

10/9/13

Rain is both friend and enemy. A steady downpour will leave you with a sloshing foot and a few soggy feathers but let the rain stop and the hungry come out. We had sporadic bouts of rain and sporadic bouts of birds, almost entirely between showers. In the end, the hiatus count led to a new record of 25 species for a week 41 walk, besting by one the previous record of 24 set in 2010 and matched in 2011. We left the median of 16 and the low of 12 mired in a muddy flotsam of what were probably mostly sunny days.

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)

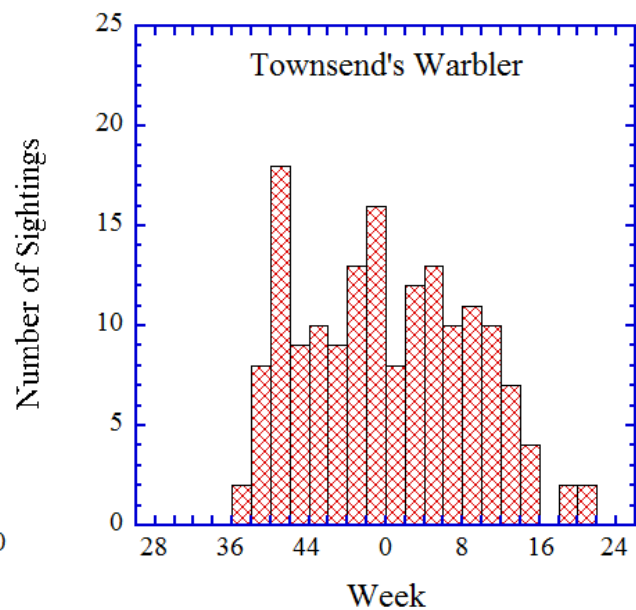
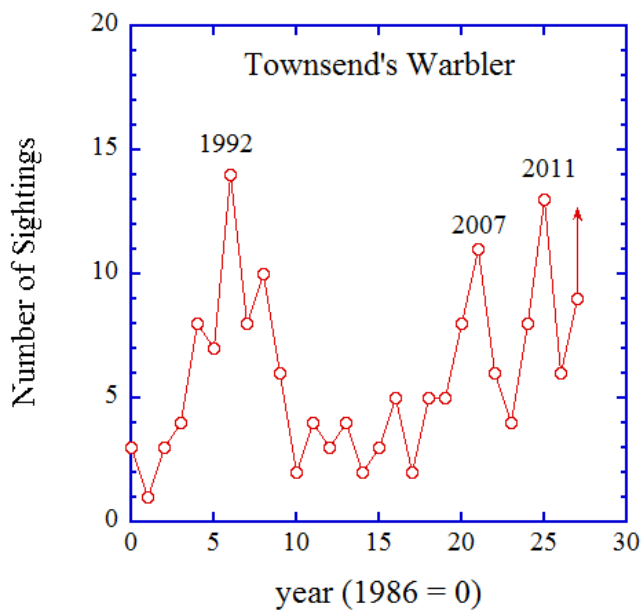
Alan records temperature and cloud cover as part of the architecture of conditions but he doesn't work with humidity and lunchtimes with rain in the offing are usually deferred. This was easily the wettest walk that I've been on and I suspect that it is the wettest Caltech bird walk ever. Viveca went on a wetter one, as she was quick to remind me, but she gave up half way through and returned to her office, thoroughly soaked. Alan acknowledged the heroics at the time but the walk has to be completed by somebody in order for it to be credited as a walk. So, Viveca's swimming expedition doesn't officially count. This time, I arrive at the starting point for the walk accompanied by slivers of rain threatening more. Viveca and Vicky arrive and we confront the potential for a downpour. It requires a bit of debate but, armed with a full complement of umbrellas, we decide to take our chances and proceed with the walk.

Before we can head off to Arden, I am looking at a couple of warblers flashing from a tree into Cahill. One of them hits a window and drops in a slow distressed spiral to the pavement below where he lands in a confused lump listing to one side. People are walking around him, taking no notice and, somehow, not stepping on him. His companion, who had matched his spiral, breaks off when it becomes clear that something is seriously wrong, and flies off to the tree. These are yellow rumped warblers. The downed bird is in serious trouble but, by the time we get over to him, he has managed to fold an outstretched wing back into his body. He obviously can't stay where he is, so I bring my hand down and lift. He clasps one of my fingers, which I take to be a good sign, and I move him over to the side railing where he is less likely to be stepped on. We decide that he should at least be out of the rain, so I pick him up again and move him another meter closer to the building. The story ends. I cannot tell you of the warbler's fate but I can say that this is the second window strike we have witnessed in the last three weeks after not seeing one over the previous three years or more. Something is wrong. Have we become thoughtless killers without even the passing sport of an overfed cat. Is this some nonrandom freak of new industry standard energy efficient windows? Both strikes were on new buildings. Did the landscape designer put trees at the wrong distance from the building? If bird strikes on campus correlate with new construction and our construction practices are the cause, then our birds are in trouble.

