

1/15/2014

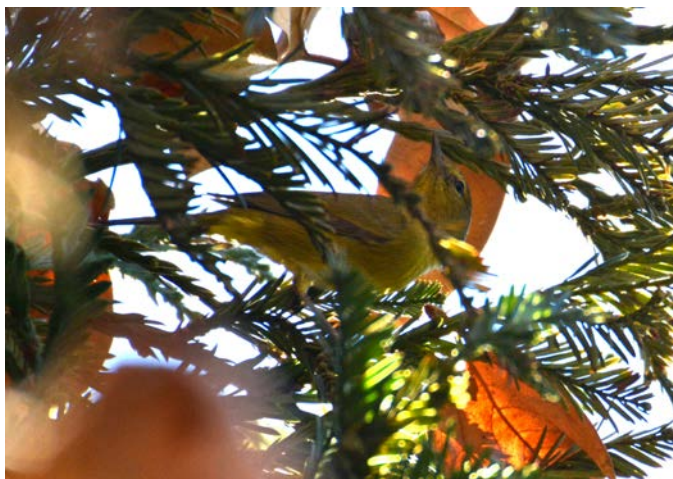
Well, that didn't take long. The year is just three weeks old and we already have two records for number of species. With 26 species, we doubled up on the record low of 13 and beat the old record for of 23 species set in 2002. Naturally, we eclipsed the median of 20. We also met Yoshi Tuttle, our 148th walker.

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

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

We had a number of firsts for the year, our first red-naped sapsucker, our first California towhee, and our first turkey vulture (an Alec sighting, incidentally). The Bewick's wren was singing the world at Morrisroe. A Bewick's likes to hear himself singing and he can spontaneously erupt into song at any time of the year but I expect this gentleman is looking for more. Everyone could hear him but it took a couple of amused gardeners to help us pin him down visually.

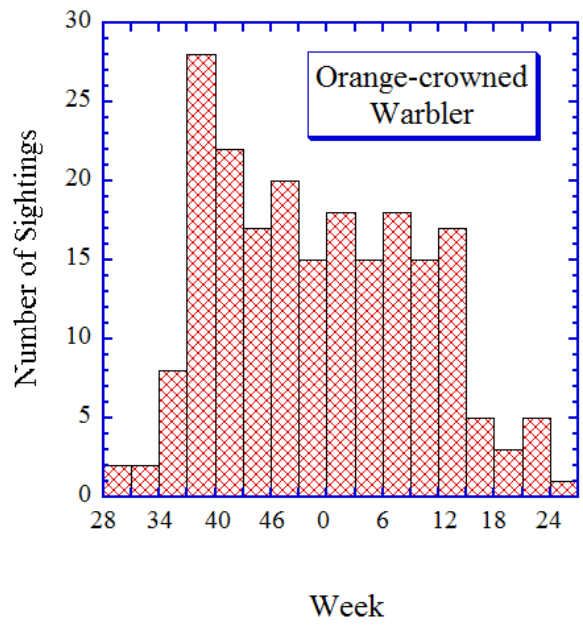
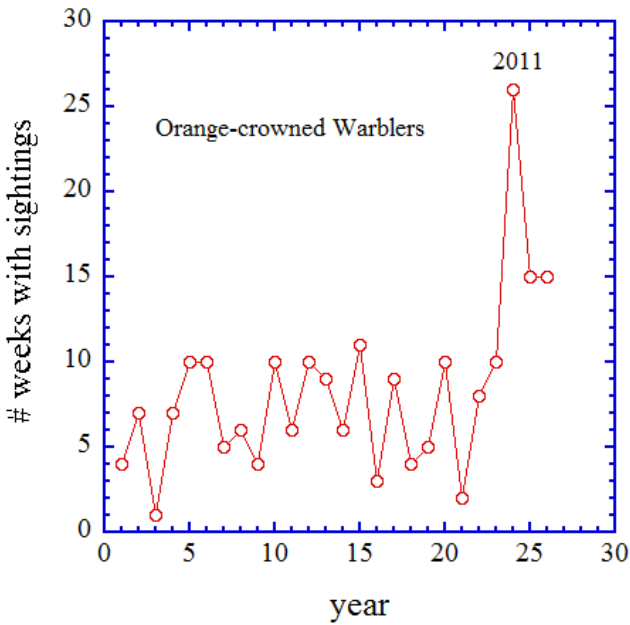
I am often surprised by a bird. I find one where or when I don't expect to. I don't find one where I hope to. I am less frequently surprised by a birder but it does happen. I am discussing crows and ravens with Yoshi. A crow above us calls and I point out that the difference between a crow's call and a raven's is much like the difference between a tenor and a baritone. There is some overlap but each bird calling in the sweet spot of his or her voice will be readily separated. What we had just heard was a tenor. "A raven," I said, "would have sounded more like baritone bubbles." Unfortunately, there are no vocal ravens available for a direct comparison, so the meaning of baritone is dissipating in the air along with the crow's caw but, just as I am about to abandon the topic for lack of verbal support, a magnificent baritone "rok-rok-rok" blares out. "Who did that?!" Alec turns, wrinkles a cherub smile and produces another series of roks. Alec Brenner is apparently a man of many talents.



