

F O C U S

The Eye-ringed Leaf Gleaners

Rich Stallcup

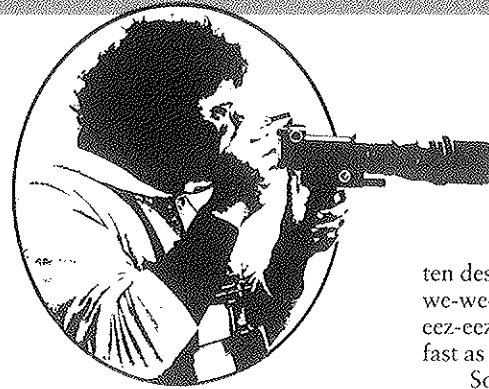
THREE SMALL GREEN WESTERN PASSERINES that I call the Eye-ringed Leaf Gleaners look and act enough alike to deserve special attention. The Ruby-crowned Kinglet and the Hutton's Vireo have developed strikingly similar plumage patterns for species who are not very closely related. And the west-coast race of Solitary Vireo (*Vireo solitarius cassinii*) resembles Hutton's Vireo much more closely than its eastern and southwestern congeners do. In most field guides (Peterson, Robbins et al, and Pough) *S.v. cassinii* is not pictured or discussed at all. The plate in the National Geographic guide is not wholly accurate, and, although there is a photograph of *cassinii* on page 101 of the Master Guide (bottom), it is mislabeled as the "Rocky Mountain Race" which is *V.s. plumbeous*. Several factors help in sorting out the three species in the field.

Distribution in California

THE RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET (RCKI in abbreviation) is a sparse breeder in the very high Sierra-Cascades and is totally absent elsewhere in the state from May to September. In the third week of September it begins to rain RCKI's and by late October they flood the lowlands. Throughout winter they are everywhere except in deep northern forests and high mountains. This winter influx is from breeding populations to the north of us as far as Alaska. These birds begin to depart in mid-April just as our breeders return from wintering areas in Mexico.

HUTTON'S VIREO (HUVI) is a year-round resident in coastal forests and foothill woods west and south of the Sierra-Cascade conifer belt especially where there are live oaks. It is rare east of the crest, in the deserts, and in the Central Valley and is absent from the Salton Sea area to the Colorado River drainage and in high mountains. A small percentage of the population is at least partially migratory as evidenced by its appearance during migration periods away from the usual range (for instance, Deep Springs, Inyo County, and on Southeast Farallon Island).

The Cassin's race of SOLITARY VIREO (SOVI) nests sparsely throughout the north woods of California and the foothills surrounding the Central Valley up to 5000 feet. It also nests on the Pacific slope of



southern California mountains. It is absent as a breeder from the Central Valley, the high Sierra-Cascade, the outer coast of central and southern California, the Great Basin, and the desert mountains. In the latter two areas, *Vireo solitarius plumbeous*, the big gray and white race, takes over. Territories are usually near water in mixed deciduous woods often with scattered conifers. During fall migration it may be found anywhere in the foothills or lowlands but is never common. Except for a very few records near the coast and in the desert, the whole population winters in Mexico.

The Winter Problem

BY THE TIME RCKI'S ARRIVE in late September most SOVI's are already in Mexico. It is unlikely that these two would be much of a visual identification problem anyway. However, SOVI's overt similarity to HUVI ripples the whole pond. Here we will distinguish between RCKI and HUVI, the winter couple, and later, HUVI and SOVI the summer couple.

Voice: By far the easiest way to separate RCKI and HUVI is through the clear differences in their vocalizations. This is also the easiest way to locate them since both species are very vocal, especially when agitated. There are no magic shortcuts to learning bird noises. Tracking them down or going out with someone who has already done the tracking are the best methods. We can make only a feeble attempt at describing them.

RCKI's most frequently give a very nagging but rapid, machine gun-like series of single notes on the same pitch. They are unmusical but also unwhining and might be written as "ah-a-a-a-a-a-a" with two or more per second.

HUVI is not quite as chatty as RCKI but will usually give its basic complaining noises in response to owl calls or to "pishing." These notes are also unmusical and nagging but are quite nasal and wheezy and descend in pitch. Some are delivered in packets of two or three and each piece is lower than the last. This might be written as "waaah waaa waa" one or less per second. There is a faster, longer call of six to

ten descending notes like "whee-we-we-we-we-we-we-we" and "wheez-eez-eez-eez-eez-eez-eez" all on the same pitch and nearly as fast as RCKI.

