

8/21/13

We were well toasted but not baked. Ashish, who is about to leave for a few weeks, joins us and Vicky, who doesn't like to come on walks when the starting temperature is over 90°F, comes this time because her thermometer says it is only 89.9°F just prior to the walk. Out she pops, to our benefit, and so did the total number of species. We ended with 17, just one shy of the record for a week 34 walk, which was set in 2010, but we were well above the median of 13 and record worst score of 9.

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

From a habitat perspective, the street side of the Health Center has unusually good bird habitat for Caltech. This is probably because it fronts a residential street and Caltech, as a nod to the neighbors, has created substantial visual screening. It has a short lawn bounding the street but the parking lot and building have been screened from the street by a hedgerow and a line of adjacent trees. This has the effect of taking an abashed institutional building with a thirty car capacity and hiding both massing and activity from street view. Generally, Caltech makes abutting neighbors provide most of the screening but this rare example shows that Caltech can blend when it wants to. From an avian perspective, you get one of the few places on campus with well-protected foraging opportunities for sparrows and wrens. We have also been having good luck with Nuttall's woodpeckers and warblers in this spot.

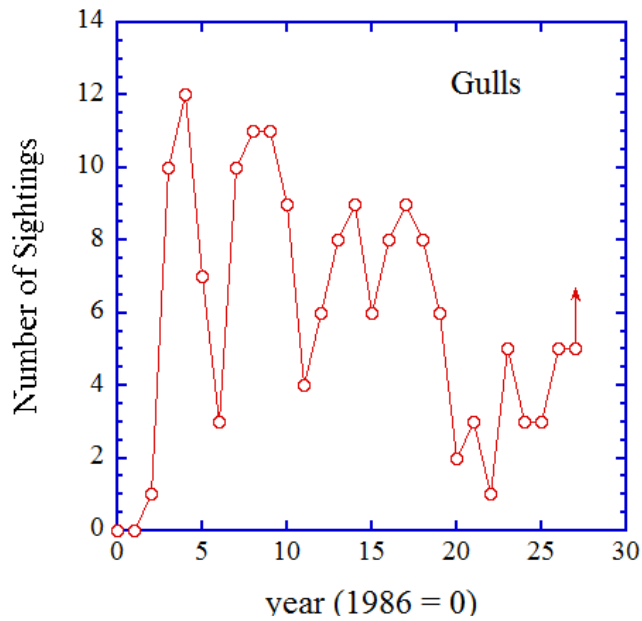
After savoring the street life, Alan typically walks over to the corner of the hedgerow and walks along it to see if he can flush a ground foraging bird. He checks the trees at the same time and this time he notices a disturbance in the corner tree, which is soon revealed to be an orange crowned warbler. It had prominent stripes on the breast and an unusually clear eye streak. This is an Alaskan bird (we do get an occasional Channel Island orange crowned warblers that summers on campus but these are not highly striped). It appears that the breeding season is over in the Pacific North West and that we have just witnessed one of the early migrating returns.

The Health Center hedgerow yielded no sparrows but we did hear a classic Bewick's wren song. One of the great things about Bewick's males is that they genuinely like to sing. Most birds sing for mates and to advertize territory against potential male intruders during the breeding season but once the breeding season is over, so are the songs. In fact, once he has a mate, passerine song production tends to decline steadily. The Bewick's has a great song in his courting arsenal but he is liable to burst into song at any time of the year just because it feels so good. A Bewick's wren lives in a Musical.

