

3/5/14

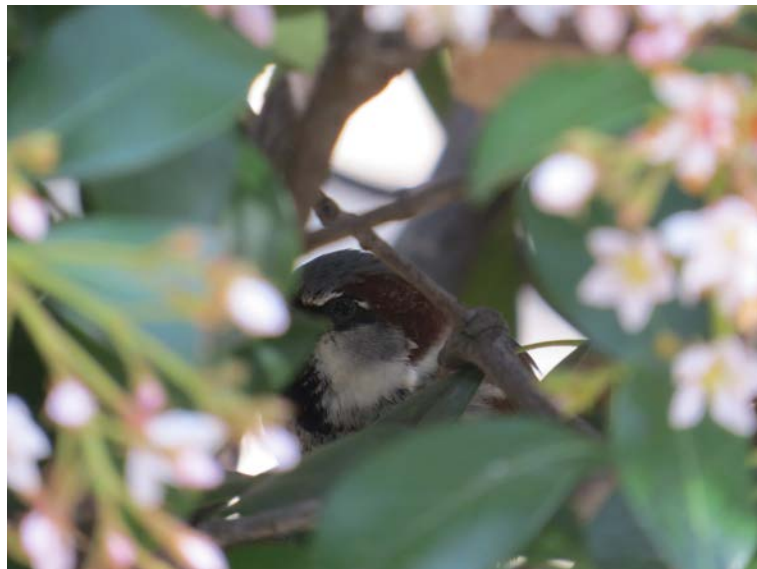
Our streak of 30 birdwalks ends at one with a highly respectable but not especially high species total of 25. The median (19) and record low (15) were easily eclipsed but we would have needed 32 to match the record high set in 2012. That could have been done, perhaps with an eight hour walk. So, we will take the day's offering and move to highlights.

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

Perhaps, the first highlight worth noting came before the beginning of the walk, when the Throop ponds yielded a grand total of one mallard. We have been consistently seeing three mallards in the middle pond, two males and a female. One of the males was the hen's mate and the other wanted to be the hen's mate. The latter's basic tactic was one of hanging around with a constant testing of spatial boundaries but no overt aggression. He was hoping that the primary male would drop dead, get eaten,



or be hurt enough for him to have a chance of driving off the other drake. It didn't happen and he will not be mating this season. Based on look and action, I suspect that he is probably a first year bird, so the chances of the hen accepting him, even if the first male had disappeared, were relatively slim. She has her pick of unmated drakes in the area and would likely pick someone older and stronger. So, today, he is alone. During the nesting season, the successful drake will accompany his mate to check out potential nesting sites and wannabe males are not welcome.



The red-shouldered hawk continues to frequent the Health Center. This may be bad news for local rodents and vine-testing birds like wrens but he is a flashy bird for us. We are entering nesting season for red-shouldered hawks, so he may also have the Arden end of campus in mind for territory and will be breeding in the general area, leading to numerous sightings over the next couple of months.

House sparrows have become difficult captures on the bird walk. Today, we picked one up near the Red Door, where there are junk food foraging

opportunities; he is also sometimes heard but not seen in bushes along the south side of Thomas. The Thomas/Red Door house sparrow is very talkative but doesn't like exposure. You can occasionally see him on the ground around the outdoor tables but this is the best photo I've managed to get so far and, frankly, I think it does a better job of showing personality than a standard full bird looking for crumbs under a table shot would have given. I have to say that he seems to have a very wary eye on me.



There is quiet in a bustling crowd of humans, some tottering and all clumsy, but they breed an accepted ambiance. "We have this noisy peace and good foraging. If you keep a wary eye for those sport killing cats all is well." But all is not well. The ascent is a sudden song. "This is mine." "This is mine." "This is mine!" In every thumping note, the interloper cries an insolence, not to speak of an easy willingness to accept any listening female. So, we both seek

the salients for a view to attack. "This is a good place for one pair of common yellowthroats but it cannot support a colony and you will definitely not displace us. We will stop you." They boil out of the shrubbery in a huffing defense that holds a plain but offensive-minded view. "Where is the interloper? He was over here. I could hear him" but the app has faded. You search to confront. You want to make his sorry glassy tail swing in a flustered fast retreat but he is apparently gone, already fled. You call back and forth mate-to-mate and finally, slow the moment's form into a standard human day. It has been a traumatic afternoon. "Well, we have just conducted a survey of the territory and neither interloping male, nor vagrant cat remains to any field of view. Perhaps, we should take advantage of the effort." The male swings down to the stream bank running between the mid and lower Throop ponds. He stays near the top lip of the stream for a moment, in easy reach of an Indian hawthorn refuge, then flits down to the stream and takes a bath. I cannot hear a common yellowthroat unless he is very close but I can see the beak movement. He is calling back to his mate who continues a watch. "All is well. No danger." He hops out of the stream back up to the lip of the stream bed, thinks about it for a moment and then flits back for a second dip. Finally, having expunged all the grainy memories of the never found, he hops out of the stream, tosses a quick shake, and is gone into the Indian hawthorn. About a minute later, the female lands next to the stream. She keeps up a steady banter with the male about updates on local predator forecasts but is soon immersed in water. Her bath is a little shorter than the male's but more intense. We have our first common yellowthroats and our fiftieth new species sighting of the year.

