

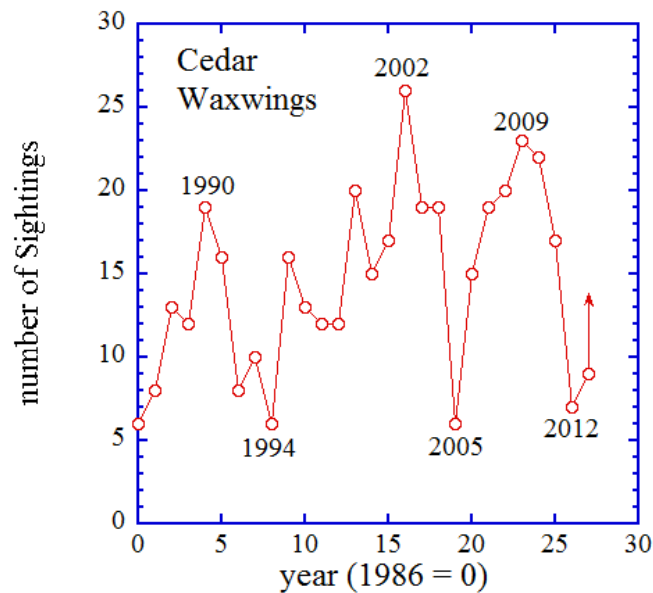
9/11/13

Week 37 is a dangerous week. The birding can be very good and it can be very bad. The all time lowest number of species recorded on a Caltech bird walk was 6, set in week 37 of 2006 but it is also a week of migration, so it can hold species we rarely see. The record high of 23 was set in 2002 and with this walk we tie a venerable institution that still holds four record highs. This was also the first 20+ bird species day since week 30. The summer drought is over.

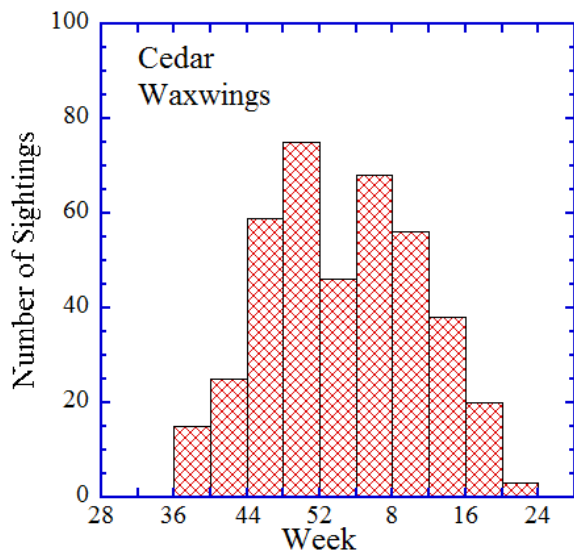
See the plots at [http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird\\_data/species\\_time.html](http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird_data/species_time.html) and [http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird\\_data/two\\_plots.htm](http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird_data/two_plots.htm)

We saw a very sharply dressed Nuttall's woodpecker at Arden and another black throated gray warbler. However, the star of Arden was a Bewick's wren foraging under the Indian hawthorns. I don't think I've ever seen such a well defined eyebrow. We saw nothing between Tournament Park and the recycling center, where we picked up a scrub jay. However, the area around Avery garden and the soon to be old Child Care Center yielded a banner crop of mourning doves and a family of acorn woodpeckers. We caught a turkey vulture over Holliston. This is only our sixth turkey vulture week for the year. We

should get a few more before the end of the year but this is looking like a relatively weak year for turkey vultures.

