

NESTING OF THE SOLITARY VIREO IN THE
TALLADEGA NATIONAL FOREST

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The Solitary Vireo (Vireo solitarius) occurs as a migrant throughout Alabama and as a winter resident in the southern half of the State and rarely but regularly in the northern half (Imhof, 1976). Several May and June records in the Tennessee Valley and Mountain Region have suggested that the species might breed in the State. The discovery by the author of a nesting pair of Solitary Vireos, several bonded pairs and numerous singing males in the Talladega National Forest in Cleburne County confirms the species as a breeding bird in Alabama.

On March 25, 1979, while in the Choccolocco Wildlife Management Area, my attention was drawn to the persistent singing of a Solitary Vireo. I observed the singer for about 30 minutes and concluded that the bird was on territory. On March 27 I returned to the area and found the male and female beginning construction on a nest 20 feet high in a small, 6 inch understory southern red oak (Quercus falcata) growing on the upper slope of a mixed pine hardwood hillside that dropped off steeply into a hardwood bottom. At this time the nest consisted of only a few plant fibers suspended from a fork in a small horizontal limb about 2 feet from the main stem of the tree. I would judge nest construction to have begun no more than 1 day before, on March 26.

The male made 2 trips alone to the nest carrying nesting material and 1 trip accompanied by the female. On all 3 trips he approached the nesting site chattering and sang frequently while working on the nest.

On March 29 both the male and female were busy at work on the nest. By this time the cup had taken shape but holes could be seen through the nest from

below. The pair made 6 to 8 trips over a 15 minute period and the male usually approached the nest chattering and would sing at the nest. While one member of the pair worked on the nest, the other would often gather material from nearby branches.

Five days later, on April 3, the nest appeared completed and there was no activity around the nest, although the male sang frequently in the vicinity. Assuming nest construction to have begun on or near March 26, nest construction required 12 days or less.

On April 6, the female was sitting on the nest and appeared to be incubating. After 10 minutes, she left the nest and joined the male on a branch about 15 feet away. He immediately moved up within 2 or 3 inches of her, stood full length on the limb, crest erect, and bobbed from side to side singing and chattering. This brief courtship display was immediately followed by copulation, and singing was almost continuous before and during mating. Following copulation the female left and did not return. Interestingly, another male suddenly appeared, fought briefly with the resident male, then left.

On April 24 the female was on the nest, presumably incubating or by this time brooding young. I was unable to make a follow up trip to check on the progress of the young.

As it turned out, the Solitary Vireo was a common bird in March and April in the Talladega National Forest from Cheaha Mountain north to the Choccolocco Wildlife Management area, and probably occurs as a breeding resident south from Cheaha. Territorial males were common to abundant in hardwood and mixed pine-hardwood habitats in both remote areas and near main woodland roads. How the species has been overlooked so long is somewhat of a mystery.

The Solitary Vireo is an early nester when the woods are still wintry and bare. Singing is at a peak during March and April and occurs even on icy mornings when the temperature is in the upper 20s and the spring woods stilled by the cold. Closer observation in early spring might reveal the Solitary Vireo to be a common breeding bird in the mountainous areas of the State.

Summary

The Solitary Vireo is a common breeding resident in the Talladega National Forest from Cheaha Mountain north of the Choccolocco Wildlife Management Area, but the species probably breeds in other hardwood and mixed pine-hardwood areas in north Alabama and possibly further south.

A nesting pair observed by the author in the Choccolocco Wildlife Management Area confirms the species as a breeding bird in Alabama.

Nest construction began on March 26 or 27 and required 12 days or less. The female appeared to be incubating on April 6 when copulation was also observed. She was last observed on the nest on April 24, presumably incubating or brooding young.

Literature Cited

Imhof, T. A. 1976. Alabama Birds, 2nd ed. State of Alabama Department of Conservation, University of Alabama Press.