



Monthly Meeting February 5, 2018
Bayland Community Center
6400 Bissonnet St, Houston, TX

6:30 pm [Learning Corner](#): Distinguishing Among the Large, Spectacled Vireos: Blue-headed, Cassin's, and Plumbeous by Nina Rach

7:00 pm [Ornithology Group](#) (OG) Business Meeting

7:30 pm [Program](#): Birding Then and Now by Fred Collins and Bob Honig

[Field Trips](#): Archbishop Fiorenza Park, Saturday, January 27, 8 am, led by Skip Almoney; Austin Weekender, February 3-4, led by Deb and Lee Wallace; San Jacinto Battleground, February 10, 8 am, led by Erik Ostrander; March Out of Texas Weekender, March 3-4

[Cold Birders and Hot Birds: Brazoria County Field Trip Report](#)

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[Upcoming Texas Birding Events \(link to web page\)](#)

2018 Dues are Due: <http://ornithologygroup.org/Dues>

Distinguishing Among the Large, Spectacled Vireos: Blue-headed, Cassin's, and Plumbeous

By Nina Rach

This is a tale of three vireos. All are small, greenish, migrating passerines. Back in the day, birders distinguished between the Blue-headed, Cassin's, and Plumbeous Vireos. In the 1950s, the three species were lumped into one: Solitary Vireo, *Vireo solitarius*.

Regional distinctions were noted, however, and in 1997, new molecular data showed that they were, in fact, three distinct species. The work was done by Carla Cicero and Ned K. Johnson (1932-2003) at the Univ. of California, Berkeley.

These vireos are somewhat drab-colored and slow moving, often perched motionless, and eat insects and larvae, and berries in winter. They have slightly hooked bills.

Sibley (2000) says "Intermediate birds and perhaps hybrids should be expected, and not every individual will be identifiable."

Blue-headed Vireo, *Vireo solitarius*, BHVI

Common and vocal in northeastern forests. Nest across northern Canada, northern Michigan and northeastern Minnesota, to New England, and south through the Appalachians. Migrant and winter resident in the eastern two-thirds of Texas.

Bluish gray head with white spectacles, green back, two whitish wing bars, white belly, bright greenish-yellow flanks. The plumage is usually brighter and more contrasting than Cassin's. There is strong contrast between the cheek/auricular area and the white throat.

Cassin's Vireo, *Vireo cassinii*, CAVI

Common in far-western forests, conspicuous for its constant singing. Spring migrants to Texas early March through late April, uncommon to rare in the western half of the Trans-Pecos; rare to casual east through the western Edwards Plateau. More common during fall migration. Rare in winter, but reported from Trans-Pecos, South Texas Brush Country, Lower Rio Grande Valley, and the coastal prairies.

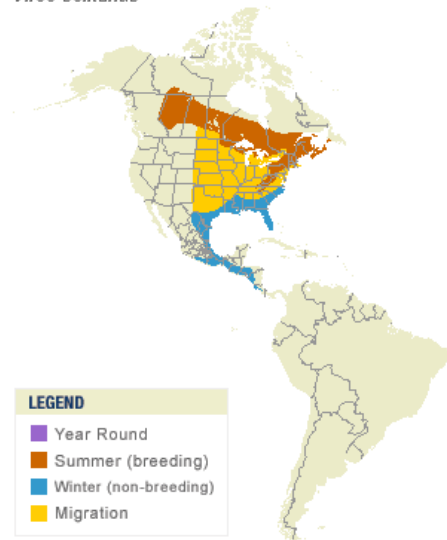
Appears dingier than BHVI. Brownish-gray head with white spectacles, greenish back, two whitish wing bars, white belly, yellowish flanks. The shape is identical to Blue-headed; the plumage is intermediate between Blue-headed and Plumbeous. There is weak contrast between the cheek/auricular area and the white throat.