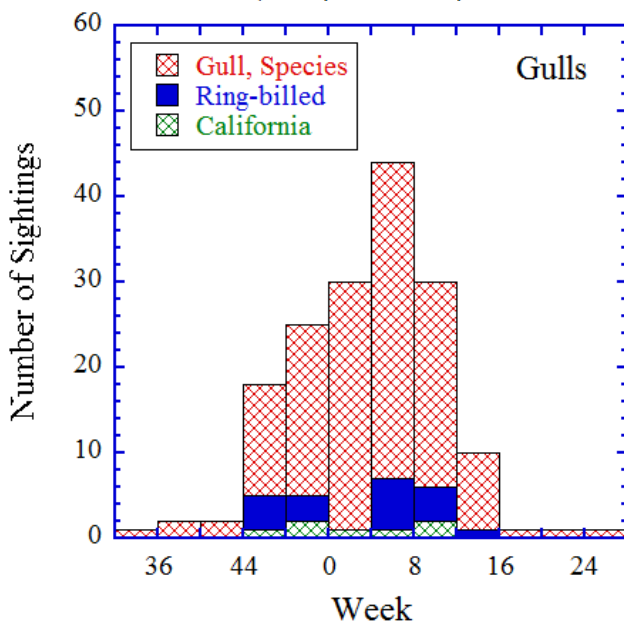
Tournament Park has been a weak source of birds this year when viewed from a historical perspective. This is almost certainly due to the nearby construction of the new Child Care Center and the consequent destruction of habitat in the former Maintenance yard. There is a spillover effect on Tournament Park that leads to a suppression of birds there. We can only hope that the birding will improve once they are done with the Child Care Center. Still, in spite of my crabbing verbiage about Tournament Park, we got an excellent view of a Cooper's hawk who circled over the park a couple of times at a very low height before slowly gliding softly off to the northeast.

Usually, we fill up on hummingbirds at the hummingbird lady's house just outside Tournament Park. This time, we saw some Anna's and black-chinned hummingbirds but there was no brown to be had anywhere. For a Selasphorus, we had to wait until we wandered through the silk floss forest near Keck. When these trees are in full bloom, you get numerous hummingbirds coursing through the pink pastiche

of a river, adjusting to each other like arrogant cigar boats. Selasphorus hummingbirds are particularly fond of silk floss nectar and there were probably several as we walked beneath the canopy. However, nobody could follow them well enough to be sure of numbers, so we left it at two.



The rarity highlight came early and distant. Flying high over Arden, we have a soaring bird that speck specialist Viveca somehow manages to see. You might reasonably expect a hawk under these conditions but this bird is a gull. There can be no details, so it goes down as a gull, species. It is quite anomalous for us to see a summer gull and we have never before seen one in August. From the histogram, gulls are a fall to spring phenomenon for Caltech, with numbers peaking in February. There is a strong saw tooth form to the distribution of sightings with time, which suggests a dynamic element of population control over campus. This does not appear to correlate with seasonal rainfall totals but I didn't attempt to parse the data very carefully. Based on the sightings as a function of time, we may be experiencing a rebound from the low of one sighting in 2008 but the winter will be telling. Overall, gull sightings have been generally declining with time, perhaps indicating better anti-gull defenses at regional landfills. If you are a gull and pickings are easy at a landfill, why would you go for a hard life on the coast, unless you are a restaurant bird, but if pickings are tough or dangerous at Scholl Canyon or other local landfills, why would you bother to fly over Caltech?



From the histogram, you can see that we leave most of the gulls we see as gull, species because they are usually too far away to identify beyond the gull form, but we occasionally get a close-up view leading to a formal identification (so far,

we only have California and ring-billed gulls; we can reasonably hope to see a western gull and there are a variety of rare possibilities). I will leave you with a close-up of a winter plumage (note the gray flecks on the head) adult ring-billed gull from Bolsa Chica.

The date: 8/21/2013
 The week number: 34
 The walk number: 1209
 The weather: 90 F, sunny

The walkers: Alan Cummings, Viveca Sapin-Areeda, Vicky Brennan, Ashish Mahabal, John Beckett

The birds (17):

- 2 Mourning Dove
- 6 Anna's Hummingbird
- 1 Acorn Woodpecker
- 5 American Crow
- 4 Black Phoebe
- 1 Bewick's Wren
- 25 Bushtit
- 1 Nuttall's Woodpecker
- 1 Gull, Species
- 1 Common Raven
- 1 Orange-crowned Warbler
- 3 Black-chinned Hummingbird
- 3 Lesser Goldfinch
- 3 Red-masked Parakeet
- 1 Cooper's Hawk
- 2 California Towhee
- 2 Hummingbird, Selasphorus



--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
9/19/13