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often attract the Brown-headed Cowbird, which parasitizes vireo broods. The cowbird is usually associated with livestock, farms and ranches where it benefits from waste grain and insects. Cowbirds can only lay their eggs in other birds' nests, leaving the host bird to raise their young. A cowbird chick often aggressively expels the host bird's eggs and young, leaving only the cowbird chick to be fed by the host. While some birds can discriminate cowbird eggs, the vireo cannot, and thus parasitized vireo nests typically fail to produce vireos. Between 20-80 percent and up to 100 percent of vireo nests are parasitized by cowbirds in some areas.

Control of Brown-headed Cowbird populations has been shown to be highly effective in increasing local productivity of host species such as Black-capped Vireos. Such control includes direct removal of cowbirds as well as reduction in livestock herds and feedlots. In addition, maintenance of sufficiently large patches (> 50 ha) of quality habitat, along with proper management of native and exotic ungulates, will not only serve to recover the Black-capped Vireo but will keep the entire community healthy and thriving.

**Publicly-accessible viewing sites for Black-capped Vireos can be found at the Kerr Wildlife Management Area (830) 238-4483 and Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge (512) 339-9432.**



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TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE

# The Black-capped Vireo

## in Texas



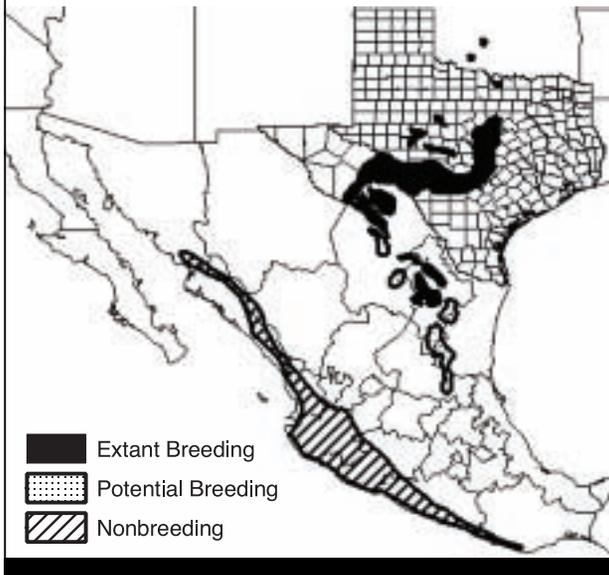
CRAIG FARQUHAR '02

WILDLIFE DIVERSITY

# The Black-capped Vireo in Texas

The Black-capped Vireo (*Vireo atricapillus*) is listed as endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Habitat losses, a substantial reduction in the breeding range, and reduced reproductive success due to brood parasitism by the Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) have contributed to marked population decline.

Figure 1. Geographic Distribution of the Black-capped Vireo (*Vireo atricapillus*)



## RANGE

The vireo ranges from the mountains of northern Mexico through central Texas and into Oklahoma. It may have once ranged as far north as Kansas. Throughout its range it occurs in small, scattered populations of several to as many as 100 or more pairs.

## HABITAT

Black-capped Vireo typically nest in shrublands and open woodlands with a distinctive patchy

structure. Typically, the vegetation will be from three to 15 feet high and have a highly variable canopy. Brush cover usually ranges from 30 percent to 70 percent and territories include adjacent open areas, and woody areas with up to 100 percent canopy closure. Woody shrubs with foliage from ground level to about four feet appear to be a critical component of breeding habitat as it provides the supporting vegetation for nest and foraging sites.

Common broad-leaved plants in vireo habitat include: Texas (Spanish) oak, Vasey oak, shin oak, Durand (scaleybark) oak, live oak, Texas mountain laurel, evergreen sumac, skunkbush sumac, flameleaf sumac, redbud, Texas persimmon, mesquite and agarita in the east; and sandpaper oak, vasey oak, Texas kidneywood, Mexican walnut, fragrant ash, Texas mountain laurel and guajillo in the west. Junipers are a frequent component of Black-capped Vireo habitat but usually make up no more than 50 percent of the canopy cover.

Throughout the habitat, plant composition appears less important than the presence of adequate broad-leaved shrubs, foliage to ground level, and the mixture of open grassland and woody cover. These factors are also important in providing habitat for the insects on which the vireo feeds.

## LIFE HISTORY

Black-capped Vireos arrive on their nesting grounds from mid to late March. Males sing during the entire breeding season (April to August). The cup-shaped nest is suspended from its rim in a fork of a branch about two to four feet above the ground. Almost all Black-capped Vireos nest within this narrow band of heights. Four eggs are usually laid, incubation takes 14 to 17 days, and the young usually fledge nine to 11 days after

hatching. The vireo usually nests more than once in the same year. A new nest is constructed for each nesting. Vireos may live for more than five years, and return year after year to the same territory, or one nearby; therefore, it is essential that occupied territories be protected. Vireos migrate to their winter grounds on the Pacific slopes of Mexico beginning in August.

## THREATS

The Black-capped Vireo is vulnerable to habitat fragmentation and loss. For any given site, good vireo habitat may become unsuitable because of natural plant succession; although



this is less of a concern in the south and west. Thus, active management may be required to maintain good vireo habitat. Man affects vireo habitat by vegetation manipulation (e.g., range management, urbanization), fire suppression and by maintaining an excess of browsing animals such as deer and goats. Man's activities