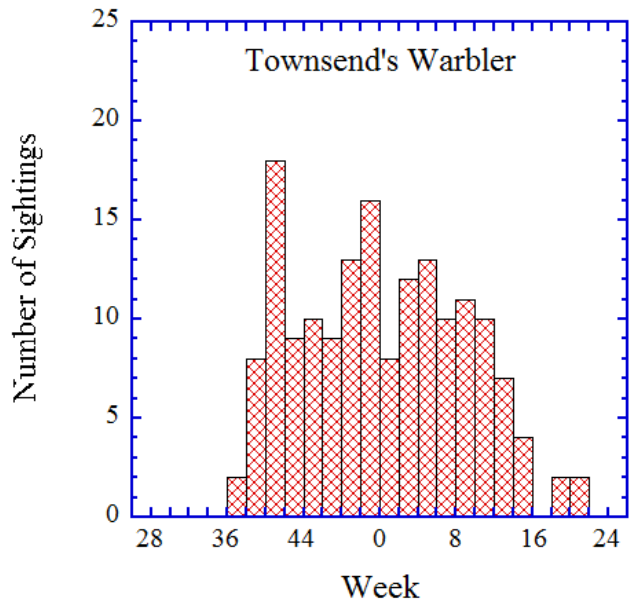
The rok-ing exhibition actually came as we were exiting Tournament Park. Alec's first major contribution to the walk came at Arden where he noticed an orange-crowned warbler in a small redwood after most of the party had already left the scene to walk up the driveway to the Health Center. This is a favored spot for orange-crowned warblers as we have seen one at this location on several occasions over the last year. It is typically also a quite difficult lighting situation but Alec manages to get the enclosed shot, which is good enough to support some of the key identification features, or lack thereof, of this

bird. First, Alec's bird is a fairly nondescript warbler with dark legs and not much of an eye ring, although he does have a bit of an eye streak that you can see if you catch him in good lighting and at the right angle (if you squint just right, you can see one in Alec's photo). The lack of substantial contrast from bottom to top is both an exercise in subtlety and, strangely enough, a distinguishing feature. The much stronger contrast in plumage will distinguish a Nashville warbler and the pink legs, solid eye ring, and stubby tail of a MacGillivray's warbler will keep you safe from a misidentification on that front

(there are orange-crowned warblers with gray cowlings but we don't get them here). During migration, you have to worry a bit about yellow and Wilson's warblers but both of them show much more of a true yellow (as opposed to a yellowish-green for an orange-crowned warbler), the yellow warblers are all yellow underneath, including the tail, and the Wilson's will be more yellow underneath (with a dark tail) and will generally sport a cap that ranges from in your face (adult male) to subtle but still discernible. At this time of year, differences with yellow and Wilson's warblers are moot, as we won't be seeing examples of either for another couple of months (i.e., they are both pure spring/fall migration birds for Caltech).



