A Study of the Solitary Vireo

BY CORNELIUS WEYGANDT

The song of the Solitary Vireo brings home to me the realization that there are birds' songs as distinctively minor as minor poets. Beautiful and mad and memorable as it is, the Solitary's song is as surely minor, compared with the Wood Thrush's, as Herrick is minor compared with Milton. It is no belittlement of Herrick to call him a minor poet, and in calling the Solitary Vireo a minor singer I intend all praise. I would place him first of all minor singers as artist, although quality of voice and long love make me hold more precious the Field Sparrow's song, as surely a minor bird-song as is the Solitary's, or the Southern Water Thrush's, another bird that, like my Vireo, the books have failed to praise sufficiently. My purpose is to praise the Solitary Vireo, but inasmuch as I would praise him only to his honor, I want at once to confess that his song must not be contrasted with the songs all of us will own as major, the songs of the Bobolink, Catbird, Brown Thrasher, Mockingbird, Veery, Hermit Thrush, and Wood Thrush. I would confess as frankly that the Solitary Vireo's song would suffer, heard side by side with the Orchard Oriole's, the Winter Wren's, the Fox Sparrow's, far greater as an artist as the Vireo is than these last-named three. For associations' sake I hold dearer the Redwing's fluted "okalee," the Whitethroat's "far lonely silver strain," the House Wren's homey prattle, the Bluebird's soft warble with all the spring in it, and the purity of a child's heart. But what a fine fellow the Solitary is! Like so many woodlanders, he is sober enough in his dress and gentle enough in his ways; but he is every feather of his five and a half inches the artist, a madcap singer, a gloater in the dripping sweetness of his bridal-song.

It was in northeastern Pennsylvania, where the Poconos look

over to the Catskills, that the Vireo's song won me. It was exciting to me to hear unexpectedly so beautiful a bird-song; it was doubly exciting in that it was the first time I had listened to it; it broke in on me with all the thrill of a discovery, for I had not read that the Solitary was so fine a singer. I had stopped day after day, as I passed his home by the roadside, to look at him and his mate busy about their nest. I had taken a Cowbird's egg from it in the hope that, that danger removed, they might rear their young, indiscreet though they had been in trusting them to so low a limb in so exposed a place; I had even smoothed her dark head as she sat on the nest and chucked her under her soft white chin, but no song had I heard save the *twuweet*, *twuweet*, *twietchuweet*, *turu*, that proclaimed him a Vireo from its likeness to the Redeye's song, but not that bird but his fine self, through its greater keenness and fulness. Then the day after the catastrophe, the day after we found the parents in distress, and but one young in the nest, and it dead, came the revelation. I was following the winding red road through the low rock oaks of the mountain-top, conscious that the Solitary Vireo was singing, but paying no special heed to him, when all of a sudden there leaped up a jetting little song, like the Catbird's in its ecstasy, but gentler and more caressing. From such intricate sweet warbling it fell to lively trilling, not unlike the Yellowbird's prolonged trilling, to rise at the end to another Catbird-like burst. I looked up and just above me was the Solitary Vireo, revolving his head in that dizzying fashion so characteristic of his kind, as he eyed about for prey. But the madness of remating was upon him, and he soon fell to warbling and trilling again, preceding each outburst with his usual song. I had heard few birds with songs so long and so varied, and put him down then and there as the best of his race, and one of the very best of any race.

Charming in his trustfulness and little ways, I had known him before; and beautiful, as I had watched him as he sat on the nest, relieving his mate, that you could scarcely distinguish from him, for her ramble for food. But now he was revealed a really great singer, of little volume though his finer notes. For two weeks after this day, July 15th, you might hear this fine

full song here, there, and everywhere, through the mountain-top woods. He would break into it about every half hour, sometimes about every quarter hour, and continue singing for some five minutes with short intervals of silence between. Then for twenty minutes, or maybe only for ten minutes, he would be busy hunting, uttering, as he hunted, his usual keen song. In few half hours would you total a silence of more than five minutes. In the hotter hours he would be silent for longer intervals but you would hazard a good chance of hearing him at any time of day if you halted for ten minutes anywhere within his usual hunting-ground. His usual *twuweet, twuweet, twiet-chuweet, turu*, carries a good quarter of a mile, but his bridal song is not of such penetrating quality. To get its every note you must be within a hundred feet of the bird singing.

The full story of his life during the three months I lived with him on the top of Buck Hill I cannot write, but what I did learn of it interested me deeply. When I came upon the nest on June 16th, the birds had just finished it, and as I visited it for a week afterwards I would generally find her in the nest. This week she was laying. At its end I looked into the nest for the first time and found in it four eggs, very like the familiar Redeye's, with an irregular circle of fine brown and black dashes and spots around the greater end, and a Cowbird's egg. I took the intruder's egg and one of the Vireo's eggs, for the Cowbird had indented it in dropping in her own. On blowing them I found both fresh. I did not look into the nest again until July 14th, the day after the tragedy, but I had noticed the old birds feeding young a week earlier.