Plumbeous Vireo, *Vireo plumbeus*, PLVI

Common and local in montane forests, more limited range than the other two species. Nest in the southwestern Rocky Mountains, northeast of the Black Hills. Spring migrants begin to arrive in Texas in early March (through early May). Common summer resident in the Davis and Guadalupe Mountains of the central Trans-Pecos. Fall migration from late August to early October.

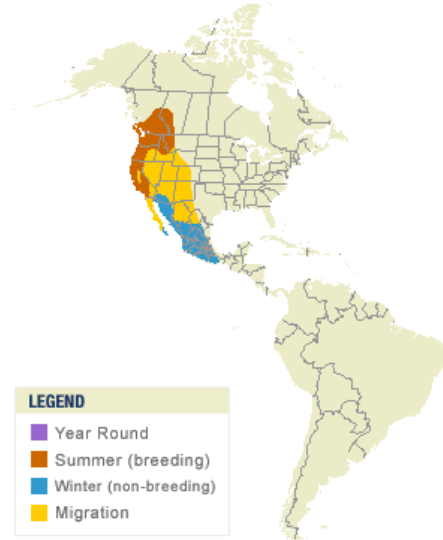
Overall darker birds, with slate-gray sides. Dull gray head and back, white spectacles, gray overall, two whitish wing bars, white belly, gray flanks. Averages a little larger and has a larger bill than Cassin's. Has broader wing bars and has almost no yellow tones, only a faint yellow wash at bottom of belly near the white undertail coverts.

Blue-headed Vireo
Vireo solitarius



Map by Cornell Lab of Ornithology
Range data by NatureServe

Cassin's Vireo
Vireo cassinii



Map by Cornell Lab of Ornithology
Range data by NatureServe

Plumbeous Vireo
Vireo plumbeus



Map by Cornell Lab of Ornithology
Range data by NatureServe

Sources:

David A. Sibley, (2000). The Sibley Guide to Birds, pp. 348-349.

Dan Tallman's Bird Blog (Oct 14, 2014). "Blue-headed vs. Cassin's Vireos."
<http://dantallmansbirdblog.blogspot.com/2014/10/blue-headed-vs-cassins-vireos.html>

TOS Handbook of Texas Birds (2014), Second Edition, pp. 211-212.

Matt Heindel (1996). "Solitary Vireos." *Birding*, 28: 458-471.

Don Roberson (May 2002). "Some thoughts on the 'Solitary Vireo' complex."

<http://creagrus.home.montereybay.com/sovi-id-comm.html>

Carla Cicero, Ned K. Johnson (May 1998). "Molecular phylogeny and ecological diversification in a clade of New World songbirds (genus Vireo)." *Molecular Ecology*, 7(10): 1359-1370.

[Ned Keith Johnson (1932–2003) served as Curator of Birds and Professor of Zoology at the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology (MVZ), University of California, Berkeley, from 1961 to his death from leiomyosarcoma in 2003. He had a distinguished career in ornithology and received the Brewster Medal from the American Ornithologists' Union in 1992 and was President (1996-1998). He had eight peer-reviewed publications in print by the time he finished his undergraduate degree at the University of Nevada, Johnson launched into his doctoral program then received his Ph.D. at MVZ under Alden H. Miller; his dissertation monograph was on western flycatchers (*Empidonax* spp.).]

Birding Then and Now

By Fred Collins and Bob Honig

How do the places where birders in the Houston region went 50 years ago compare with where they go now? The focus of the presentation will be the OG's "Good Birding Trips," a bird finding guide prepared in 1967-68, a copy of which recently came into Bob's possession. In the 50th anniversary year of what may be the OG's first bird finding guide, we will compare where Houston area birders went birding then with those locations today. Fred will add a first-hand perspective of birding when "Good Birding Trips" was written. Satellite imagery will help us look at land uses at these locations then and now. It promises to be a very interesting retrospective, with credit given to the authors of various sections of the 1967-68 booklet.

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Field Trips:

Archbishop Fiorenza Park, Saturday, January 27, 8 am

Led by Skip Almoney

Come check out Skip's favorite "backyard". SKIPALM82@gmail.com.

