

3/12/14

To the extent one should be concerned with records for week 11, one shouldn't be concerned with records. We encountered 27 species, which is certainly an indicator of a strong walk. We were well above the record low for the week but for those of you living by the record, we were up against three thirty-bird walks, including the second highest species count ever (35 in 2011). So, we have no staggering raw number records to report.

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

We also didn't encounter any new species for the year. We are left to struggle on the merit of moments. It's not hard. We can begin with a new walker, Daniel Springer, who as walker #149 brings us to the dawning slope of a new century, and Jason Price, who hasn't been on the walk for a couple of years.



Every walk carries a tacit theme that can be easily overlooked and it brings us to extremes. We have a very hot day and it is the open panting and deep watering that we remember along with Alan curling up his collar and hopping from shade to shade. If there are a lot of birds, we may lose the moments in the numbers. Today was a pleasant day. It was not a day of extremes, so I lead with the quiet and obscure rather than some textbook singing from 5 feet away. Even the scanty cladding of a newborn is enough. That's a mockingbird or a house finch. Instead, I will sing of the near-

absence and the almost seen. We arrive in the shadows of a single chirp or a slight movement in dense foliage. It is not enough and it will never yield to a gentle paeon or a withering curse. So, we walk into the resolution of an accepting guess or a walk away. The first photo is one of those. We arrive at the entrance to the parking structure under the North Athletic field. Apparently, the baseball team has



trouble hitting home runs but we are a clever crowd. We bring in a temporary fence to tighten the field and, voila, instant power. Unfortunately, for the birder population, the fence eviscerates the field, making it difficult to see anything on the infield side. It's a net negative for us but, this time, we see a gray and yellow bird at the south end of the field hawking from the safety bar mounted on top of the fence. We have a chance for something new but it is a far chance unless we can get closer. There are no obvious wing bars, so I think we might be dealing with a kingbird, probably a Cassin's given all the gray up front. After all, I had seen two kingbirds over the weekend.

Jason, however, pooh-poohs the idea. He thinks the bird is smaller than a kingbird and suggests a lesser goldfinch. Someone notes the lack of wing bars. A lesser goldfinch isn't going to cut the grade. Perhaps, it's a MacGillivray's warbler. Move on. We are left with ambiguity and much that turned on size, always a dangerous venue for a birder. I return to the field the next afternoon and measure the yellow safety bar. It's 4 inches in diameter. This is a small bird but certainly not something we could possibly entertain as a listing truth.

Since I started with one fuzzy photo that didn't have enough purchase for identification, it seemed only fitting that I should offer to you another fuzzy that does. This bird was also sighted at the North Athletic field but he was neither impeded by nor attracted to the fence. He is instantly recognizable in flight from underneath provided you have enough light to infer the light trailing edges of the wings bounding a dark central core that almost looks as if it belongs to another smaller bird. We have a turkey vulture. He is a listing truth.



Morrisroe brought a more classic look. We pass under a tree without noticing but then, upon looking back, we see an adult red-shouldered hawk. This may be the bird that we have been seeing recently near the Health Center. He or she should be looking for a mate about now and, if we and he/she are very lucky, as we were a couple of years ago, we might even get a viewable nest.

I will leave you with a not very good but still recognizable photo of a nonbird. This is a painted lady from the walk, whose photo I took near the old Child Care Center (i.e., near Avery Garden). I toss it in just to

remind us that migration is not the sole provenance of birds and wildebeests. Some species of butterflies also migrate and, although the Monarch is undoubtedly the most famous, the most common and widespread is probably the painted lady. Our painted lady was born in San Diego County or in northern Mexico. She had a happy childhood but by late February the flowers of winter faded to brown and all was dust. She sleeps to transformation and emerges in a small folded glory. There is nothing for her here. She flies north. She will fly until she consumes all her larval fat. Then she will feed and breed and lay eggs, and then she will die. The Central Valley beckons but, given her interest in the flowers shown in the photo, I don't think she is going to make it. This is a multi-generational migration.

The date: 3/12/2014

The week number: 11

The walk number: 1238

The weather: 75 F, sunny

The walkers: John Beckett, Jason Price, Viveca Sapin-Areeda, Yoshi Tuttle, Vicky Brennan, Kent Potter, Daniel Springer

The birds (27):

- 1 Scrub Jay
- 2 Northern Mockingbird
- 2 House Sparrow
- 1 Mourning Dove
- 3 House Finch
- 1 Anna's Hummingbird
- 2 Acorn Woodpecker
- 2 American Crow
- 2 Hummingbird, Selasphorus
- 35 Yellow-rumped Warbler
- 1 Snowy Egret
- 4 Black Phoebe
- 6 Lesser Goldfinch
- 1 European Starling
- 1 Turkey Vulture
- 3 Mallard
- 2 Ruby-crowned Kinglet
- 2 Common Raven
- 1 Townsend's Warbler
- 1 Bewick's Wren
- 1 Red-shouldered Hawk
- 2 Bushtit
- 3 Band-tailed Pigeon
- 1 Red-tailed Hawk
- 2 White-throated Swift
- 1 California Towhee
- 1 Spotted Towhee

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
6/24/14

