

Cassin's Vireo *Vireo cassinii*

William E. Haas

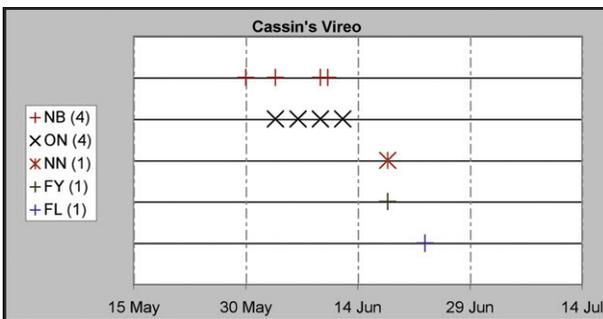
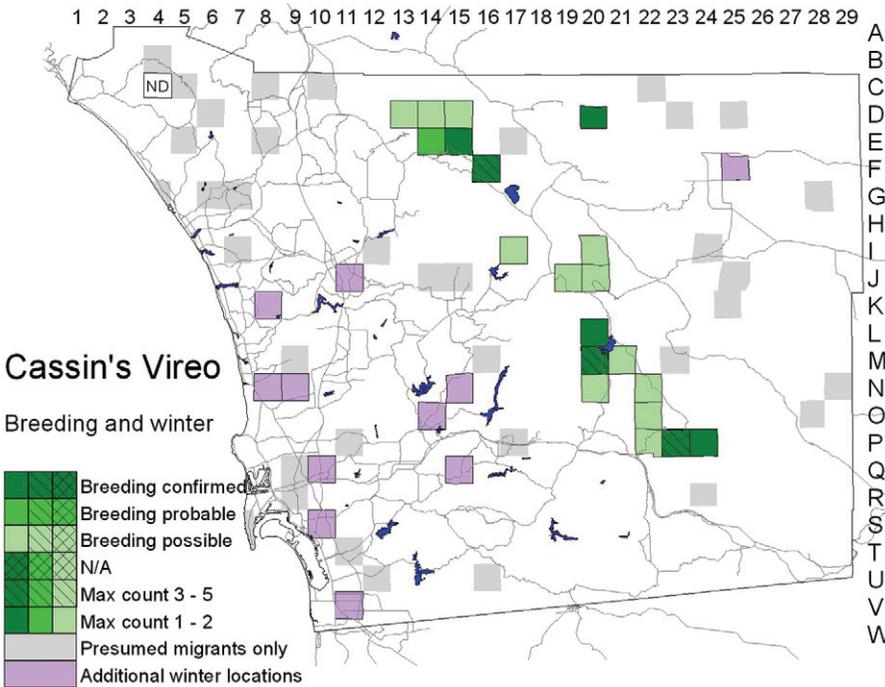
Rare in San Diego County as a breeding bird, Cassin's Vireo is best found by visiting oak and coniferous woodlands above 4000 feet elevation from late May to mid July. It is seen throughout the county in migration, though uncommonly. It is a regular winter visitor to riparian woodland and ornamental trees near the coast but rare in that role as well. Though Cassin's Vireo was never abundant, parasitism by cowbirds is likely responsible for the vireo's population decline and current rarity.

Breeding distribution: Currently, Cassin's Vireos summer in San Diego County only in montane mixed oak and conifer woodland above 4000 feet elevation. On Palomar Mountain, our 15 records during the atlas period were all of single individuals except for one nesting pair near Doane Pond (E15) 12 June 1999 and two nesting pairs at the lower end of Jeff Valley (F16) 30 May 1999 (W. E. Haas). Around Hot Springs Mountain, our only record during the atlas period was of a nesting pair at the north base in a small pocket of incense cedars in Lost Valley (D20) 10 June 2000 (W. E. Haas), though previously the species occurred near the summit (E20/E21; five, including a nesting pair, 8 June 1985, P. Unitt). Similarly, on Volcan Mountain (I20) and around Julian (K20) during the atlas period we had only three observations of single individuals, though numbers not long before were higher; for example, five on Volcan 30–31 May 1993 (P. Unitt). In



Photo by Jack C. Daynes

the Cuyamaca Mountains we had 13 sightings at various sites, the best of which was Middle Peak (M20), with up to four, including three singing males, 11 June 2000 (R. E. Webster) and nesting of two pairs confirmed 3 June 1998, 18 June 2000, and 9 June 2001 (W. E. Haas). In the Laguna Mountains the 11 observations were concentrated around Wooded Hill and the heads of Agua Dulce and La Posta creeks (P23), with up to five on 3 June 1999 (E. C. Hall, J. O. Zimmer). The only sighting in the breeding season away from these areas was of one about 3500 feet elevation 2.6 miles southeast of Mesa Grande (I17) 15 June 2000 (D. C. Seals).