Meet at 8:00 AM in parking lot near toilets.

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Austin Weekender Fundraiser, Saturday and Sunday, February 3-4.

Led by Deb and Lee Wallace

February Weekender Fundraiser to Austin's top birding hotspots (including optional trip to Warbler Woods for rare Golden-crown Sparrow) Saturday and Sunday, February 3 and 4, 2018

Our February trip to Austin includes Hornsby Bend and Commons Ford Ranch, the top two birding hot spots in Travis County, which offers 409 sp. compared to 414 in Harris County. We will enjoy waterfowl at Hornsby Bend, and sparrows at Commons Ford Ranch. We have opportunities to see birds that are rarely encountered near Houston, including Bewick's Wren, Canyon Wren, Rock Wren, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, Canyon Towhee, and Lesser Goldfinch. A Golden-crowned Sparrow has been seen at Warbler Woods Bird Sanctuary in Schertz (<http://www.warblerwoods.org/>). This is very rare and is typically only seen in the Texas Panhandle and far west Texas and will have an optional Sunday afternoon trip to Warbler Woods for a chance to see four Zonotrichia – Golden-crowned, White-crowned, White-throated, and Harris's Sparrows.

- Our Austinite guides are Deb and Lee Wallace, who saw 476 species in Texas last year.
- \$30 for OG and TOS members or \$40 for nonmembers; 14-person limit.

Saturday: Hornsby Bend and McKinney Falls State Park

- 7:30AM: meet at Hornsby Bend Bird Observatory (2210 South FM 973, Austin, TX 78725). Let guard know you are birding before heading to main building, which should open by 7:00AM.
- We will consolidate into four cars and leave promptly at 7:45 AM.
- Bring lunch and drinks. Check local weather reports and dress accordingly.
- Head to McKinney Falls State Park for lunch. Bring Texas Park Pass (*if you have one*).
- We will decide on when and where to have dinner during the day.
- Overnight at La Quinta Inn & Suites Austin Airport or any preferred accommodations.

Sunday: Commons Ford Ranch Metropolitan Park

- 7:00 AM: Meet in lobby of La Quinta Inn and Suites Austin Airport (7625 East Ben White Blvd, Austin, TX 78741; hotel phone 512.386.6800). Drive to Commons Ford Ranch, unless you are meeting us at the park (let trip coordinator know of your plans).
- 7:30 AM: Arrive at Commons Ford Ranch Metropolitan Park (614 N. Commons Ford Rd, Austin, TX 78733), assemble near the barn and main buildings.

- Finish before noon and either head home or go onto Warbler Woods, which is a little over an hour from Commons Ford, and three hours from Houston. Warbler Woods has limited parking, so off-site parking or carpooling is encouraged. Remember to bring a small donation to support Warbler Woods operating costs.

Trip Coordinator: Teresa Connell (505.280.7443).

Trip Leaders: Lee Wallace (512.800.2962) and Deb Wallace (512.937.7572).

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San Jacinto Battleground, Saturday, February 10, 8 am

Led by Erik Ostrander

San Jacinto is Erik's backyard (he works for Texas Parks and Wildlife at San Jac.), so you are in for a treat!

Meet at 8:00 AM at northeast side of Monument, near the large green garbage cans.

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March Out of Texas (MOOT) Trip and Weekender Fundraiser, Saturday and Sunday, March 3-4

Cost: \$30; nonmember is \$40; 20 spaces available.

A grand trip to Louisiana's Cameron county to see more than 100 species at the #2 Louisiana hotspot at the Peveto Woods Baton Rouge Audubon Society Sanctuary at Holly beach. On Sunday, we visit Cameron Prairie NWR. These sites have nearly the same drive time as it takes to get to the Sabine woods. Carpooling is available and encouraged.

Hotel: Hackberry Mainstay Suites (337-762-3128): \$125/night AAA rate for two double beds.

Local Louisiana leader to be announced.

