

FIRST RECORD OF THE CASSIN'S VIREO NESTING IN ALASKA

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On 4 June 2005, while birding along the Chilkat River near Haines, Alaska, we observed a pair of Cassin's Vireos (*Vireo cassinii*) attending an active nest. The birds were also observed later the same day by Thede Tobish, Jr., Alan DeMartini, and Gary H. Rosenberg. We first heard an adult singing at 06:00 hrs, and at approximately 06:30 hrs followed it to the nest, where it fed four young. We photographed the pair, nest, young (Figure 1), and surrounding habitat during the period of observation. The pair was actively feeding the young and disposing of fecal sacs during our visit. Both adults delivered food to the young, but they were seldom seen for more than a few seconds at the nest. When we approached the nest, both birds became agitated and gave alarm calls. After a short period of discontinuous singing in the early morning, the pair continued to vocalize solely with alarm calls until we departed after 0.5 hour of observation.



Figure 1. Female (upper) and male (lower) Cassin's Vireos attending nest near Haines Alaska, 4 June 2005.

Photo by Lucas DeCicco

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Formerly considered conspecific with the Cassin's Vireo, the Plumbeous Vireo (*V. plumbeus*) and Blue-headed Vireo (*V. solitarius*) differ only slightly in plumage and voice. The Plumbeous Vireo's breeding range extends north only to northeastern Wyoming (Oakleaf et al. 1992), but the Blue-headed Vireo breeds much closer to Alaska, in northeastern British Columbia (Campbell et al. 1997). Given acceptable views, field identification of these species by plumage is reliable under most circumstances (Heindel 1996). The two birds near Haines differed slightly in plumage, with one appearing brighter than the other. On this basis, we identified the duller individual as the female (Pyle 1997). The male had more green and yellow tones than the female (Figure 1); we distinguished it from the Plumbeous Vireo by its olive-colored back contrasting slightly with a grayer head. This characteristic also distinguished it from the Blue-headed Vireo, which shows a strong and sharp contrast between a grayish-blue head and olive-green back, less than in the male we observed. The female appeared very similar to the Plumbeous Vireo, differing primarily by its yellow flanks and undertail coverts. This field mark is not completely reliable but does suggest our bird was not a Plumbeous Vireo. The Blue-headed Vireo was easily ruled out because of the minimal contrast between the crown and back of the observed birds and their overall drab gray coloration (Heindel 1996).

The territory was located within the alluvial floodplain of the Chilkat River 0.4 km southwest of mile 24.4 on the Haines Highway near the Chilkat River bridge. In this area, the Chilkat River is lined with riparian groves of black cottonwood (*Populus balsamifera*). In its lower reaches, the river widens into a shallow braided alluvial floodplain, situated between steep mountain slopes. The gravel bars of the floodplain are overgrown with black cottonwood ranging in height from 0.5 to 10 m. The trees are growing in stands of defined cohorts, with very few areas containing mixed size classes. Other vegetation in the floodplain includes dwarf fireweed (*Epilobium latifolium*), along the river's shoreline, willows (*Salix* spp.), and unidentified grasses.

The nest was a hanging cup, slung between two branches of a 5-m-tall black cottonwood tree, approximately 2 m above the ground. The nest measured roughly 90 mm wide by 55 mm tall. The inside of the cup measured 65 mm wide by 30 mm deep (nest measurements were taken in the fall, after the breeding season, when the birds had vacated the area). The nest was woven from grasses and spider webs and lined with stiff bristles. On 4 June, the four young had well-developed pinfeathers, with some emerging from their sheaths, including the rectrices; the nestlings' gapes were prominent, and their eyes were not yet open.

Alaska's first recorded Cassin's Vireo was an adult male collected at Hyder on 11 June 1986 (Univ. Alaska Museum [UAM] 5321; Gibson and Kessel 1992). Since then the species has been recorded 13 out of the past 20 years between late May and August in the riparian zones of the major rivers on the southeast Alaska mainland. As of spring 2006 there have been 39 additional Alaska records of Cassin's Vireo, 36 of which have come from mainland southeast Alaska, primarily from the following major rivers: Fish Creek (near Hyder) (Gibson and Kessel 1992, *Am. Birds* 45:1151, *Natl. Audubon Soc. Field Notes* 52:492, *N. Am. Birds* 58:417-420), the Chickamin (Johnson et al. in press), Unuk (Johnson et al. in press), Stikine (Gibson et al. 2003, UAM 6713), Whiting (Johnson et al. in press), Taku (*N. Am. Birds* 54:413, Johnson et al. in press), and Chilkat (Johnson et al. in press, *N. Am. Birds* 59:641). The impressive number of Alaska records of the Cassin's Vireo over the past 20 years would seem to parallel the trend of an increasing breeding population of this species in its normal range since 1980 (Sauer et al. 2007). The earliest arrival dates of this species in Alaska are 3 May 2004 (NAB 58:417-420, 2004) and 9 May 1998 (AFN 52:375, 1998), near Juneau. The birds we found near Haines had young that appeared to be at least 8 days old, as determined by the emerging rectrices, a technique verified for the closely related Blue-headed Vireo (James 1998). The birds' latest arrival to the nesting territory would have been 5 May, given an incu-

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bation period of approximately 13 days (Drynan and Purcell *in* Goguen and Curson 2002) and a nest-building and laying period of at least 10 days (Dawson and Bowles 1909). The suitable habitat along major southeast Alaska rivers is usually not visited by birders until late May, so earlier arriving birds could easily be missed. Three pairs of this species had been observed on territory prior to 2005, when the nest on the Chilkat River was found (Johnson et al. *in press*). One of these pairs was along the Taku River 27 May to 3 June 2000, one was along the Whiting River 7 June 2002, and one was observed vigorously defending a territory near Choca Creek, Chickamin River, 19 June 1996.

Beyond the southeast Alaska mainland rivers, there have been records of Cassin's Vireos from Mitkof Island, in the Alexander Archipelago adjacent to the Stikine River mouth (11 June 1993, G. B. van Vliet, pers. comm.), and from as far west and north as Anchorage (14–18 June 1999, *N. Am. Birds* 53:422, 1999, and 30 May–30 June 2001, *N. Am. Birds* 55:471, 2001). Previously, the Cassin's Vireo was known to breed sparsely as far north as Quesnel, in central British Columbia (Campbell et al. 1997), approximately 1075 km southeast of Haines.

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