

10/16/13

Our species count of 22 was actually the third highest species total ever for a week 43 walk and therefore, by definition, quite respectable. We were crushed by the distant thrum of the near thirty experience of 2010 but a healthy five species ahead of the median of 17 and far away from the minimum of nine.

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

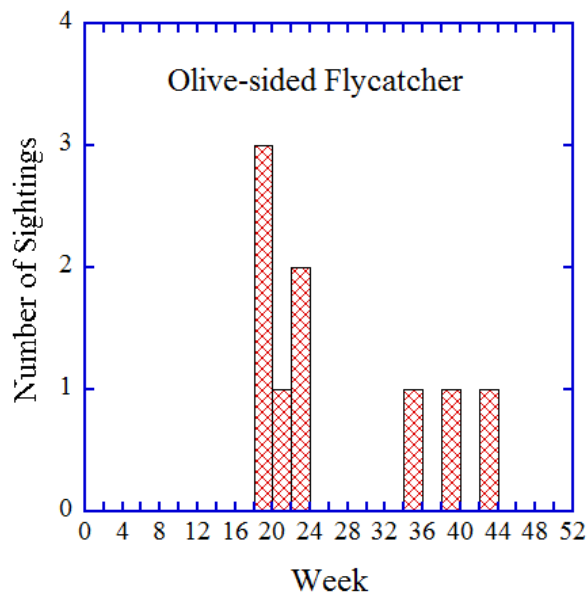
The baseball field brought us a western meadowlark but the gang of last week appears to have moved on. We have been getting used to meadowlarks like an Indian summer but we have never seen western meadowlarks more than three weeks in a row and only twice has it been three. The last time, Bill Clinton was still in the White House (1999). In other news, Viveca picked up a dark eyed junco on the perimeter wall at the south end of Tournament Park. He was our tenth dark eyed junco of the year and, if we see one more before the end of the calendar year, we will have matched the total for 2011, the most junco prolific year of all time.

The new Child Care Center being built on the site of the old Maintenance yard is nearly complete. Landscaping is going in and playground features are beginning to appear. We took a tour around the perimeter, where there is a small gap between the fencing for the Child Care Center and neighbor fencing, just to scope out what might be left of the birding potential and difficulty of access. There are, of course, no trees to speak of on the Caltech side of the perimeter fencing but the neighbors' trees are still alive and therein lie the avian potential. BCCC (before Child Care Center), the Maintenance yard was a major source of birds for the walk but much of the action was along the perimeter in neighboring yards (i.e., we saw birds while standing on Caltech property, hence legal, but the birds were not on Caltech property). It seems likely that birds will filter back into the area with the end of construction, though likely in reduced numbers because foraging opportunities in the Maintenance yard itself, which was an attractive weedy space, will have been destroyed. However, the perimeter is poorly developed and I don't see Caltech building a walkway along it, so we will probably have to give it up as a standard part of the bird walk (Alan is the grand poobah of walk routes, so he will provide the official line later). There is, however, a fenced-in rump at the south end of the old Maintenance yard that has been graded and embellished with a faux stream along the north side. It looks sort of like a dog run, so perhaps it is intended as an isolatable play area. I'm not sure if they plan to run water in the stream (small children seem to be able to drown in almost anything) or this is a fancy drainage ditch but who knows. Regardless of what they do, it seems a good bet that there will be an access point we can use. I think that it would be worthy of a scheduled stop.

We only had three warbler species, a drop-off from the five of last week, but we had all three of our woodpeckers. Arden brought us a Nuttall's that Vicky picked up while checking out Alan's favorite trees, along with an orange-crowned warbler, and the Townsends. The Nuttall's was especially important because we also saw one near Morrisroe. Now, it is possible that these were the same bird, although we took credit for two, but this seems unlikely. It's about half a mile as the Nuttall's is likely to fly between the Arden and Morrisroe sites. In a riparian setting where a narrow strip along a stream provides the only suitable habitat, a Nuttall's can claim half a mile of territory but around Caltech, the territories are likely to be much less gerrymandered. Also, Nuttall's woodpeckers tend not to do a lot of heavy foraging and beating of the bounds in the middle of the day. A relative inactivity translates into modest movement. Assuming modest movement, we have two Nuttall's with actively developed

territories and, assuming two Nuttall's that stick around for a few months, we could have an unusually Nuttall's-rich season because we would be doubling our sighting opportunities.