Songs of these two birds are even more different than their calls but needn't clutter this discussion. The calls above are far more often heard in winter.

Actions: RCKI and HUVI are two of the most responsive birds. A birder should hang up his Audubon Bird Squeecker if after a few tries at the edge of a likely looking wood a RCKI does not come in. Often both species will come in so close that binoculars will no longer focus on them, and because of their pestering voices many other species will come in with them.

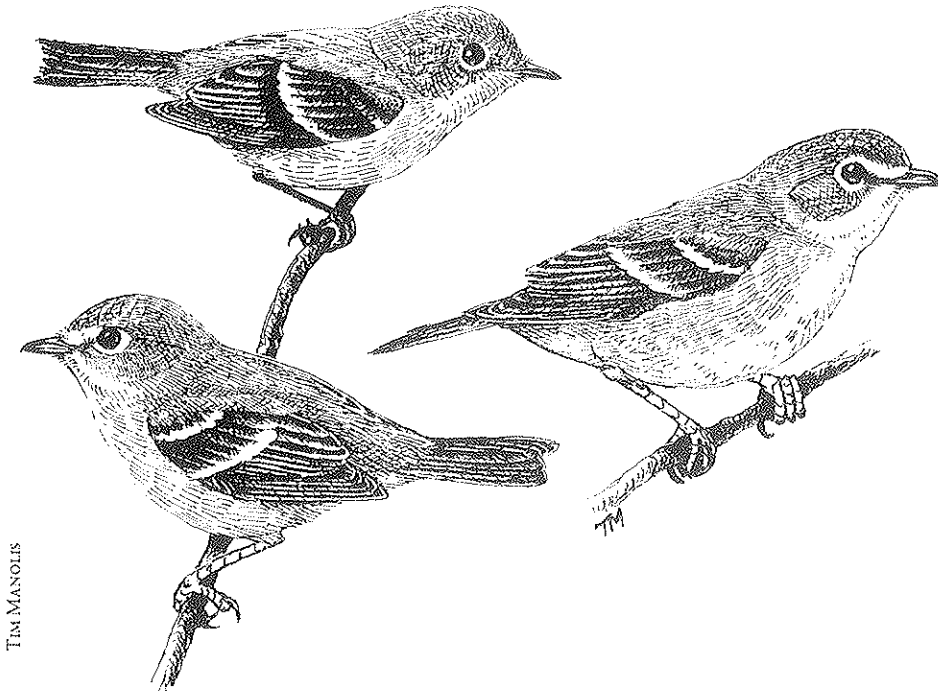
Under this condition, movements of RCKI and HUVI can be very similar. Most sources suggest that RCKI moves much more quickly, appearing nervous and twitchy, while HUVI is slow moving, deliberate, and comparatively sedate. While the former is always true for RCKI, the latter is only true for HUVI while it forages at ease. When HUVI joins a lynch mob of small birds after a predator or a simulated predator it loses all composure. Therefore, if the birds are upset, *both species move about quickly, often change positions, and do lots of rapid wing-flicking*. The only real difference in actions, then, are RCKI's more continuous chatter and HUVI's slighter slower perch changes.

When foraging at ease, RCKI is much more nervous acting and HUVI slower and more deliberate. Both species can hover briefly to pick at something on a hanging leaf, but this is part of RCKI's regular routine while HUVI does it rarely.

Size and Shape: RCKI is only slightly shorter than HUVI but is much lighter and less bulky. These dimensional things are of little utility, though, when one is looking up at a small, green bird in a sea of leaves and twigs. More helpful is *shape*. RCKI's head looks proportionately correct on its body and the whole bodyline is sleek. The front end does not look particularly heavier than the back end. It appears a slim waif unless fluffed up in cool weather or while preening.

HUVI definitely has a bull-headed look, paler lores, thicker bill and shorter-looking tail. It is also very chesty, which contributes to its front-heavy look.

The Head: Both RCKI and HUVI have distinct eye rings, and both are broken at the top. RCKI's eye ring is *white* and



TIM MANOLIS

The Eye-ringed Leaf Gleaners. Top: Ruby-crowned Kinglet; above: Hutton's Vireo; right: Solitary Vireo.

uniformly narrow. The lores (between the eye and the bill) are usually green like the face thus isolating the eye ring. Each eye is monocolored not spectacled. The bill of RCKI is shallow and sharp.