Trip Coordinator: Teresa Connell

RSVP: (505) 280-7443; teresacConnell@live.com

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Cold Birders and Hot Birds: Houston OG Field Trip to Brazoria County, January 13, 2018, guided by Ron Weeks.

By Jean Booth

Seven OG Members met in Freeport for our January field trip to Brazoria County guided by Ron Weeks.

Again, we started the day at 32 degrees and it did not get much warmer throughout the day. All participants were layered and bundled with hats and gloves, but it was worth the cold, as again this year Ron Weeks searched and helped us identify almost 100 species. What a great day with

our group – Jean Booth, Mary Mack, Michelle Romydy, Cathy Hays, Debbie Burnett, Peggy Boston and Alice Anne O'Donell, who is working on a TEXAS BIG YEAR.



We started the morning at San Bernard NWR and on our way to Bob Cat Woods, after some work, we got good looks and photos of a Fox Sparrow. Then at Wolfweed Wetlands, we had good looks at two Bald Eagles and 9 species of ducks. We left there and took a stroll down Scissortail Trail and our bird of the walk was a Northern Waterthrush. What a surprise. Next stop was Moccasin Pond and after a long careful look and photos, Ron confirmed we identified a Greater Scaup. While driving down Rail Pond Road, we had good looks at an adult White-tailed Kite. After identifying an exciting 65 species at San Bernard NWL, we worked our way toward Freeport, then Quintana. On the way we stopped near Justin Hurst WMA and found 4 Harris Hawks in trees by the side of the road. What a great find.

After lunch we headed to Bryan Mound Levee and had good looks at a Common Goldeneye, and 3 Eared Grebes and a Lesser Black-backed Gull. Our last birding spots were Quintana Jetty and Oyster Creek and our best birds at the end of the day were a single Hooded Merganser and while driving Ron identified a White-tailed Hawk flying close to the road - a great way to end the trip. We tallied 96 species for the day.

What a great trip, and thanks so much Ron for taking us out for the day and your focus of finding us so many great birds again this year. Alice Anne is thankful to watch her list grow so early in January.

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Minutes of January 8, 2017 Meeting

By Jean Greenhalgh

The January meeting of OG was held on January 8th, 2018 at the Tracy Gee Community Center, 3599 Westcenter Drive, Houston. 35 people attended.

Instead of a Learning Center, attendees listed the Christmas Bird Counts in which they participated and received a ticket for each one. After the main program there was a drawing and most attendees received one or more gifts.

February's meeting will be on February 8th at Bayland Community Center, 6400 Bissonnet St .

Nina Rach, OG President, said that volunteers are still wanted for the positions of President and Vice President/ Program Organizer. Please contact Nina at nrach@autrevie.com if you are interested in either of the positions or would like further details.

Teresa Connell (teresacConnell@live.com), Field Trip Coordinator, is building this OG's field trips around the theme of Birding in your Big Back Yard – County Birding. Here is the tentative field trip list through April 2018.

January 27 – Archbishop Fiorenza Park

February 10-11 – Austin Waterbird weekender

February 24 – San Jacinto Battleground

March 3-4 – Palmetto Woods and Cameron Prairies NWR, Louisiana, with Baton Rouge Audubon Society

April – Kerr County - 3 day weekender, possible sites include South Llano SP, Lost Maples SP, a ranch and a fish hatchery.

The final Texas Ornithological Society meeting date for 2018 has been announced –

May 3-6 – Thurs-Sun - Spring Meeting, Alpine area

Future Field Trips will be listed on the OG website <http://www.ornithologygroup.com/>

The Program for the evening was **Big Year 2017 by David Sarkozi**.

David, who started birding in middle school, had tried a Texas big year in 2015, while he was working. He reached a total of 496 birds. When he retired, and with a new vehicle, he decided to try again. Only four people had seen 500 or more birds in one year in Texas. Lynn Barber holds the record with 522 seen in 2005.

His plan was to front load the year with as many species as possible, aiming to be close to 350 by mid February. Upper Texas Coast, Laredo, Granger Lake, West Texas and the Panhandle were the targets for the first couple of months.

