

9/18/13

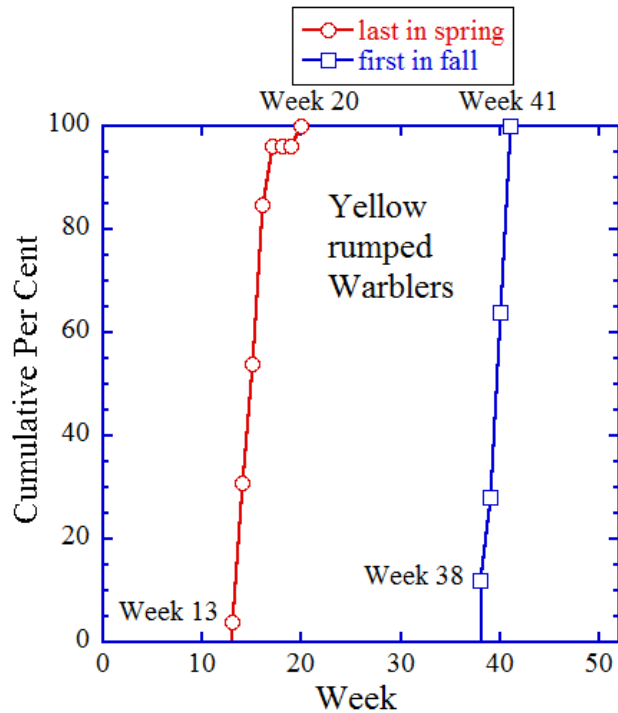
Sometimes, a walk works in numbers. There is a record number of species and you can extol the virtues of seeing an extra bird or two. This was not one of those walks. Sometimes the walk has a single salient highlight that overwhelms any consideration of numbers. This was not one of those walks either. Sometimes, a walk becomes a collimated mass of highlights. That's what this walk was. We came up with a very respectable 21 species but this was well below the record of 25. The fact that it was well above the median of 15 is almost completely irrelevant. It was a walk of seasonal marker events and high drama.

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

The mallard is back after a three months long molting layoff in some large body of water (we last saw him looking very ratty in week 26). Even now, he is still not quite through molting but his presence is a testament to the power of the cat food left out for Caltech's feral cats. He is trading good water with bad food for a poorly protected body of water with excellent food. He has concluded that any person over 3 feet high is not a significant threat and he is probably right. He is also gambling that there are no coyotes on campus in the middle of the day. This probably works out, too. I don't know where he spends the night but, if he flies out late in the day to overnight in a better protected body of water, I would say that he is optimizing life. In other minor news, the bushtits are flocking again. Vicky brought us a flock of ~20. We saw another flock of ~20 bushtits on Wilson but given the good chance that these were the same birds that Vicky saw, we left the bushtit total at 20.

Usually, we can count on a black phoebe working the baseball field from our standard stop at the entrance to the underground parking garage. This time we confront an oddity. There is a black phoebe but he is hawking from the back of a chair north of the field. Now, it is quite common for a black phoebe to use the back of a chair as a perch. The resident black phoebe in my back yard uses a teak chair back in preference to all other immediately available perches, leading to a nitrogenous overlay on the slates that we accept because we like our phoebe. The chair use is, however, very unusual behavior for the baseball field phoebe, who almost always uses the chain link fencing or the soccer goal. Something is up. The explanation comes in the form of a bumbling batch of juvenile western bluebirds. The phoebe has in past weeks ignored a pair of adult bluebirds but this group seems strange. They bounce from fence to tree. A bird drops to the ground and stays for a moment, as if contemplating where the insect seen only a moment ago and seemingly so accessible, has disappeared to. His siblings take no notice. They have their own flies to chance but all of them suddenly snap to attention as if by signal and fly in ones and twos over to the foldable bleachers on the other side of the field, perching there or on the adjacent chain link fencing. These bluebirds were confident fliers and landed well but in foraging technique, I think we still have a work in progress. We continue watching for a few minutes but then decide to move on toward the gym and Tournament Park. We are hoping to pick up some close-up views of the bluebirds along the way and that's what happens. All of these birds have gray to blue backs and flight feathers but at least two of them still have the patchy remains of the classic crosshatch pattern characteristic of juvenile breasts. It is molting out but you could still see a vest of russet along the side of the breast with flanges of tufting white surrounding a core of crosshatched brown and off-white. It is one of those rare occasions when I wished for a serious camera on the walk because capturing such a late-stage juvenile molt has to be rare. I was unable to find a comparable example on-line.

Now, I left you with the impression in the previous paragraph that it was the bluebirds that held us in thrall at the underground garage's entrance but the bleacher area held another attraction.



Foraging on the ground is our first yellow rumped warbler of the season. As shown in the figure, we usually get our first fall glimpse of a yellow rumped warbler, sometime in weeks 39 - 41. A week 38 sighting is the earliest we have on record, although 2009 also boasted a yellow rump in week 38. So, the yellow rumps are in town. There will come a time, perhaps soon, when we will be mildly annoyed at a foraging flock of a dozen yellow rumps sowing confusion through our muddled attempts to capture the odd Townsend's or black throated gray warbler in their midst. For now, we revel in the one.