The comradeship of the two during incubation had been very winning. As one sat upon the eggs the other would come flying swiftly to a dead limb above and then drop to the little branch from which the nest was swung, landing not a foot away from it. Here the incoming bird would mew, ever so caressingly, and the bird on the nest would answer in the same low tone. Sometimes the interchange of greetings would be followed by interchange of positions, the sitting bird first unsettling itself gently from the eggs and then flitting off to alight beside its mate. The incomer would lift itself into the nest as deftly and

then after a few more mutual mews the relieved bird would be off to the oak-tops. Once the sitting bird, this time I suppose the male, sang while brooding on the nest when the other returned.

Almost on the wood-edge as it was and not ten feet back from a little opening off the road and scarcely over head-high, it was easy to watch the nest. I could follow the bird's comings and goings through the open wood without difficulty. I got to know well some details of their living and something of their ways. Since they took turns on the nest I had a chance to compare their appearances, but with the exception that after two weeks' sitting one seemed duller than the other I could not say which was which nor could I tell which sat longer save that it seemed that I found the duller one oftener on the nest. This one, which, of course, I took to be the female, was much the tamer of the two, so tame that gradually she came to eat hard-boiled eggs and crumbed cracker from the finger of one of the ladies from the nearby hotel.* Anyone could stand within six feet and pick out her dainty coloring, which justified the name "Blue-headed Vireo" much more than her ways did the name "Solitary." I have chosen the name Solitary as more usual and more euphonious, greatly regretting that so charming a bird is unnamed in the vernacular. As she sat on the eggs her white chin, projecting over the side of the nest, contrasted quite distinctly with her dark blue-gray head and green-grey back. The white line over her eye and the two wing-bars of yellowish-white could be easily distinguished. When she hopped off of the nest you could see the yellow flush on her sides. In the tree-tops she looked brownish-gray.

She sat faithfully in all weathers. When the heat was so intense that she panted even in the shade in which she had built, and in steady downpours of rain, and on days of cold wind when her cradle swung as if it would turn over, she was at her post. After much devotion it was the hardest of fates that the young should be destroyed. Just what destroyed them I never could determine. It may have been deer-mice, of which there

* Cf. E. R. Lyman, in Bird Lore, 1906, p. 123.

were legion roundabout, it may have been a chipmunk, or a red squirrel, or a snake. Sometimes I think that overkindness in feeding the mother brought death to the young, for she would regurgitate the egg and cracker given her and feed it to them. Again, I wonder if lice were not responsible, for there were many in the nest, and even while the one squab that had not disappeared was lying in the nest the mother came back and carefully ate the lice off the nest and the little bird, whose plump and unwounded body puzzled me as to how it came by its end.

The lateness of the nest's building would indicate that its builders had already tried to raise a brood before this attempt, and the presence a hundred yards further down the mountain of a nest whose eggs were destroyed about June 1st, made it more likely that the nest of which I write was the second failure.

During the remating of mid-July the male started to build again just back of our shack, but he never got further with it than the wrapping of the silk of little cocoons around the two twigs of the fork of a little maple. I saw him here off and on for a week; but either the site proved on second consideration disadvantageous, or the birds concluded it was too late now to attempt a third brood. After the beginning of the last week in July, I did not see him fussing about the little maple, although he still visited us daily. I never saw his mate there at all, though she frequently accompanied him on his visits to our trees until August 13th. This was the last day until September 2d on which I heard him sing his shorter song, *twuweet, twuweet, twietchuweet, turu.* The mating-song had died away two weeks earlier. Early in September, after an absence of three weeks, and now moulting, the two revisited us again. It may be the moulting had kept them in hiding. I would like to think that it was family cares, but I am afraid it was not, for when they returned there were no young with them, as there were with two pairs of Redeyes, late in the season though it was. September 7th was the last day on which I saw the Solitary Vireo, and then it was in the neighborhood of the nest where I had watched them for a month.

It is not as they were, the last time I saw them, nor as the settled brooding pair of the late June, but as the wandering

madcap singer and his mate of mid-July that I shall remember them. And when I think of that quickening song there comes with the memory a sense of the presence of those mountain-top woods, the tanny odor of their decaying leaves, the beauty of their pale-yellow false foxgloves standing stiffly up from their brown floor, the infinity of their rank on rank of low rock oaks. And forever now I may not see one of these three without recalling the others, and the half light of those woods to which they gave such charm—rock oaks, false foxgloves, and the Vireo's song.