Nesting: Like many vireos, the male Cassin's is not hesitant to sing at or near the nest, which is typically suspended by its rims from a forked twig of a small forest tree or bush. Nests are rarely placed at heights of more than 20 feet; most are built between 3 and 7 feet of the ground. Of six San Diego County nests, one nest was in a tangle of snowberry, honeysuckle, and an unidentified oak (Palomar State Park), two were in coast live oaks (Jeff Valley), and three were in incense cedars (two on Middle Peak, one in Lost Valley). Although Cassin's Vireo nests are typically shaded in dense foliage (Harrison 1978), as were those in incense cedars, one in Jeff Valley was in a sparsely foliated oak directly over a major footpath.

Our few observations of Cassin's Vireo nesting 1997–2001 suggest laying of a single clutch from late May to mid June: four records of nest building 30 May–10 June, five of occupied nests 3–12 June, one of a nest with nestlings (Middle Peak 18 June 2000, W. E. Haas), and one of fledglings (Laguna Mountains 18 June 2000, E. C. Hall, J. O. Zimmer). These sightings all fit within historical data on Cassin's Vireo nesting in San Diego County, 40 egg sets collected 15 May–28 June 1895–1933.

Migration: Spring migration of Cassin's Vireo through San Diego County is spread rather evenly from 10 April

to 20 May. Our earliest migrants were single birds at Bonsall (E8) 21 March 1999 and Carlsbad (I7) 23 March 1999 (P. A. Ginsburg); latest were along Vallecito Creek near Campbell Grade (M23) 20 May 1999 (R. Thériault) and at Crestwood Ranch (R24) 24 May 1999 (D. C. Seals). The extreme early date of 14 March 1970 still stands (AFN 24:643, 1970). Early arrivals are probably of migrants headed farther north; birds breeding in San Diego County's mountains arrive later. A survey of Jeff Valley 15–16 May 1999 revealed no Cassin's Vireos (W. E. Haas).

In fall, Cassin's Vireo migration, extending from early September to November, is even less noticeable than in spring; most birds probably keep to the mountains.

Winter: The usual winter habitat for Cassin's Vireo is riparian woodland in the coastal lowland, as at Kit Carson Park (J11; one on 12 December 1998, W. Pray), lower Los Peñasquitos Canyon (N8; one on 1 March 1998, D. K. Adams), and the species' most consistent site, around the Dairy Mart pond in the Tijuana River valley (V11; up to two on 26 December 1998, G. McCaskie). Cassin's Vireo also winters in ornamental trees, as at Greenwood Cemetery (S10; 12–21 January 2002, G. McCaskie), rarely in coast live oaks, as Steltzer County Park (O14; 8 January 2002, M. B. Stowe). The two winter records for the Anza–Borrego Desert are of one at Agua Caliente Springs (M26) 10 February 1977 (J. L. Dunn) and one at Ellis Farms, Borrego Valley (F25), 15 February 2002 (P. D. Ache).

Through the atlas period 1997–2002, the number of wintering Cassin's Vireos found annually ranged from one to five. Four on the Oceanside count 22 December 1979 is the record for a San Diego County Christmas bird count.

Conservation: Cassin's Vireo was more widespread and common in the past than now. Egg collections up to 1933 attest to its nesting at somewhat lower elevations than currently, at Witch Creek (J18), Descanso (P19), Campo (U23), and even Lake Hodges (K11). Cooper (1874) called Cassin's Vireo "not rare" in the Cuyamaca Mountains and, just as the cowbird was beginning its population explosion, Stephens (1919a) called it a "rather common summer resident of timbered cañons in the mountains." Presumably brood-parasitism by the Brown-headed Cowbird is the factor most responsible for the change; cowbirds parasitize Cassin's Vireo more heavily than expected from its abundance (Goguen and Curson 2002). Yet in spite of widespread cowbird trapping in San

Diego County since the late 1980s, Cassin's Vireo, unlike Bell's, has yet to show any evidence of recovery. From the viewpoint of San Diego County, the trend toward increase reported for the species as a whole (Sauer et al. 2003) looks unlikely; in all of the species' local roles the trends look flat to negative.

Taxonomy: With the split of the Solitary Vireo into the Blue-headed, Plumbeous, and Cassin's, the last consists of only two subspecies, nominate *V. c. cassinii* Xantus, 1858, being the only one in the United States.