

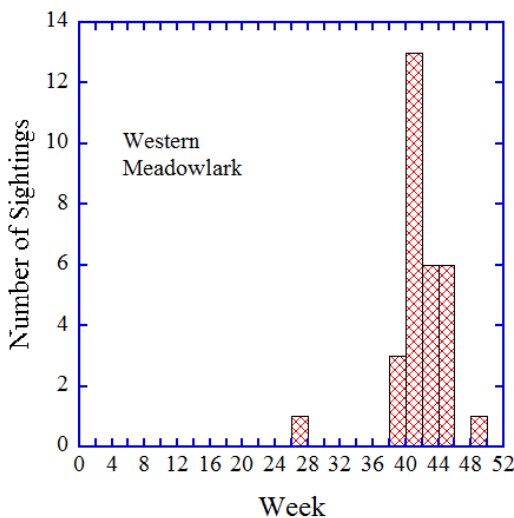
10/2/13

We ended with a generally respectable 21 species but cast ourselves into a nether region between glory and mediocrity, midway between the record of 25 for the week 40 and the median of 16. Still, the weather was nice and the walk very pleasant. In my view, pleasant trumps numbers, so according to the Beckett birding aesthetics index, this constituted a highly successful walk.

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 had our best warbler day of the season so far with four warblers, three of them named (Townsend's, orange crowned, and Wilson's) and one unnamed. The latter was most likely a yellow rumped warbler cavorting in the midst of a bushtit hoedown but we weren't able to get a definitive look or hear it over the cacophony. The last warblers for the walk were working the high canopy over the Throop ponds. From below, they were yellow with a gray tail, which is definitive for Wilson's warblers and, in my view at least, it is generally the easiest approach to these birds. It's a key as easy as a thousand one, a thousand two. In five minutes of watching, I get numerous views of gray tails and yellow bellies, many of which say Wilson's warbler. In five minutes, I get a single two-second text book view of a male Wilson's warbler from the side. A thousand one, a thousand two. Miss the view and you have nothing. The moral of the story: pay attention to the bottom line.

Arden rarely disappoints but today we found little of comfort and we arrive at the viewing station in a state of mild concern. Alan scans the field quickly, looking for sparrows. We had some song sparrows here last week. Will lightning strike twice? Alas, the song sparrows are gone, which wasn't too surprising since migrating sparrows don't usually stay in a stopover for very long. However, Alan continues scanning downfield and soon picks up a western meadowlark scrubbing among the dirt clods. He could only see the bird from the front and side but these are pretty distinctive and Alan was confident in his call, even though he had seen no butter or black collar flashing. Alan's bird has a companion and, finally, one of them turns, traversing from interesting to sweet. They appear to be oblivious to walkers or birders because of the exclusionary power of fences. We have our first western meadowlark sighting of the year.



We have no viable long term habitat for western meadowlarks because they need grass high enough to cover against predators and this is particularly important for nesting. So, meadowlarks can neither winter nor breed here. We are left with the odd visitation to Caltech's "meadows." We have had as many as five sightings in a year (1999) but usually it's zero to two. The distribution is, however, seemingly unusual. Notice that there is only one peak of occurrence for western meadowlarks and most sightings occur in the window of weeks 40-42. There is no corresponding pulse in the spring. With migratory birds, we tend to get one of two patterns. The bird may pass through Caltech going north in the spring and south in the fall, leading to a two pulse pattern or we may get a winter resident who arrives in

the fall, stays through the winter and leaves in the spring, which leads to a single broad pulse of

sightings centered in the winter. Wilson's warblers are an example of the former and yellow rumped warblers of the latter. The meadowlark pattern is different. Meadowlarks are resident in California and don't even qualify as short distance migrants like Say's phoebes. They do tend to expand their wintering range relative to breeding range but we don't see a spring - fall combination at Caltech and we rarely see them in the winter. We may be looking at some sort of juvenile dominated dispersal but, if so, the birds never pass through here in the spring. Where do Caltech's meadowlarks come from and where are they going? E-bird could almost certainly be used to address this problem. Knock yourself out.

The agricultural industry in California has been a major power in the state both economically and politically for well over a century. In the beginning, the average farmer and the state had the Maoist approach to birds in a field. If you see a bird, kill it. However, by the twentieth century, there was a more nuanced approach. If you don't like a bird, go ahead and kill it but if you want the state to help, you need to make sure that your bird is a bona fide pest. In 1914, the western meadowlark came up for pest designation. It was obvious that the bird damaged crops but the obvious is not always the whole story, so the industry funded a meadowlark study to prove the obvious. The conclusion: western meadowlarks like grasshoppers when they can get them and on balance, they are actually agricultural benefical. The meadowlark pest party fell apart.

Sparrows have been the bane of our walks lately. We make a standard side trip from Wilson up to the entrance of Braun to look for house sparrows. As is usual these days, we neither see nor hear any house sparrows. A black phoebe working from the south wall and just a couple of meters down, also observing from the wall, is a dark eyed junco. So, we have a sparrow sighting. We now have nine dark eyed junco sightings for the year driven largely by the breeding pair across the street in the foundation bushes in front of Prufrock. Our chances of their returning to Prufrock is only about one in five but, if they come again this season, we could have years of excellent dark eyed junco hunting. Even the nine sightings we have so far this year is exceeded only by the eleven junco-imbued weeks of 2011. Adult females generally move south before the males or juveniles do, so I suspect that "she" is just here for the day but she could be followed by a bird who decides to stay for winter.

The date: 10/02/2013

The week number: 40

The walk number: 1215

The weather: 73 F, partly cloudy

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

The birds (21):

- 3 Scrub Jay
- 1 Northern Mockingbird
- 3 Mourning Dove
- 1 House Finch
- 3 Anna's Hummingbird
- 5 American Crow
- 8 Common Raven
- 6 Lesser Goldfinch

- 2 Western Meadowlark
- 5 Black Phoebe
- 2 Band-tailed Pigeon
- 2 American Goldfinch
- 1 Orange-crowned Warbler
- 2 Townsend's Warbler
- 1 House Wren
- 1 Nuttall's Woodpecker
- 50 Bushtit
- 1 Warbler, species
- 1 Dark-eyed Junco
- 2 Wilson's Warbler
- 1 Rufous Hummingbird

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,  
Alan Cummings,  
10/22/13