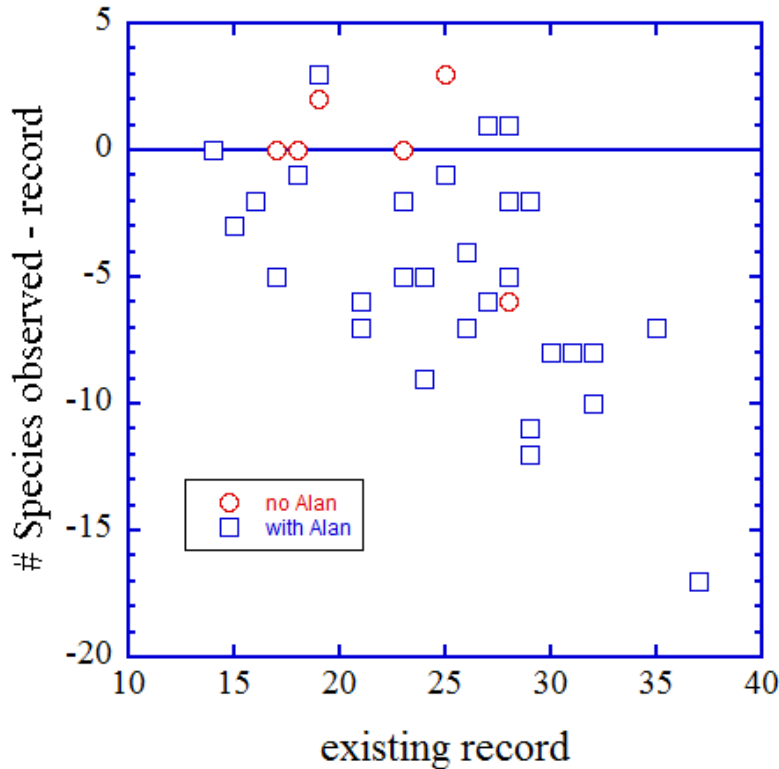


The Throop ponds were quite productive. The duck has not made his way back from the great molt so far, in spite of the powerful incentive of free cat food, but we did see a warbling vireo and the Wilson's warblers of last week (or a new batch) were still up in the jacaranda canopy. Viveca heard a common yellowthroat singing but we were unable to find it and, lacking Alan's iPhone app, we weren't able to try teasing him out. Still, a vocalization id is an id. Hopefully, he will decide to stick around for the winter. We also saw a non-phoebe flycatcher. We tried to get an angle on this bird but the lighting was so bad that we gave up. We were forced to leave it as a flycatcher, species and find pleasure in the Wilson's.



Some of the birds described above qualify as relatively rare for the Caltech birdwalk but the big news of the day is that the cedar waxwings are back in town. We saw a small flock fly over Avery garden. To me, they were indeterminate. They could easily have been sparrows. But Viveca caught a good look as they zipped by and claimed that she could even see the yellow tips on their tails. Week 37 is the earliest we can expect to see cedar waxwings (also recorded on

week 37 in 1999 and 2011) but the first sighting of the season is typically a couple of weeks later. Cedar waxwing sightings are cyclical for us both within and between years. There is a wavelength to sightings frequencies of 7-10 years with a factor of four or five difference in weeks with sightings between very good and very bad years. Cedar waxwings do winter in the area and we see them on migration in the fall and spring. Their reappearance sometime in weeks 37-41 is a major hint that the fall is here regardless of what the thermometer might be saying.



I have previously mentioned the Feenstra effect. Jon Feenstra participated in the bird walk in 2002 and is a major factor behind the great species totals and records of that year. He was a Caltech physics student but he liked birding so much and was so good at it that he sidestepped the dubious job market of the time for physicists and became a full time birding/biology guide/consultant (<http://leaftosser.com/birding/Welcome.html>). If you do a pelagic birding trip in southern California, there is a good chance you will be intersecting him. More recently, there has been a decided propensity for meeting or exceeding records when Alan is out of town. In fact, the best predictor of a new record is Alan's absence. This year we have

three ties and two new records in the six weeks that Alan has missed the walk. This compares with three new records and one tie in thirty walks when Alan was with us. You can see this rather starkly in the figure. Is Alan the anti-birder? Should we be asking Alan to not come if we want to go for a record? Do we make this stuff up when Alan isn't there to instill quality control? No, no, and no. There are a couple of reasons for why we do so well when Alan is gone. The first, and I think most important, is that a Caltech bird walk averages half an hour longer when Alan is out of town. Since the species count is a function of the time spent looking, you are almost certain to do better with a longer walk. Think of it this way. If you were to run the bird walk, it might be a good run but you probably wouldn't pick up very many species. If you spent the entire day at it, you would be maximizing your opportunities to intersect flyovers and to pick out birds that are moving through campus and birds that aren't moving or talking when you happen to go by. By spending more time on the walk, which happens consistently when Alan is out of town, we enhance our chances of picking up the odd bird and that is often the difference between hitting a record and not. A second factor is that I usually know what the record is when Alan is elsewhere (I go out of my way to look it up) and I generally don't know what it is when he is on the walk. If you know that you are close to an existing record, you are likely to work harder for that sessile or shy bird you might otherwise have passed by and you will be more likely to let the walk timing stretch while you are trying. This phenomenon is most prevalent when we are within one or two species of the record but, once achieved, there is a natural tendency to relax. In effect, we are hollowing out the species totals for walks that run just below the records. If we are well below the record, the walk just

flows normally. It will still be long relative to an Alan enhanced walk but we aren't cranking through every leaf trying to see a feather. So, should we just ask Alan to stay away in the interest of better birding? Of course not. The longer walks happen because they don't happen too often. If Alan were to permanently remove himself from his walk, there would be a relaxation back to "normal" walk times and our anomalous stew of new Alanless records would dry up. Of course, there is probably some optimal number Alan-free walks per year that would maximize record potential without leading to a crash. I suspect that it's not much higher than ten but it's also a number that I'm in no hurry to discover.

The date: 9/11/2013

The week number: 37

The walk number: 1212

The weather: 78 F, sunny

The walkers: John Beckett, Viveca Sapin-Areeda, Vicky Brennan

The birds (23):

- 1 Scrub Jay
- 6 Mourning Dove
- 8 Anna's Hummingbird
- 4 Acorn Woodpecker
- 5 American Crow
- 1 Warbling Vireo
- 2 Lesser Goldfinch
- 1 Nuttall's Woodpecker
- 1 Black-throated Gray Warbler
- 1 Bewick's Wren
- 2 Western Bluebird
- 7 Black Phoebe
- 1 Common Raven
- 20 Bushtit
- 1 Red-tailed Hawk
- 2 Hummingbird, Selasphorus
- 9 Red-masked Parakeet
- 6 Cedar Waxwing
- 1 Turkey Vulture
- 1 Black-chinned Hummingbird
- 2 Wilson's Warbler
- 1 Common Yellowthroat
- 1 Flycatcher, Species

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,  
Alan Cummings,  
9/27/13