The acorn woodpecker was a typical palm tree capture at the northern end of campus. The downy was an anomaly, though not at first. As we pass the corner of the yard behind Morrisroe, we hear a downy woodpecker call. We see downies more often than we hear them but we'll take it. I write him down as he continues to talk. We still can't see him but he seems to be south of the driveway and moving north. Finally, he pops out of the foliage and flies across the driveway to a branch on a tree in the corner of Morrisroe's yard. About 30 seconds later, a Nuttall's woodpecker flies across the driveway to the same tree. He gives the downy a buzz as he arrives and lands on the downy's branch. The downy flies to another branch. He thinks about it for a few seconds and then flies over to the trunk of the tree and works his way over to a crotch. A stasis ensues, lasting perhaps a minute as the Nuttall's assesses and decides. There is no bill wagging or cursing. He flies directly at the downy, who gives way, moving a couple of meters out onto his branch, but still emoting his calls. The Nuttall's, who has said nothing, curls around the tree trunk, then flies up to another branch. There is another uneasy 30 seconds with no motion by either party. Only the occasional chirpy call of the downy breaches the visual tension. It is the Nuttall's, who breaks. He dives directly at the downy, who flies off to the next tree to the north. The Nuttall's circles around and lands back on the branch he had just come from. He stares in the general direction of the downy for a few seconds and then flies back across the driveway. The downy is silent.



Although the agonistic interaction between the Nuttall's and downy was dramatic, the bird of the walk has to be the last bird of the walk. Viveca and I are approaching the lower Throop pond. We naturally look up to an exposed bare branch near Dabney because this is a favored perch of flycatchers during migration. The advantage of this perch for us is that it exposes flycatchers that like high open foraging stations. The disadvantage is that, at the time we get to the site, the bird is likely to be badly overexposed in the sun, which makes ticking off field markings very difficult. A couple of weeks ago, we were forced to leave a flycatcher species on this branch because we could tailor nothing through the glare of the sun. This time, we see a flycatcher dispatching an insect. The insect is fairly large and appears to be yellow-orange, so I am guessing bee

but it could have been beetle, given the lighting. The bird is washed out by the sunlight but we can make out a thick (for a flycatcher) black bill, which suggested an olive-sided flycatcher, although there were differing opinions. After a couple of minutes, the bird decides to fly off. He was out of view within a couple of seconds but his body blocks the sun as viewed from below and he leaves a clear wake with a sharply contrasting "vest." We had our first olive-sided flycatcher of the year. It's just in time because, he's probably heading to Central America and he is probably among the last to go. Olive-sided flycatchers are a rare sight for us. This is only the ninth sighting on the Caltech bird walk, making it a <1 % bird. If you take out the three sightings from 2002, it's a <0.5% bird. It's a statistics of small numbers problem but the distribution of sightings is consistent with a sharply defined spring migration and a more fuzzy fall migration.

The date: 10/16/2013

The week number: 42

The walk number: 1217

The weather: 83 F, sunny

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

The birds (22):

- 1 Northern Mockingbird
- 1 Mourning Dove
- 1 House Finch
- 1 Anna's Hummingbird
- 1 Acorn Woodpecker
- 6 American Crow
- 1 Mallard
- 4 Townsend's Warbler
- 10 Bushtit
- 19 Yellow-rumped Warbler
- 2 Nuttall's Woodpecker
- 6 Black Phoebe
- 1 Orange-crowned Warbler
- 1 House Wren
- 5 Lesser Goldfinch
- 1 Western Meadowlark
- 1 Dark eyed Junco
- 1 Swift, Species
- 1 Downy Woodpecker
- 1 Common Raven
- 1 Hummingbird, Selasphorus
- 1 Olive-sided Flycatcher

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
10/24/13