

Gray Vireo



ILLUSTRATION BY ZACKERY ZDINAK

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SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Vireo vicinior* is derived from the Latin *vireo*, which denotes a small green bird. The word *vicinis* translates to “very near or related,” and likely refers to the close resemblance of this species to other small, dull-looking birds.

DESCRIPTION: The gray vireo can be difficult to distinguish due to its drab plumage, but to the keen observer, a number of key features and charismatic behaviors, and a distinctive song, set this species apart. Its smoky gray underparts fade to a whitish abdomen. Dark gray wings bear a single, faint wing-bar. It has a narrow, white eye-ring and its bill is short, stout and dark. Its tail, proportionally longer than that of other vireo species, is often raised and flicked enthusiastically. This vireo’s song contains a series of burry two- and three-syllable phrases phonetically described as, “che wi, chee wi, choo.” Adult birds average 5.5 inches long and weigh about half an ounce.

DISTRIBUTION: Breeding range consists of mostly montane regions and adjacent arid scrubland in the southwestern United States and nearby northern Mexico, with

isolated populations speckled through southern California, Colorado and west Texas. In Arizona, gray vireos breed in northern and eastern regions at 3,500 to 6,800 feet elevation. These short-distance migrants can be encountered wintering very locally in secluded Sonoran Desert canyons that often contain elephant trees, whose fruit is a valuable food source. Much less is known about their spotty wintering distribution in southwestern Arizona, where they have been documented from approximately 1,400 to 2,200 feet elevation.

HABITAT: This discrete scrub dweller typically nests in relatively arid, open vegetative communities containing scattered pinyon pine and juniper, often on sloping terrain with a chaparral or sagebrush component. After the breeding season, gray vireos transition to the dry, rocky slopes of desert mountains and steep canyons, where they seek the supplemental nourishment of native fruiting plants.

BIOLOGY: Spring migration begins in March. Birds pair up by mid- to late April and begin nest construction soon

after. Nests are complete after five or six days and egg-laying begins. Clutches of two to four eggs are incubated by both adults (primarily the female) for 12 to 14 days. Parents cooperatively feed nestlings, which fledge 13 or 14 days later. Adults continue to feed their recently fledged young for five to 10 days, and if favorable conditions persist, may attempt another clutch. Though seldom observed, fall migration begins in August and peaks in September.

During breeding season, gray vireos forage actively, rapidly darting from shrub to shrub in their hunt for an insect meal, which often includes grasshoppers, beetles, cicadas and caterpillars. However, on wintering grounds when insect abundance declines, these dynamic little birds alter their dietary strategy. Here, they find the fleshy fruits of elephant trees and settle in for about six months of vigorously defending winter territory.

STATUS: Dependent on specific tree and shrub species, gray vireos are highly susceptible to declines of these resources. Elephant trees are very sensitive to freezing events, and junipers (regular nesting trees) to drought. For these and other reasons, the gray vireo is on the state’s list of species of greatest conservation need.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: Although a significant portion of the gray vireo’s breeding range is in Arizona, population trends are essentially unknown in the state. Further investigation of these trends and additional knowledge of wintering areas and ecology is needed. Proper management of gray vireo habitats is vital in keeping this species a stable component of our ecosystem. 🦋

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