Common yellowthroats have historically been a very rare sighting for Caltech but in the winter of 2011 - 2012, we had a pair wintering around Throop ponds and this led to 17 sightings (versus two for all

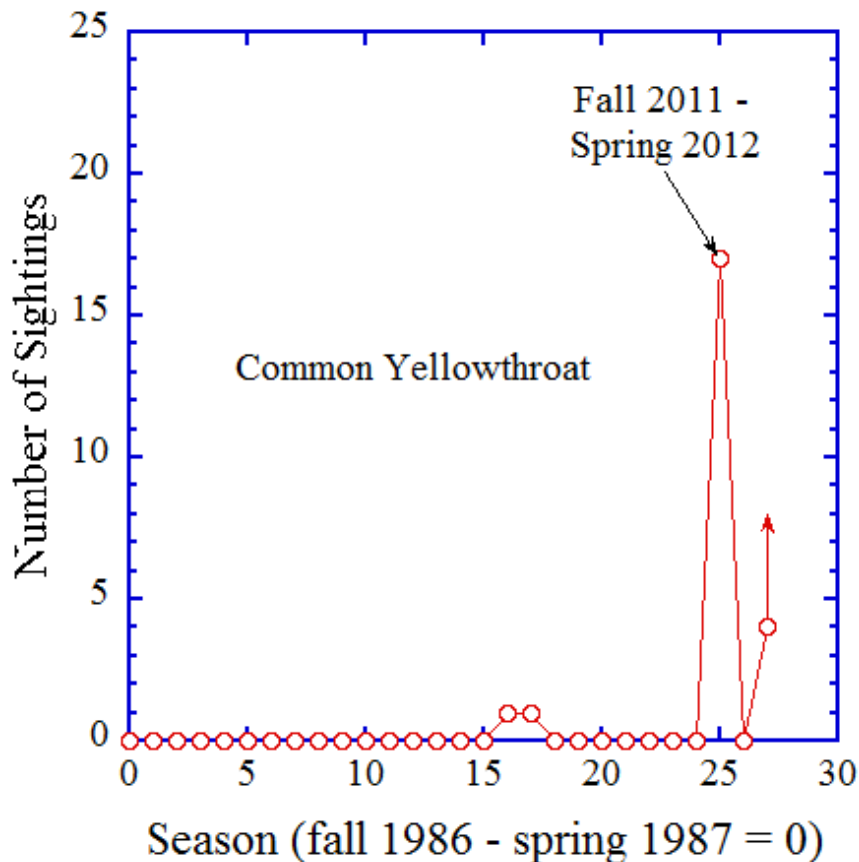
previous years combined). Last winter was a bust but, this fall, we had three weeks with sightings and, now, we clearly have a pair of them. They are an example of the significance of individual birds for bird counts. Get one (or two) common yellowthroat taking up residence near the Throop ponds and you may pick up nearly 20 sightings in a season. Depend on birds passing through and you may only get one (or two) sightings in 20 years.



The date: 3/5/2014
 The week number: 10
 The walk number: 1237
 The weather: 74 F, partly cloudy
 The walkers: Alan Cummings, Viveca Sapin-Areeda, Yoshi Tuttle, John Beckett, Vicky Brennan, Kent Potter

The birds (25):

- 1 Scrub Jay
- 2 Northern Mockingbird
- 1 House Sparrow
- 15 House Finch
- 1 Anna's Hummingbird
- 3 American Crow
- 2 Common Raven



- 25 Yellow-rumped Warbler
- 2 Red-tailed Hawk
- 6 White-throated Swift
- 6 Bushtit
- 3 Orange-crowned Warbler
- 1 Mallard
- 4 Black Phoebe
- 1 Red-shouldered Hawk
- 12 Lesser Goldfinch
- 2 California Towhee
- 1 Bewick's Wren
- 1 Red-whiskered Bulbul
- 1 House Wren
- 2 Ruby-crowned Kinglet
- 5 Band-tailed Pigeon
- 2 Spotted Towhee
- 2 Common Yellowthroat
- 1 Townsend's Warbler

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
3/28/14