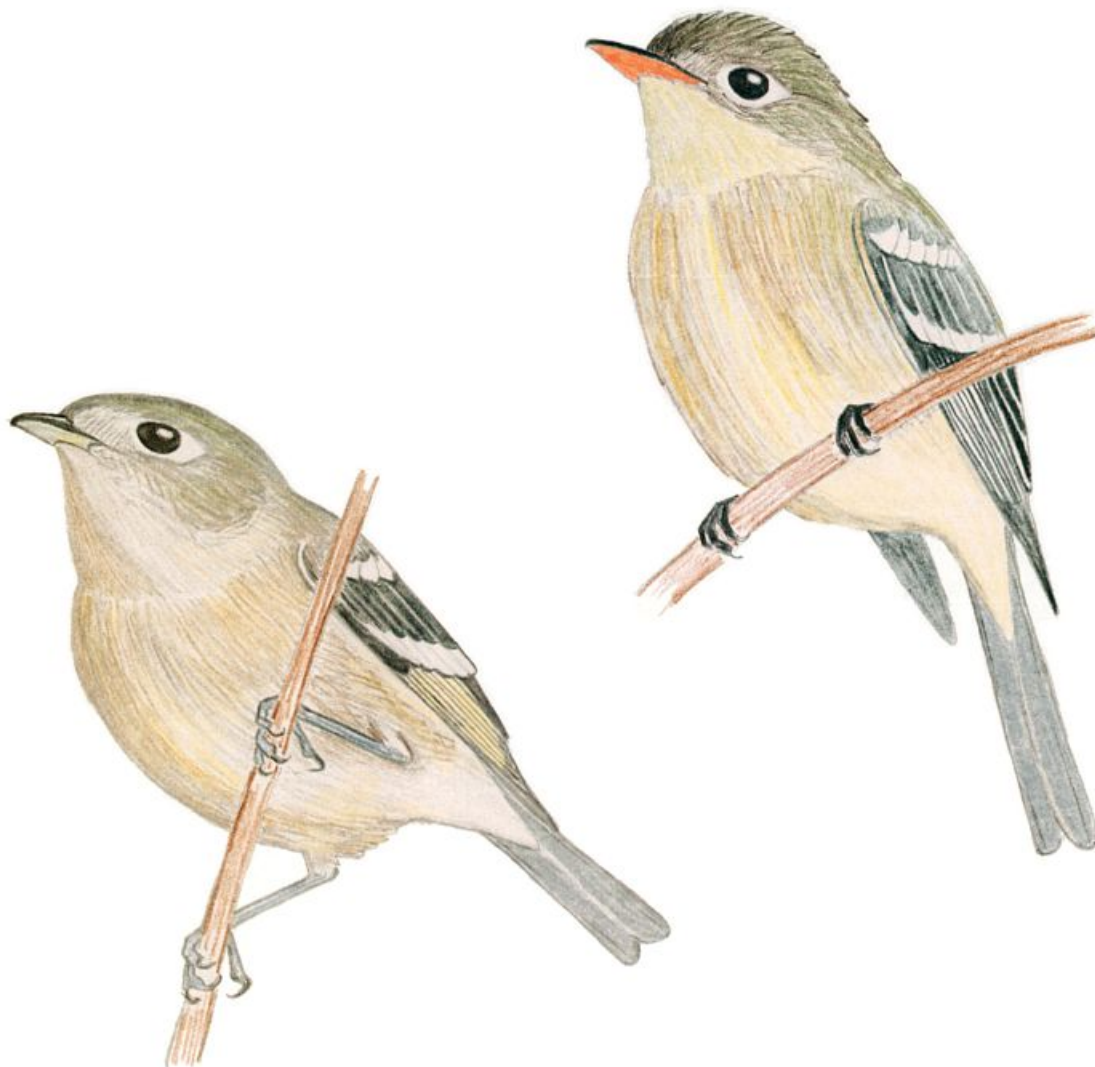
**Figure 1. Two midgets. The Ruby-crowned Kinglet really is a tiny bird, while Hutton's Vireo only pretends to be; but with a poor or quick view, they can look surprisingly similar. Above: Hutton's Vireo in reasonably fresh plumage. Notice its wing pattern, with two strong white wing-bars, and a dark "panel" between them formed by the dark greater coverts. Also note the shape of the bill, and the thickness and color of the legs. Below: Ruby-crowned Kinglet in fresh plumage. Only one of its white wing-bars is really obvious, and this one is bordered at the rear by a conspicuous black band. Notice also its tiny black bill, and its thin black legs ending in yellowish feet. These two species differ in overall shape as well; Hutton's Vireo is more chunky and has a much larger-looking head for its size.**

when they really *are* Empidonax.

In terms of superficial markings, Hutton's does have a lot in common with some of the Empids: eye-rings and wing-bars, for example. But with a close view, it has an obvious (if miniature) vireo bill, narrow and thick, not a wide flat one. Its overall shape and posture are different as

well. And when foraging, it hunts for insects along branches and twigs (like a vireo!) rather than sallying out after insects in flight, as an Empidonax flycatcher would.

At least two current bird guides illustrate the difference between the grayer forms of Hutton's in the interior of the Southwest and the slightly



**Figure 2. An Empid comparison. Left: Hutton's Vireo.** Birders seeing it for the first time occasionally mistake it for an *Empidonax* flycatcher. **Right: Pacific-slope Flycatcher (*Empidonax difficilis*).** The "teardrop" shape of the eye-ring on this flycatcher is often duplicated by Hutton's Vireo. However, bill shape, body shape, posture, and behavior should be enough to indicate that these birds belong to different families.

greener forms along the Pacific Coast. The difference between these forms would be obvious if they could be seen side by side, in fresh plumage. However, seasonal variation has a much bigger impact on their appearance than regional variation. Hutton's everywhere are at their most "colorful" when they are in fresh plumage, generally in early- to mid-fall. The adults are at their drabbest (worn to gray, wing-bars worn thin) in mid-summer. If one of these worn birds were to be seen next to one of its

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fresh-plumaged young, just off the nest, they could easily be identified as belonging to two different races.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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