

Philadelphia Vireo (*Vireo philadelphicus*) observations along Coastal British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin

Introduction and Distribution

The Philadelphia Vireo (*Vireo philadelphicus*) is an eastern species of vireo that breeds across the northern Canadian Boreal Forests from the southern Yukon, Southern Northwest Territories into the Peace River region of British Columbia across Canada to the Maritimes Provinces, including southern Newfoundland and the northern parts of United States from North Dakota to New York State and New England (Godfrey 1986, Campbell *et al.* 1997, Sibley 2003, Hamilton *et al.* 2007). In British Columbia it is known to be restricted as a summer breeding species to the Peace River Region (Campbell *et al.* 1997). There have been recent records of Philadelphia Vireo in the Prince George area and birds have been banded in the fall at the MacKenzie Banding Station (J. Bradley Pers. Comm.). There is also an early summer record of a singing adult male seen by the author while conducting bird counts in Aspen Habitat on June 15, 1992 near McBride. Coastal records are few in number but are increasing in the fall migration window. Along the west coast Philadelphia Vireo is a casual visitor in Washington State where there are 5 accepted records (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WRBC 2012) and in Oregon where there are 5 accepted records (OFO 2012). The species is considered casual in summer and fall in Alaska where there are 3 accepted records (West 2009). California has the bulk of the west coast records with 116 records for the State (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). The vast majority of these records come from the months of September and October with a small number from November (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). Philadelphia Vireo has also occurred as a fall vagrant in Ireland at Galley Head, County Cork between October 12-17, 1985 and in Britain on the Isles of Scilly October 10-13, 1987 (Lewington *et al.* 1992, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). Since this species breeds British Columbia and there is an established pattern of fall vagrancy, it is a species that should be carefully checked for in the future by observers.

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of Philadelphia Vireos is today covered in most standard field guides. However it is important for observers to understand that there are 2 distinct subspecies of Warbling Vireo in North America that could lead to potential misidentifications. The western subspecies of Warbling Vireo is called "*swainsoni*" which is in overall size smaller to its eastern subspecies relative "*givus*" (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). They look very similar to each other and are best distinguished by song (Sibley 2003). Both subspecies of Warbling Vireo have a gray crown, white throat and chest and very yellow-green sides and back (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This can superficially make look very similar to a Philadelphia Vireo. Where there are important differences is in the face. The both subspecies of Warbling Vireo have a plain face that is yellow-green in color (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Philadelphia Vireos have a dark gray crown and a dark

grayish –olive check patch with a dark line that starts at the base of the bill and travels through and behind the eye (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Above the eye is a white line that goes from the base of the bill over the eye to behind the eye (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). There is a lighter line below the eye as well and a darkish colored cheek (Sibley 2003). The throat is bright yellow and this extends down the chest onto the sides and flanks to the under tail coverts (Lewington *et al.* 1992). The back and wings is a dark olive-green color (Lewington *et al.* 1992). Philadelphia Vireos are small birds with a short tail, squat fat body and a large fat head (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Both subspecies of Warbling Vireo are much longer and thinner bodied with a small head and longer tail (Sibley 2003). By voice both species are very different to each other. Philadelphia Vireo is a higher-pitched weaker and choppy slowed down version of a Red-eyed Vireo (Sibley 2003). The song of the Western Warbling Vireo is completely different to Philadelphia Vireo by being a rapid run-on warble “*viderveedeviderveedevider-VEET*” with no pauses and a distinctive husky quality (Sibley 2003). The song of Eastern Warbling Vireo is similar but subtly different to the Western Warbling Vireo by being clearer, lower in pitch with a singsong rhythm that usually ends in an emphatic high note (Sibley 2003). This is still very different to the song of a Philadelphia Vireo. Though there are no confirmed spring records for Coastal British Columbia it is possible for Philadelphia Vireo to be found in the magical eastern passerine vagrancy window of mid-May through mid-June when other eastern passerines have been found in British Columbia. To date all records have been in the fall. As with any rare bird observers are encouraged to get photographs and document any sightings of Philadelphia Vireo encountered away from the breeding grounds of the Peace River.

Occurrence and Documentation

On September 13, 2006 a Philadelphia Vireo was found by the author amongst a large flock of Warbling Vireos at Jordan River (Cecile 2007). This bird stayed for 3 days in the same general area and was photographed on September 14, 2006 constituting the first confirmed record for Vancouver Island (Cecile 2007). The timing of this and all other coastal records for the Province falls into the pattern established in California where Philadelphia Vireo is a predominantly a fall vagrant that is no longer a review species for the State (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). Of the 116 accepted records, 88% of them occur between September 4 and December 14 with the peak occurring in mid- September (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). The coastal occurrences of Philadelphia Vireo in British Columbia fall perfectly into this pattern (see Table 1 below). Almost all of the early coastal records of Philadelphia Vireo have been in association with Warbling Vireos. The later birds seen in November were mixed with Kinglets, Chickadees and late Yellow-rumped Warblers. The habitat that Philadelphia Vireo has been found as a vagrant varies but to date this species seems to prefer Alder Trees, Birch Trees and Willow Trees. With careful scrutiny by observers given to fall Warbling Vireos it is highly likely that Philadelphia Vireos will occur in known vagrant traps along coastal British Columbia again in the future.

Table 1: Philadelphia Vireo Records for Coastal British Columbia:

- 1.(1) fall plumage October 28-November 17, 1973: Brian Kautesk, mobs: Stanley Park, Vancouver (Crowell and Nehls 1974, Toochin 2012a)
- 2.(1) fall plumage September 13-16, 2006: Rick Toochin, mobs (photo) Jordan River (Cecile 2007, Toochin 2012b)
- 3.(1) fall plumage September 2, 2007: Rick Toochin: Jordan River (Toochin 2012b)
- 4.(1) fall plumage September 22, 2007: Gord Gadsden (photo) Island 22 Regional Park (Toochin 2012c)
- 5.(1) fall plumage October 22, 2009: Rick Toochin: Jordan River (Toochin 2012b)
- 6.(1) fall plumage November 10 & 12, 2010: Chris MacDonald, mobs (photo) Island 22 Regional Park (Toochin 2012c)
- 7.(1) fall plumage October 1, 2011: Rick Toochin (photo) Sardis (Toochin 2012c)

Hypothetical records:

- 1.(1) adult May 26, 2009: David Allinson: Tower Point (D. Allinson Pers. Comm.)

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