The mallard is back. He seems to be spending some time off campus because, last week, he was on campus on Tuesday, absent on Wednesday, here on Thursday, gone on Friday, and present on Saturday. You would think he was taking a class. We also saw a pair of gulls north of campus fly into a thermal, ride it up, and then glide off to the east. This is an unusually early first sighting of the season, no doubt a consequence of the rainy/cloudy weather, but we can expect the sightings frequency to rise steadily until they peak early next year.

By the time we pass the sapsucker tree, Tournament Park had yielded some lesser goldfinches, one house finch, and a passel of subdued crows. Across the park, there are birds foraging in a tree and we are drawn by a stirrup wish, hoping for American goldfinches. There are none to be seen (the birds are all lessers) but we hear a wren cussing from inside bushes lining the fence. I suppose the Darren Dowells of the world might be able to tell the difference between an annoyed house wren and a disgusted Bewick's but the verbal onslaught is going to leave us with a "wren, species" unless we can see the source. We slide along the perimeter, hoping the wren will surface to express himself and he does! He flies up to a branch overhanging the bushes by perhaps a couple of feet, cussing all the while. He posts up, parallel to the branch and proceeds to shimmer in agitation, flinging one verbal assassination after another. We are nothing. Something despicable lies below. We see nothing along the line of sight projecting from the length of his body. A snake or some other low-lying danger seemed unlikely in this location and we see no hawks. This had to be competition. Another wren would certainly qualify but you might reasonably expect a second wren to be dishing the bile back just as fast as it was being poured out. Finally, we see the agitative cause of the invective pearl, a Bewick's wren perched on the chain link fence perhaps a meter below and two meters to the south of the screaming house wren. He seems unperturbed but attentive, as if listening for nuance in a familiar song. "Your mother was the consort to a flock of ruby crowned kinglets and you look like the scruffy scum produced by the excrement of a sick cedar waxwing. This is my territory. Get out! Get out! Get out!" [ed. note: as a insectivore, the excrement of a frugivore like a cedar waxwing would have no nutritional value to a wren, so it would be insulting to be compared to it]. We didn't stay for the second act, if there was one; the first act invective was still pulsing the air as we passed under the oak trees at the south end of the park.

The numerical story of the day lay in warblers. There were more warblers (27) than finches (21), bushtits (15), corvids (8), or sparrows (0). We also saw five different species and this has only happened on four previous occasions, three of the four in weeks 39-41 and the other (last year) on week 20. So, having our latest five warbler day on a week 41 walk is typical of the genre. What makes for a five warbler day? The key for this walk was rain. The warblers huddled in deep foliage during a shower but they would hop out like a ravenous cloud of mosquitos as soon as the rain stopped. The key in general seems to be a combination of Wilson's and orange crowned warblers. All five of these five warbler walks boast both of these species. The raw odds of picking up a Wilson's warbler is only 4% (49 of 1216 walks) and the odds of a five warbler day is 0.4% but, if you get a Wilson's warbler, the odds of a five warbler day is one in ten (5 of 49). Logically, I would now give you a sightings figure or two on Wilson's



warblers but I did that recently, so in lieu of them, I offer the Townsend's warblers. This is already a very good year for Townsend's and we are not just seeing them on multiple weeks but we are getting multiple individuals, which increases the odds of a sighting on any given walk. This week's extravaganza is essentially a statement of mixed flocks during a brief migration window when we can reasonably hope for winter residents and migratory species to overlap. Townsend's sightings fall off after great migratory pulse but birds wintering on or near campus will give us sightings into next spring. There is a good chance that 2013 will be one of our top years for Townsend's warblers and that may be saying good things about recent breeding successes on the islands off British Columbia.

Finally, I wanted to mention that we had a chat with one of the grounds crew, who pointed out a house wren for us that we had been hearing but not seeing. He says that George Rossman's leucistic crow has been hanging out around the Throop ponds early in the morning before the campus wakes up, around 6:30-7:00 AM. The bird is skittish and the fact that he hasn't been able to join one of the juvenile flocks, suggests that he is also a social outcast. Perhaps, he has discovered cat food. An early bird photography expedition would seem to be in order.

The date: 10/09/2013

The week number: 41

The walk number: 1216

The weather: 60 F, overcast with rain, heavy at times

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

The birds (25):

- 1 Northern Mockingbird
- 1 Mourning Dove
- 1 House Finch
- 2 Anna's Hummingbird
- 1 Acorn Woodpecker
- 8 American Crow
- 1 Mallard
- 4 Townsend's Warbler
- 17 Yellow-rumped Warbler
- 1 Hummingbird, Selasphorus
- 2 Black Phoebe
- 6 Western Meadowlark
- 4 Band-tailed Pigeon
- 20 Lesser Goldfinch
- 1 House Wren
- 1 Bewick's Wren
- 1 Nuttall's Woodpecker
- 4 Orange-crowned Warbler
- 1 Wilson's Warbler
- 15 Bushtit
- 1 Black-throated Gray Warbler
- 12 Cedar Waxwing
- 7 Swift, Species

- 1 Cooper's Hawk
- 2 Gull, Species

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,  
Alan Cummings,  
10/23/13