As we cross into the parking lot lining the back end of campus off Wilson, a pair of small (likely warbler) birds flit across the parking lot over to trees adjacent to Broad. There are no words, just a glance, but it sends Viveca and myself trundling off in pursuit. Fortunately, the birds are in no

hurry to cross campus and, by the time we catch up, they are actively foraging. The angles are not great. Both birds offer tantalizing glimpses but no good looks. We see bits of white and yellow in the belly, inconsistent in various ways with Townsends, black throated grays, or yellow rumps. There is some yellowish green on top but no gray, so these are not Nashville or MacGillivray' warblers, and they seem variegated, so we are not working with orange crowned warblers. These are warblers but decidedly odd. I'm getting confused. I am trying to get another look at one of these birds when I hear "Disaster! Disaster!" followed by a slap as Viveca's handbag strikes the pavement. I look over and Viveca is stutter stepping over towards the walkway where a bird is flopping, dark against the concrete. One wing is outstretched like a crazed ceramic, forgotten in a great concussive strike on the window. Broad knows nothing. There is a bit of blood at the base of the beak, which is not good. Usually, the best thing to do for a bird that has struck a window is to leave it alone. You could pick it up. Normally, a captured bird will stay quiet in the clutches of a predator because, if you struggle, the predator will kill you right away. If you are passive, you have a chance. It's not a good chance, perhaps one in a hundred, but it's much better than your chances in a struggle. Bide your time and wait for a chance to escape. This is why mist nets and bird banding don't kill a lot of birds. Now, consider a bird that has just struck a window. He is traumatized and hurt. If you pick him up, he may go into shock and die. So, it is generally better to leave him alone to recover or not on his own. However, the usual rules don't apply. We are in the middle of a walkway frequented by oblivious people who might step on or kick the bird. God may notice every fallen warbler but I wouldn't want to bet much on a Caltecher noticing even one. Also, however well camouflaged this bird might be in a sunlit tree, he contrasts sharply with the gray concrete of the sidewalk. One of the Caltech feral cats, who are generally great motion detectors but lousy at pattern recognition, would likely investigate. Our bird needs to be moved. Viveca picks him up and, cupping him in her hands, helps the wing to fold back into the body. The bird is quiet and, I think, badly concussed. There may also be internal injuries that we can't see. We move to the base of a

nearby tree, and Viveca releases the bird. At least, he can stand up and I choose to take this as a good sign, although the claws are oddly bent. We move a couple of meters away. There is enough brown so that the bird blends in nicely. We've done what we can and now move back into identification mode. I flip through Sibley warblers and am getting nowhere. Even opening the skies to eastern warblers isn't helping until I blunder into a juvenile common yellowthroat. We have our bird and, guilt by association, we ascribe his companion to the same species.

In my experience, bird strikes on windows come in three forms. The strike can kill the bird more or less immediately (e.g., broken necks), it may bounce off the windowpane and immediately fly away, or it can bounce off the window and hit the ground still alive. In the latter case, the bird will generally stay where it lands for a period ranging from a quarter hour to a couple of hours, eventually recovering enough to take advantage of immediately available cover before flying away. Our bird blends in with the ground around the base of the tree where we released him but he was exposed without adjacent bushes. I would assert that this was a big improvement over the sidewalk but still not the best possible spot. There was a more promising hedge across the lawn. It was a tough call but we decided to leave him under the tree instead of risking the trauma of a second move. Finally, we have to leave. Did our bird survive? I don't know but I choose to believe that he did. The world needs all the common yellowthroats that it can get.

Is there a moral here? The greatest man made predator of birds in this country is the window. If a hawk flies by, a bird can and generally does escape. With a window, a bird will see a reflected view of habitat and doesn't realize that there is anything dangerous involved. Care to share a sense for the consequences? Run at full speed into a tree. Lead with your nose and flare your arms back, as if you are about to break the tape at the end of a sprint at a major track meet. You are probably going to be leaving the field on a stretcher and there is a decent chance that you won't be doing it alive. Are you still with us? Great! Triple your speed and try again.

Solving the bird strike problem is not impossible but it requires money and political will, neither of which is in high supply. You could, for example, laminate or double pane windows with a UV-reflective pattern (e.g., Ornilux). There are also films and paints that can be used. These tell most birds that there is no free passage through the window. This will do little to help hawks, who see poorly at best in the UV, but passerines can see quite well in the UV and often take advantage of it in signaling fitness for potential mates. We are with the hawks. A UV-reflective pattern has absolutely no effect on our enjoyment of the view because we are blind in the UV even as it markedly decreases bird strikes. Based on our unhappy event, there is no UV-guard on the windows of the Broad Center through either lamination or film. Eli Broad has a nice collection of art and wonderful sense of community but he isn't God and I don't think he can see a fallen warbler.

The date: 9/18/2013

The week number: 38

The walk number: 1213

The weather: 78 F, sunny

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

The birds (21):

- 1 Scrub Jay
- 1 Northern Mockingbird
- 6 Mourning Dove
- 5 House Finch
- 6 Anna's Hummingbird
- 1 Acorn Woodpecker
- 5 American Crow
- 1 Mallard
- 20 Bushtit
- 1 Common Raven
- 4 Black Phoebe
- 2 Lesser Goldfinch
- 5 Western Bluebird
- 2 Red-masked Parakeet
- 1 Yellow-rumped Warbler
- 3 Band-tailed Pigeon
- 3 Hummingbird, Selasphorus
- 1 Bewick's Wren
- 1 Nuttall's Woodpecker
- 1 Black-chinned Hummingbird
- 1 Common Yellowthroat

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
10/1/13