

1/8/14

Last week started the year with the resounding revelation of a new record. This week is much less blessed with puritanical value (the I must be good and blessed of God because I'm rich, even though I never actually earned a penny, or only earned my pennies by wrapping rancid companies or credit default swaps in window dressing and selling to the naive and the dumb) but, I would assert, full of true value. The record for a week 2 walk is 32 species. We had only 20. We were well above the record low of 11 and just above the median of 19. More importantly, we met two new walkers, Deborah Vane who works on the Cloudsat mission from JPL and Alec Brenner, a new undergraduate here at Caltech. They are walkers number 146 and 147.

See the plots at http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird_data/species_time.html and

http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird_data/two_plots.htm

I sometimes find it annoying to walk along Wilson Avenue. This often yields the best representation of the Caltech version of the tree of life: plant tree, overwater or underwater tree, kill tree, remove tree, plant tree. Unfortunately, they tend not to leave the snags (dead standing trees) in long enough to be more than a passing fancy for the local woodpeckers or secondary hole nesting birds.



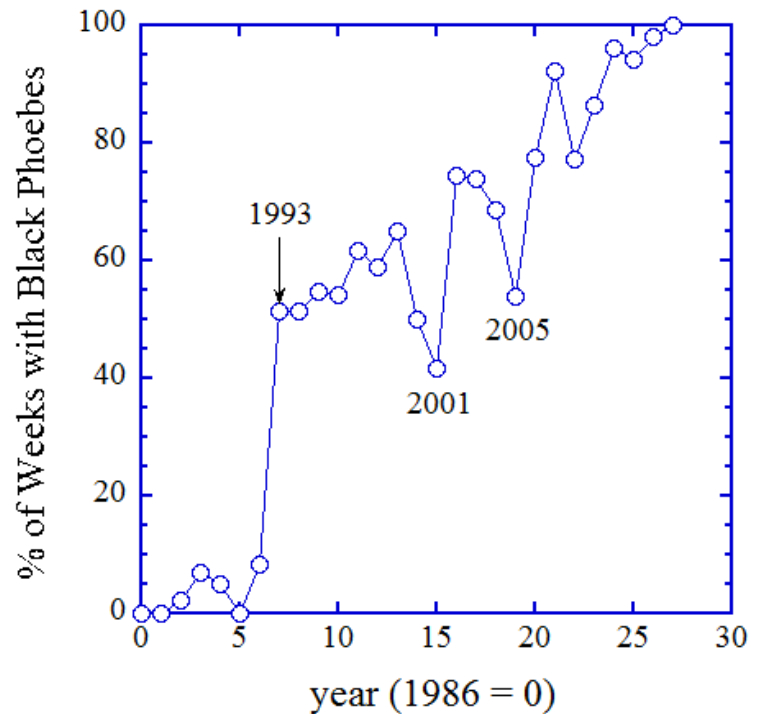
Two cameras can be much better than one, especially if one of them is a gun that can fire a frame a second and do close-ups from across the street. Alec brings a camera and the first and by no means only fruit of his efforts is a shot of the Arden Townsend's warbler. This bird was foraging in the outer canopy, so there was light but he was mostly high up and moving fast. I didn't bother to try for a shot since I knew the odds that I would get anything useful were quite low. Alec is made of sterner stuff and he produces the first photo to the left that shows all sorts of key features. If you look at identification lists for Townsend's warblers, the black mask over yellow around the eyes, black cap, streaking along the side, overall yellow breast, and pair of white wing stripes are all likely to gain mention. Now, adults will also have black throat patches, quite prominent for the male and less prominent but still obvious for the female. Alec's picture shows enough of the throat to lend confidence to the conclusion that this is a first year bird. There is no black throat patch. If you look at the lower photo, a Townsend's I shot at Prufrock on the same walk, you can see the pair of white wing bars,

the black eye mask, side streaking and cap, *and* a large dark throat patch. This is an adult male. I note

as an aside that the yellow in the breast gives way to an off-white belly. You can see the transition zone in Alec's photo. When you only get a bottom view, this yellow-white transition can sometimes help you distinguish a Townsend's from a yellow-rump or a black-throated gray, the primary competition for our area.



Since I am on the subject of warbler identification, I will talk out of turn and discuss a holding dream of Prufrock. In addition to the Townsend's I mentioned above, we also saw a black-throated gray warbler and Viveca also caught sight of an orange-crowned warbler. The latter was foraging in the central portion of a small oak and I was completely unable to get any photographic documentation but the black-throated gray warbler in the large Prufrock tree was not shy and I got a couple of useful images. Now, you might think that the definitive feature of a black-throated gray warbler is a black throat but that would be falling into a cheap trap because you can't count on it. Just as first year Townsend's warbler lacks a black throat patch, so does a juvenile black-throated gray. The photo to the left shows the one true key feature. There is a prominent black throat patch, which suggests that this is a male. There are side-stripes and a white belly and breast. These are all positive elements consistent with a black-throated gray warbler but the true defining feature lies in a small tinge of yellow. Black-throated gray warblers always have a yellow supraloral spot.



