

2/26/14

Well, let's start with the basics. We had a 30 bird walk, only the 13th ever but, in spite of that factoid, we only tied the record for a week 9 walk (matching week 9 of 2006). Naturally, we exceeded the median of 22. The record low of 11 is a bit of a cheat because it came in 1987 when the walk had not really gelled into something resembling its modern form but we still doubled up on the 14 species walk of 2005.

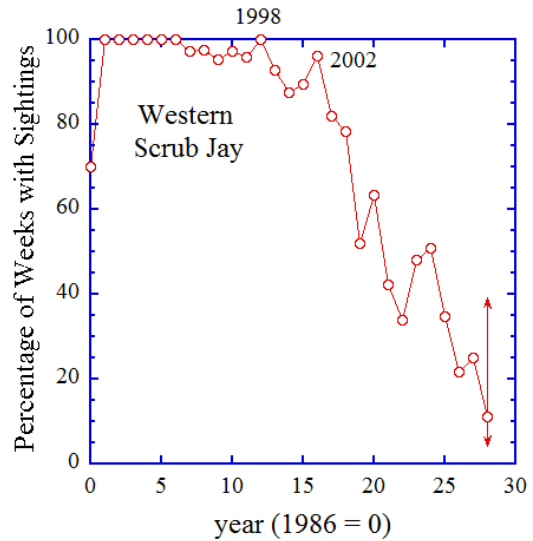
See the plots at [http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird\\_data/species\\_time.html](http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird_data/species_time.html) and [http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird\\_data/two\\_plots.htm](http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird_data/two_plots.htm)

When you are birding, it is very inefficient to run around looking for an anomalous birder unless you have a reliable tip. Yes, you may fortuitously encounter one because some rare birders are highly individualistic loners but most of them are moderately to highly social. Think about it. If you were a bar-tailed godwit stuck in the middle of southern California, where would you hang out? It's dangerous to be by yourself. No matter how good you are, you can't notice as much in the way of prey or predator as you can in a flock, so you almost certainly want to be with the local marbled godwits. They have similar interests and similar concerns. It's the same with rare birders. You can watch the rare birder alerts to get to the right area but then you still have to find your birder. Today, the rare birder reports were silent. Our encounter was a happy surprise.

You scan a mixed flock of birders in REOMY (rump end of the old Maintenance yard) and it's the common birders, that dominate, as shown in the photo on the left but there is a hint of something more. However, before launching into our highlight birder of the day, I want to say a few words about a couple of the common birders. Even with this bad view, you can't miss the purple Vicky. Some birders are just so distinctive that a glance is enough but it's not always so easy. For example, an alanated-Cummings is just as common as a purple Vicky but much harder to identify with any confidence. I know there are birderers who claim they can identify one from the rear, and I'm sure a female alanated-Cummings can do so, but most birderers need a better view. Nor do vocalizations help as much as you might think. An alanated-Cummings may produce a song that is strikingly similar to that of a love-sick Bewick's wren in one moment and, in the next, he sounds just like a common yellowthroat. It can be incredibly frustrating for bird and birderer alike. Still, if you can get a good view of the face, an alanated-Cummings is unmistakable. Consider the photo on the right. It's not a great shot but the center birder still shows the diagnostic white tuft above the gape. There is no doubt about it. We have an alanated-Cummings. So, if you want to bag an alanated-Cummings, look for a good view of the head from the front or side.



All right. Since you have already seen both birderer photos through my little excursion into a couple of our common birders, you probably already recognized our rare birder. Nevertheless, just to make it formal, note the birder to the right of the Alanated-Cummings in the right-hand photo. That is a Darren Dowell, our first Dowell sighting of the year! Darren Dowells are short distance migrants, so they occasionally appear on campus but they are much more likely to be found in the foothills around JPL, especially, sad to say, on Wednesdays.



Without Darren, we would have had a very good walk but we definitely would not have hit 30 different species. For example, Darren identified a hermit thrush from vocalization that we would not have otherwise picked up. That was a new bird for the year. We also saw/heard a couple of scrub jays, first for the year. I don't have a usable shot of a hermit thrush but here's a scrub jay from this week though not from the walk, just to remind you what one looks like. When the walk started in the mid-eighties, scrub jays were a near-universal capture but, starting around 1999, they entered a period of serious and fairly steady decline, presumably a mixture of crow depredations (if the crow population gets too large, there are so many eyes that egg losses for other species can escalate to the point of local extirpation) and West Nile virus (scrub jays are actually in the crow family and highly vulnerable to West Nile). Is the campus scrub jay population bottoming out? Maybe. Last year, we had only two weeks with sightings by week 9, so it's possible that this will be a good scrub jay year. Would that be a good thing? Maybe but be careful what you wish for. Scrub jays are raccoon smart birds. You almost expect a pair of little hands to pop out of those feathered breasts. Scrub jays are also die hard egg stealers.



We saw three orange-crowned warblers on the walk but all were in shade and/or deep foliage by the time we had any camera opportunities. However, one warbler earlier this week sat for a portrait. Katie Kaufman found a stunned orange-crowned warbler outside Cahill and took this photo. It shows the basic two-toned coloring of the species (at least in our area). You can even see the split eye-ring and a few flecks of orange on the head, neither feature something you normally get to see in a

standard binocular or vocalization capture. Katie's bird was probably stunned after hitting a Cahill window. He was, however, later observed to fly a bit and eventually disappeared from the release point. Perhaps, he recovered enough to join the spring migration up to Alaska, perhaps not. Cahill seems to be developing a reputation for window kills and that is likely to be a long-term phenomenon because we are the careless killers of cold habit and no turns. We build for life and contract. The contractor's gone before the birds begin to die and the owner wills away the broken shards.

The date: 2/26/2014

The week number: 9

The walk number: 1236

The weather: 64 F, partly cloudy

The walkers: Alan Cummings, Deborah Vane, John Beckett, Darren Dowell, Vicky Brennan, Viveca Sapin-Areeda, Kent Potter, Yoshi Tuttle

The birds (30):

- 2 Scrub Jay
- 3 Northern Mockingbird
- 8 House Finch
- 3 Anna's Hummingbird
- 5 Acorn Woodpecker
- 9 American Crow
- 3 Mallard
- 50 Yellow-rumped Warbler
- 4 European Starling
- 3 Townsend's Warbler
- 2 Downy Woodpecker
- 3 Lesser Goldfinch
- 3 Orange-crowned Warbler
- 4 California Towhee
- 1 Red-shouldered Hawk
- 1 Nuttall's Woodpecker
- 2 Black Phoebe
- 4 Ruby-crowned Kinglet
- 1 Red-whiskered Bulbul
- 4 Bushtit
- 1 Cooper's Hawk
- 1 Bewick's Wren
- 1 Hermit Thrush
- 5 Band-tailed Pigeon
- 1 Red-tailed Hawk
- 7 Turkey Vulture
- 2 Common Raven
- 2 Yellow-chevroned Parakeet
- 1 Hummingbird, Selasphorus
- 1 Dark-eyed Junco

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,  
Alan Cummings,  
3/24/14