Orange-crowned warblers have historically been a several to ten sightings a year bird for us but, in 2011, we suddenly blasted up to 26 sightings (to get a sense for just how impressive this is, consider the fact that we only had 28 weeks in 2011 with that ubiquitous winter resident, the yellow-rumped warbler). Subsequent to 2011, we seem to be running a fairly consistent ~15 per year (i.e., sightings are up by a third relative to expectations from the previous two decades. Maybe, we are getting better at finding orange-crowned warblers but the 2011 pulse reflected, I think, an unusually good winter for orange-crowned warblers and the fact that we were getting sporadic sightings throughout the summer. What's odd about that?



If you look at the lower histogram, you can see a histogram for one of our more typical winter resident warblers. Basically, they appear on migration around week 38 - 40 and some fraction of these birds stay for the winter. Spring migration dribbles off into May but we have little chance of seeing a Townsend's warbler after week 16 and no chance after week 20. They are all up in British Columbia or islands off shore and quite busy making, feeding, and training the next generation of Townsend's warblers. That's not something we would want to interrupt.

Now, at first sight, the distribution of sightings for orange-crowned warblers is rather similar, a spike in the fall around week 40, winter residence and a drop off around week 15 but there are sightings between weeks 20 and 35. There are only ten, but four each of these occurred in 2011 and 2012. When our winter resident orange-crowned warblers migrate up to Alaska to breed, Channel Island orange-crowned warblers cross over to the mainland and summer here, returning to the islands just as the Alaskans start coming back into town. Most of the Channel Island birds stay quite near the coast but every now and then, one will wander up into the San Gabriel Valley to grace our summer. In 2011, an orange-crowned warbler summered in Tournament Park. He apparently returned to campus in the summer of 2012 but, alas, not in 2013.

Since I seem to be on identification kicks these days, I will add another Alec photo of a pair of band-tailed pigeons. Usually, a big pigeon-like bird lolling around Caltech is going to be one of three things, a rock pigeon, a band-tailed pigeon, or a mourning dove. For a band-tailed pigeon, you might think that you should be looking for a banded tail but this is not generally a quality diagnostic. Instead, you want to look for a squared off tail (mourning dove tails are pointy), brown breast with gray back (mourning doves will be tan on top and bottom and rock pigeons will generally have something else going on) and, most importantly, yellow legs and bill (yes, the bill actually bi-colored with a black tip but that's in the details not the impression), which you can see in Alec's photo, and a white band on the back of the neck, which you can't. Forget the band-tail. If you can see yellow legs or bill or the white neck-band, you can be confident that you are looking at a band-tailed pigeon.



The date: 1/15/2014

The week number: 3

The walk number: 1230

The weather: 81 F, sunny

The walkers: Alan Cummings, Viveca Sapin-Areeda, Yoshi Tuttle, John Beckett, Alec Brenner, Vicky Brennan, Kent Potter

The birds (26):

- 1 Northern Mockingbird
- 2 Mourning Dove
- 7 House Finch
- 3 Anna's Hummingbird
- 1 Acorn Woodpecker
- 5 American Crow
- 4 Black Phoebe
- 30 Yellow-rumped Warbler
- 2 Townsend's Warbler
- 6 Lesser Goldfinch
- 1 Red-naped Sapsucker
- 1 Orange-crowned Warbler
- 1 Say's Phoebe
- 7 Cedar Waxwing
- 1 American Robin
- 2 Nuttall's Woodpecker
- 4 Band-tailed Pigeon
- 1 Red-whiskered Bulbul
- 1 Turkey Vulture
- 1 Bewick's Wren
- 2 Ruby-crowned Kinglet
- 10 Bushtit
- 1 California Towhee
- 2 Gull, Species
- 1 Black-throated Gray Warbler
- 2 Common Raven

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
2/3/14