HUVI's eye ring is broader than RCKI's especially before and behind the eye and is usually *creamy yellow*, seldom white. The lores are pale but not clearly defined from the olive forecrown and feathering from the cheek to the gape. Thus, although it is spectacled, it is not sharply so. The bill of HUVI is about the same relative length as that of RCKI but is thicker throughout and is clearly hooked at the tip.

The Body: Disregarding the wings, RCKI and HUVI are very much the same color. They are basically green above and yellowish below with RCKI in fresh plumage having the brighter hues. Some eastern RCKI's are duller than ours, and that may be why most field guides seem to be wrong on color for our birds. Some books (especially Robbins et al) show RCKI as that is gray above and white below. None of ours looks like that: they are green and yellow. As to why they made HUVI look so dull and gray . . . maybe someone told them it is supposed to look like a RCKI!?!

The Wings: Although RCKI has two wingbars, the forward one is only half as

long as the rear one and much of that is often covered by breast feathers. Thus, RCKI usually appears to have one wingbar while HUVI definitely has two.

RCKI's one wingbar is white or yellow followed by a black bar followed by a chartreuse panel (the rectangle formed by the edge color of the closed wing feathers). HUVI's two wingbars are yellowish to cream; both are bordered before and behind by dull olive green slightly darker than the rest of the wing.

The Legs and Feet: Often a bird among leaves above the observer shows very little in the way of field marks. If you know it is either a RCKI or a HUVI but can see nothing but the bottom of the bird, look at its legs or feet, the best, most reliable way to differentiate the two species.

RCKI has extremely *thin, black legs* with black toes but *yellow toe pads*. HUVI has *stout, sturdy, pale gray to sky blue legs* and toes and white pads. The younger the bird, the bluer the legs; the older, the blacker.*

*Golden-crowned Kinglet (GCKI) from below would also be hard to tell from RCKI since both have similar shapes, actions and black, toothpick legs. GCKI, though, has an even shorter tail than RCKI, has even more a one wing-barred look and has a yellower (less green) wing panel. Also, there is a subtle but definite difference in the manner the wings are flicked. For RCKI nearly the *whole wing* is opened and closed very quickly but remains almost parallel to the body throughout. In GCKI the wing *tips* appear to be raised very high (towards the head) while the "shoulders" remain closed.

The Summer Problem

WEST-COAST SOLITARY VIREO (*S. v. cassinii*) is not illustrated in most field guides. The books show eastern types, with blue crowns, lime backs, lemon sides and flanks with immaculate wingbars, eye spectacles, throat, breast and belly, or southwestern types which are all pale gray above with all white underparts, eye spectacles, and wing-bars. *Cassinii* looks much more like a HUVI than any of the other Solitary Vireo subspecies. Although it is brighter and sharper than HUVI, some individuals require more than a glance for an observer to be sure.

Voice: The songs are quite different. The Solitary has clear, melodious questioning and answering phrases while HUVI has monotonous, two-noted up- or down-slurred sets. Many commercial recordings are available to compare the voices. What we can best describe is what the birds look like.

Actions: SOVI never seems to get excited or jump quickly around flitting its wings. Instead, it behaves as HUVI does when HUVI is unhassled, moving deliberately, twig to twig, looking carefully, looking everywhere, for a meal.

Size and Shape: SOVI is a little bigger than HUVI with a slightly longer tail, longer wings, and a longer bill, but overall shape is much the same.

The Head: SOVI has a *bold, complete, white eye ring with sharply white lores* forming a classic set of spectacles. The eye is big and dark as is HUVI's, but the crown is slightly grayer. SOVI's throat is often white, but some are washed with cream while HUVI's is dull yellow.

The Body: The Cassin's SOVI is more washed with duller yellow below and is more olive (less lime) above than eastern Solitaries. Thus, it looks more similar to HUVI. It is usually somewhat brighter than HUVI in the greens and yellows, and there is at least a narrow core of white from the throat through the breast and belly.

The Wings: The pattern of SOVI is the same as HUVI, but usually the wingbars are whiter and each is bordered by a green brighter than olive.

Legs and Feet: SOVI has gray to sky blue legs and feet and light pads just like HUVI.

Reference

KAUFMAN, Kenn. *Field Identification of Hutton's Vireo*. Continental Birdlife Vol. 1 #3, June 1979.