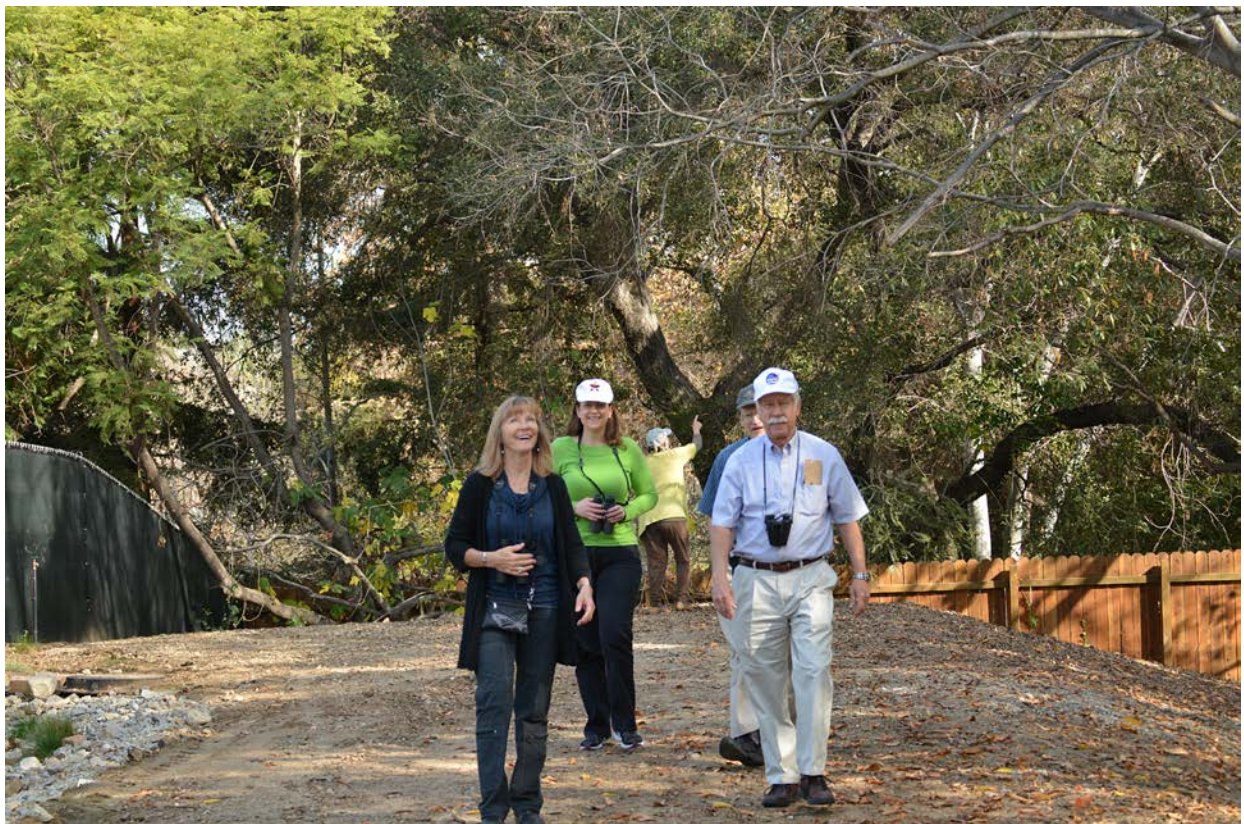
Ok enough about warblers. I want to move on to the shot of the day. This is another Alec photo and it is both truth and lie. When you look at a black phoebe from a distance, it will appear to be black and

white, essentially a tuxedo bird. In harsh light or at very close quarters, however, the bird will appear brown. So, at first blush, the photo appears a little off. It's a little too brown but that's because you don't normally get to sit next to a black phoebe. The photo is also truth. Another bit of truth is that black phoebes were the most likely species to be seen on a walk last year, edging out that master of urban dominance, the crow. We saw or heard at least one on every walk last year, which given that we also have three years of walks with no black phoebes at all, is pretty amazing.



Finally, at least in an avian sense, we come to snowy egrets. There was one each in the Ramo and Beckman ponds, which is actually bad for us because two egrets in competition will wipe out the local fish population more than twice as fast as one. So, I expect we won't be seeing either of these birds next week. Since this seems to be an identification dominant report, I will note that you look for a white heron with a black beak if you want to call a snowy egret. If you happen to see those yellow feet, you are also done. The plumes, which you can see here drifting off the neck and back of the tail are an affectation of the breeding

season and they almost led to extinction because Victorian ladies didn't make the connection between feathers in hats and dead birds until it was almost too late.



I end with a birder photo that Alec took in REOMY. This is more typical of what you might expect from a bunch of birders than the photo I showed a couple of weeks ago. Alan and Deborah are in front, followed by Vicky and myself. Viveca, in yellow, can be seen pointing into a neighbor's oak (based on where she is pointing I would say that she is probably showing Carole, who is out of view, where the robin is perched).

The date: 1/8/2014

The week number: 2

The walk number: 1229

The weather: 63 F, partly cloudy

The walkers: Alan Cummings, John Beckett, Alec Brenner, Viveca Sapin-Areeda, Carole Worra, Deborah Vane, Vicky Brennan, Kent Potter

The birds (20):

- 1 Northern Mockingbird
- 1 Mourning Dove
- 5 House Finch
- 3 Anna's Hummingbird
- 1 Acorn Woodpecker
- 8 American Crow
- 30 Yellow-rumped Warbler
- 5 Townsend's Warbler
- 5 Ruby-crowned Kinglet
- 20 Lesser Goldfinch
- 4 Black Phoebe
- 1 Say's Phoebe
- 3 Western Bluebird
- 1 American Robin
- 1 Bewick's Wren
- 5 Cedar Waxwing
- 2 Snowy Egret
- 1 Black-throated Gray Warbler
- 1 Orange-crowned Warbler
- 2 Nuttall's Woodpecker

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
1/31/14