David relied on the information received from birders throughout Texas to chase rarities and to find expected birds relatively easily. David calls some of these people the Secret Underground Birders and he spoke about a couple of these trips, where secrecy was paramount.

On January 1 he found 95 species in Brazoria County, followed by a trip from Pleasure Island and Port Arthur to the Louisiana border, which netted 104 for the day, bringing his year total to 132. Next, a day exploring Texas City Dike and Bolivar Peninsular raised this to 148. A quick trip to Braunig Lake, San Antonio for Greater Scaup and Long-tailed Duck was productive and on January 7, a trip to Laredo for the Amazon Kingfisher and White-collared Seedeater raised the total to 182. On January 8th he saw 6 hummingbirds. The winter Texas Ornithological Society meeting in McAllen in mid-January brought 29 more to reach 240 species.

He then made a West Texas and Panhandle road trip, going to Balmorhea; Davis Mountain State Park; Marfa; Dell City; El Paso; the Franklin Mountains; Rita Blanca Grasslands near Dalhart; Cedar Canyon, Lake Meredith National Recreation Area, Fritch; Big Thicket, Coons. Among the highlights was Baird's Sparrow at the Dixon Water Foundation Ranch. Denise Perez, a post-grad student at Sul Ross, is working on a Baird's Sparrow study and he coordinated with her to help with a sparrow drive. This netted a Baird's Sparrow, which was a lifer for David. Dell City park was very productive for Sagebrush Sparrows and Crissal and Sage Thrashers. Lake Meredith produced a Northern Shrike, and Henslow's Sparrow was found at Big Thicket near Coons.

After a couple of weeks' break to lead a trip for OG to Belize it was back to Texas and one of the longest days for the year – 801 miles. This was a day trip on March 1st to Lake Arrowhead State Park near Wichita Falls. The Long-eared Owls were highly visible in trees at the park headquarters next to the flagpole.

March 5th was an eventful day. David went to Anahuac and then on to Bolivar. He stopped at Rollover Pass, then on to Tuna Road, which is poorly maintained. On his return along the road he drove through the center of a puddle and the car bottomed out on a mud ridge, the front wheels not even touching the bottom. The AAA wrecker arrived after 45 minutes but said he couldn't do anything. Very fortunately, a pickup truck came down the road, the driver had a wrecker which he went to collect. He crawled through the mud to hook up the car and winched it out. The whole thing took about 4 hours. David highly recommends A1 Wrecking Service if you have problems on the Bolivar Peninsular.

David gave insights as to the best places to find regular, but hard to find species. Botteri's Sparrow at the Palo Alto Battlefield; Starr S.P. (at the entrance to Falcon Dam) for Red-Billed Pigeon; Friedrich Wilderness Park, San Antonio, for the Golden-cheeked Warbler. McAllen

Lowe's fountain at 10th and Dove for Green Parakeet. Pampa in the Panhandle under the wind farm for Lapland and McCown's Longspurs. A 13.5 mile round trip in the Guadalupe Mountains to The Bowl produced Pygmy Nuthatch, Grace's Warbler, Steller's Jay, Mountain Chickadee and Hairy Woodpecker.

The S.U.B.s netted David a Lesser Prairie Chicken, a lifer, in the Panhandle and hummingbirds and owls in the Davis Mountains. On one trip he had a burlap sack over his head to keep the location secret.

David had seen 400 birds by April 26 and reached 499 by December 7.

The last couple of weeks of the year would be difficult to find new birds but he found a few. A very long round trip to Lake Palo Duro yielded a Golden Crowned Sparrow for number 500, but on the drive home another one was found at Warbler Woods in San Antonio. He went to Sanderson on the Rio Grande to see the Violet-crowned Hummingbird. Closer to home he saw the Black-legged Kittiwake and on December 29 he had a Parasitic Jaeger and Little Gull at Fort Jacinto Historic Point and the east end of the Galveston seawall.

David saw 504 birds in 2017. He traveled 45,000 driving, and over 300 miles of hiking.

For more information visit David's blog at <http://davidsbigyear.blogspot.com/>

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Blizzard!

By Hart Rufe (Reprinted with permission from Hart Beat, first published January 1, 2018)



Not snowflakes, but Snow Geese filled the sky

“It looks like a blizzard out there!” It was true; the dense early morning Florida fog obscured the Palm tree 10 feet from our back patio as well as everything around it and beyond. But that poor comparison to a blizzard whiteout was the extent of the similarity.





There was no wind-blown swirling snow; no bitter freezing cold; no eerie howling wind; no blanket of snow covering everything in sight; no piled up drifts against our doors blocking our ability to get outside; no shoveling sidewalks and digging out cars from the snow piled on them by plows clearing the roads; and no closing of schools, stores, public buildings, and announcements of mandatory road restrictions for days until all was clear. Indeed, having spent winters in Florida since 1999, I had to delve deep into my memory

banks to recall how overwhelming blizzards are; but then I also recalled the warmth, coziness and comfort of the fireplace during the freezing forced downtime.

Sometimes enormous flocks of Snow Geese are called “Blizzards.” Indeed, when the whole flock takes flight on their wintering grounds they can seem to whiten the sky. And one can understand why viewers would compare a large flock in a field to a snow bank. (*above, right*)

In my experience the flock doesn’t let birders come very close, always walking hurriedly away from the camera in the car photography blind. (*left*) In this Snow Goose photo the grayer Snow Geese are juveniles; and the dark colored Snow Goose in the left foreground of the photo is



a “Blue Goose,” an uncommon color morph of the Snow Goose that at one time was considered a separate species. Snow Geese nest in the high Arctic and migrate south through all four of the North American flyways, with eastern migrants wintering along the mid-Atlantic coast, and only a few finding their way as far south as North Carolina. They are very rare in Florida, but a couple of reports of Snow Geese in Florida this winter inspired this column.

In fact there are apparently no native geese species inhabiting the entire Florida peninsula, of course discounting all the Canada Goose decoys on so many Florida ponds and small lakes that Double-crested Cormorants love to use as perches.



The southern extent of the Canada Goose winter range is the panhandle of Florida, and this Canada Goose photographed on the Vero Beach Wastewater Wetlands is the only one I have ever seen in Florida. *(right)* Even rarer in Florida is the Brant, a smaller high Arctic goose whose winter coastal range barely reaches the Outer Banks of North Carolina. When this one showed up for a few days this fall on the eastern shore of the Indian River along A1A in

Jensen Beach, it created quite a stir among birders. *(left, bathed in early morning sunlight)*

However, Florida does have a growing population of Egyptian Geese, which, in August 2014, was finally accepted by the American Birding Association (ABA) as a breeding countable species if seen in Florida. While they seem to prefer golf courses and public parks, this one found its way, one day only, to our condominium complex in Fort Pierce *(bottom of column)*; and this family, photographed in the town park of Sebastian, Florida, serves as proof that they are extending their range farther north from their home base in southern most Florida. *(below, right)*

While many Florida “Snowbirds” are glad to escape the blizzards of the northern winters, we do miss the blizzards of Snow Geese which occur annually. And while they do not qualify in the same way as blizzards, the occasional winter invasions of Snowy Owls, (2014/15 and again this winter) do remind us of what exciting bird species we sometimes miss in the warmth and sunshine of winter in Florida.



But, we must also admit, the warmth and coziness of the fireplace did wear thin after a while against the relentless cold and misery of the real blizzard taking place outside. Therefore, we will continue to avoid blizzards by snow-birding in Florida each winter: both snow and bird blizzards. One gladly, one sadly.

Photo of Snow Goose (Blue morph) from ebird, at MINWR 11-13-2017 (seen 11-7 to 11-13-2017 only.) ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist/S40479078.

Canada Goose in

Florida: www.wec.ufl.edu/faculty/giulianob/Extension/UW24500.pdf



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